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The Two Meanings Implied in the Nembutsu Leading to the Hell of Incessant Suffering

ESSENTIALLY, there are two meanings implied in the teaching that the Nembutsu leads to the hell of incessant suffering.

The first meaning implied is that Nembutsu practitioners will fall into the hell of incessant suffering. In *The Nembutsu Chosen above All* the Honorable Hōnen, the patriarch of all the Nembutsu believers in Japan, refers to Shakyamuni Buddha's entire lifetime of sacred teachings, or what are known as all the Hinayana and Mahayana sutras, including those such as the Lotus Sutra, the Mahāvairochana Sutra, and the Great Wisdom Sutra, and claims that, except for the three Pure Land sutras, one should discard, close, ignore, and abandon them.

In this connection, the Two-Volumed Sutra, one of the three Pure Land sutras that the Honorable One praises as the mirror of truth, says that Amida Buddha, carrying out practices to attain enlightenment in a past life as the monk Dharma Treasury, made forty-eight vows in which he resolved to save people "excepting only those who commit the five cardinal sins and those who slander the correct teaching."[1]

Though it may be said that the Honorable Hōnen is included among those who "meditate on me [Amida Buddha] ten times" to be saved, because he writes that people should close the gate to the Lotus Sutra, is he not one who would be excluded from the original vow[2] of Amida Buddha? And it follows then that the same would also be true of his disciples and lay believers.

A passage in the Lotus Sutra reads, "If a person fails to have faith [but instead slanders this sutra], . . . When his life comes to an end he will enter the Avīchi hell."[3]

If Amida Buddha's original vow and the passage in the Lotus Sutra are true, then is not the Honorable Hōnen one who has fallen into the hell of incessant suffering?

All the sutras jointly conclude that when the teacher falls into hell, so will the disciples, and when the disciples fall, so will the lay followers. It is, for example, similar to what happens to the retainers of a traitor. If you have doubts, you should examine *Nembutsu Chosen above All.* (This is the first meaning.)

The second meaning implied in the teaching that the Nembutsu leads to the hell of incessant suffering is found in the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra, an introductory teaching to the Lotus Sutra, where it says, "I made use of the power of expedient means. But in

these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth." A later passage reads, "Though immeasurable, boundless [inconceivable asamkhya kalpas] may pass, they will in the end fail to gain unsurpassed enlightenment." Referring to the period from the time Shakyamuni first attained enlightenment to his preaching at White Heron Lake, the sutra declares that it lasted forty and more years. It mentions all the sutras preached during this period and classifies them as the four great groups of sutras.[4] And the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra, referring to one of the four groups, says, "Then I preached the twelve divisions of the correct and equal sutras."[5] This statement refers to the three sutras that the Nembutsu followers believe in. The Immeasurable Meanings Sutra indicates those sutras and says that they are not the truth.

Next, the Lotus Sutra says, "The World-Honored One has long expounded his doctrines and now must reveal the truth."[6] This passage is declaring that in contrast to teachings such as the Nembutsu, which are not the truth, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is the truth.

A later passage reads, "The Buddha himself dwells in this great vehicle, . . . If I used a lesser vehicle to convert even one person, I would be guilty of stinginess and greed, but such a thing would be impossible."[7]

This passage means that if the Buddha were to have kept the Lotus Sutra to himself and have passed on to people only the sutras of the preceding forty and more years, such as the Meditation Sutra and the other sutras of the Nembutsu, and if he were to have ended up keeping quiet about the Lotus Sutra without preaching it, he would have been a stingy, greedy person who would surely have fallen into the three evil paths. It is saying that even the Buddha, if he were to have spent his entire life practicing only the Nembutsu, without changing to the Lotus Sutra, would certainly have fallen into hell. How, then, is it possible for ordinary people in this latter age who spend their entire lives single-mindedly reciting Namu Amida Butsu, never changing to the Lotus Sutra and chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, to escape the three evil paths of existence?

In the second volume, the Lotus Sutra reads, "Now this threefold world is all my domain."[8] This passage means that the sixty-six provinces and two islands that comprise the land of Japan are the possessions of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings. The same is true of the sahā world. It is certainly not the possession of Amida.

The sutra goes on to say, "And the living beings in it are all my children." Though the 4,994,828 men and women in Japan have each a mother and father, when we examine the matter, we find that they are in fact the children of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings. The major and minor gods worshiped at over three thousand shrines are also the children of Shakyamuni Buddha. They most certainly are not the children of Amida Buddha.

Nichiren

The ninth month in the first year of Bun'ei [1264], cyclical sign *kinoe-ne*

To Nambu Rokurō Tsunenaga

Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter in Awa Province to Nambu Rokurō Tsunenaga, who is thought to have actually been Nambu Rokurō Sanenaga, also known as Hakiri Sanenaga. The letter is dated the ninth month of 1264, but it is not extant in the Daishonin's own hand, and another view suggests that it was written in the ninth month of 1269. In the letter, the Daishonin explains the two meanings implied in his teaching that the Nembutsu practice leads to the hell of incessant suffering. First, refuting the Nembutsu teachings with statements from the Lotus Sutra and the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra, he asserts that because Hōnen, the founder of the Nembutsu, or Pure Land, school, is condemned to fall into hell for his slander of the correct teaching, so surely are the disciples and lay believers who follow his teachings. Second, he declares that because the three Pure Land sutras are not Shakyamuni's true teaching, but a provisional one expounded as an expedient means, if people continue to believe the Nembutsu teachings based on those sutras and fail to switch their faith to the Lotus Sutra, they will experience the sufferings of hell. Additionally, the Daishonin declares that not only Japan, but the entire world, is the domain not of Amida, but of Shakyamuni, the lord of teachings, and he implies that devotion to Amida is therefore misguided.

Notes

1. Words from the eighteenth of the forty-eight vows. It reads, "After I have attained Buddhahood, if any among the living beings in the ten directions have sincere minds and faith, and wish to be reborn in my land, and if they meditate on me ten times and yet are not reborn there, may I not attain correct enlightenment—excepting only those who commit the five cardinal sins and those who slander the correct teaching." The words "meditate on me ten times" in the following sentence come from this vow.

2. A reference to the eighteenth of Amida Buddha's forty-eight vows, known in the Pure Land school as "the original vow."

3. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.

4. A reference to the four groups of the Āgama sutras, the Correct and Equal sutras, the Wisdom sutras, and the Flower Garland Sutra.

5. "The twelve divisions of the correct and equal sutras" means all the sutras of the Correct and Equal period. The same term is also used to indicate all of the correct and equal, or Mahayana, sutras. The Immeasurable Meanings Sutra says, "Then I preached the twelve divisions of the correct and equal sutras, the teaching of great wisdom, and the Flower Garland teaching of the ocean-imprint meditation."

6. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., chap. 3.