

On the Attainment of Buddhahood by Women



THE “Devadatta” chapter [of the Lotus Sutra] states: “The Buddha said to the monks: ‘In future ages if there are good men or good women who, on hearing the “Devadatta” chapter of the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law, believe and revere it with pure hearts and harbor no doubts or perplexities, they will never fall into hell or the realm of hungry spirits or of beasts, but will be born in the presence of the Buddhas of the ten directions, and in the place where they are born they will constantly hear this sutra. If they are born among human or heavenly beings, they will enjoy exceedingly wonderful delights, and if they are born in the presence of a Buddha, they will be born by transformation from lotus flowers.’”

This “Devadatta” chapter contains two admonitions.¹ One makes clear how Devadatta propagated the Lotus Sutra and enabled Shakyamuni to gain the way.² The other explains how Manjushrī expounded the sutra and enabled the dragon king’s daughter to attain Buddhahood.

This chapter was kept hidden in the imperial palace in Ch’ang-an and only the remaining twenty-seven chapters of the sutra were spread throughout the world. Hence, during the reign of seven royal houses, from the time of

the Ch’in dynasty to that of the Liang, this twenty-seven chapter version of the sutra was read and lectured upon. Later, a priest named Dharma Teacher Man,³ having realized that the “Devadatta” chapter was lacking in the version of the Lotus Sutra then in circulation, searched for and found the missing chapter in the city of Ch’ang-an. Since then, the twenty-eight chapter version of the sutra has been the one in general circulation.

This chapter describes [the benefits of] those who believe and revere the “Devadatta” chapter with pure hearts, and states as follows: (1) they will never fall into the three evil paths; (2) they will be born in the presence of the Buddhas of the ten directions; (3) they will be born in a place where they will constantly hear this sutra; (4) if they are born among human or heavenly beings, they will enjoy exceedingly wonderful delights; and (5) if they are born in the presence of a Buddha, they will be born by transformation from lotus flowers.

Now when any of the many living beings, in their delusion, stray from the capital city of the essential nature of phenomena, the true aspect of reality, and enter the village of illusory thought and topsy-turvy views, they will thereafter be subject to the three

types of action, physical, verbal, and mental, which will produce few good roots and many evil deeds.

The sutra texts⁴ tell us that a single person in the course of a single day has eight million four thousand thoughts. And all of these various thoughts produce karma that will lead to rebirth in the three evil paths.

We living beings in this threefold world with its twenty-five realms⁵ keep repeating a cycle of transmigration; like birds flitting from tree to tree in a forest, we die and are born again, are born again and then die. Revolving like cartwheels, we go round and round in a process of birth and death that has no beginning and no end, creatures under the heavy burden of evil karma.

Thus the Contemplation on the Mind-Ground Sutra states, "Sentient beings transmigrate, born into the six realms of existence, like cartwheels turning without beginning or end. At times they are fathers or mothers, at times they are men or women, through birth after birth, existence after existence forming bonds of obligation with one another."

The second volume of the Lotus Sutra says, "There is no safety in the threefold world; it is like a burning house, replete with a multitude of sufferings."⁶

And volume twenty-two of the Nirvana Sutra states: "The bodhisattvas, mahāsattvas, observe living beings and see that, because of the causes and conditions created by color, scent, taste, and touch, they have been suffering constantly since numberless, uncountable kalpas ago. The bones one of these living beings leaves behind in a kalpa pile up as high as Mount Vipula near Rājagriha, and the milk he sucks is equal to the water of the four seas. The blood he sheds surpasses the quantity of water in the four seas, and so do the tears he sheds in grief over the death of parents, elder and younger

brothers, wives, children, and relatives.

"And though he used all the plants and trees growing on the earth to make four-inch tallies to count them, he could not count all the parents he has had in the past existences of life. The sufferings he has undergone over countless kalpas down to the present as he was born into the realms of hell, of animals, or of hungry spirits, defy calculation. And the corpses of all living beings suffer this fate!"

And so in this manner the corpses of those who have cast away their lives to no good in the end pile up higher than Mount Vipula, and the tears shed in sorrow for loved ones are more plentiful than the waters of the four seas. But because not a single bone is dedicated to the service of the Buddhist teachings, and not a single tear is shed upon the hearing of even one phrase or verse of the sutras, these living beings can never escape from the cage and confinement of the threefold world, but keep on transmigrating through the region of its twenty-five realms.

How, then, are they to break free from the threefold world? They must wipe out ignorance through the power of the Buddhist teachings and their practices, and awaken to the enlightenment of the essential nature of phenomena, the true aspect of reality.

Well then, within these Buddhist teachings, what practice is to be carried out in order to free oneself from the sufferings of birth and death? Simply the practice of the wonderful Law of the single vehicle.

The Supervisor of Priests Eshin secluded himself in Kamo Shrine⁷ for a period of seven days, praying that he might be told what teaching would enable one to break free from the sufferings of birth and death. Thereupon he received a communication from the shrine's deity that said: "Shakyamuni's teachings are contained in the single vehicle. The path by which the Bud-

dhas attain the way resides in the wonderful Law. The six pāramitās of the bodhisattvas are found in the Lotus. It is this sutra that enables persons of the two vehicles to gain the way."

The Universal Worthy Sutra states: "This great vehicle sutra is the treasure storehouse of the Buddhas, the eye of the Buddhas of the ten directions and the three existences, the seed from which spring the Thus Come Ones of the three existences."

With the exception of this Lotus Sutra, the attainment of Buddhahood is not regarded as a possibility. Nowhere outside of this one sutra is there any indication that women can attain Buddhahood. In fact, in the sutras preached prior to the Lotus Sutra, women are looked on with great distaste.

Thus the Flower Garland Sutra states, "Women are messengers of hell who can destroy the seeds of Buddhahood. They may look like bodhisattvas, but at heart they are like yaksha demons." And the Silver-Colored Woman Sutra says, "Even if the eyes of the Buddhas of the three existences were to fall to the ground, no woman in any of the realms of existence could ever attain Buddhahood."

Moreover, women bear a heavy burden of guilt in the form of the five obstacles and three obediences. The five obstacles are explained in the works of the Buddhist canon, and the three obediences are outlined in the non-Buddhist writings.

The three obediences dictate that, when young, a woman must submit to her parents; when an adult, she must submit to her husband; and in old age she must submit to her son. Thus, at no time in her life is she free to do as she wishes. Therefore, when Jung Ch'i-ch'i wrote a song describing his "three joys" in life,⁸ he noted that one of his joys was the fact that he had not been born a woman.

The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai states,

"The other sutras predict Buddhahood only for bodhisattvas, but not for persons of the two vehicles. They predict it only for men, but not for women."⁹ His commentary makes clear that none of the other sutras predict that a woman can attain Buddhahood.

Moreover, when the two Buddhas, Shakyamuni and Many Treasures, were seated side by side in the treasure tower, Manjushrī entered the ocean in order to propagate the wonderful Law, and then returned to the presence of the two Buddhas. At that time a bodhisattva named Wisdom Accumulated, a disciple of the Buddha Many Treasures of the World of Treasure Purity, objected to the assertion that the dragon king's daughter could attain Buddhahood, saying, "When I observe Shakyamuni Thus Come One, I see that for immeasurable kalpas he carried out harsh and difficult practices, accumulating merit, piling up virtue, seeking the way of the bodhisattva without ever resting. I observe that throughout the major world system, there is not a single spot tiny as a mustard seed where this bodhisattva failed to sacrifice body and life for the sake of living beings."¹⁰

While Wisdom Accumulated and Manjushrī were exchanging two or three questions and answers, the eighty thousand bodhisattvas and twelve thousand voice-hearers all bent their ears, listening intently to the discussion and not venturing to add a word of their own.

But Shāriputra, foremost in wisdom, without criticizing what Manjushrī had said directly, pointed out many reasons why it was difficult to believe that a dragon girl could attain Buddhahood. He observed that a woman's body is soiled and defiled, not a vessel for the Law, as is made clear in the Hīnayana and provisional teachings. But Manjushrī said that, to demonstrate whether or not she could attain Buddhahood, the dragon girl would now

appear in the presence of the Buddha.

True to these words, the eight-year-old daughter of the dragon king, without changing out of her dragon body, appeared in the presence of the Buddha and presented a wish-granting jewel said to be worth as much as the major world system to the Buddha. The Buddha, pleased, accepted the jewel.

At that time Bodhisattva Wisdom Accumulated and Shāriputra, their doubts resolved, came to realize that a woman can in fact attain Buddhahood. Hence this has come to be looked on as a model of how women can attain Buddhahood. If you wish to know more of the matter in detail, you may read of it in the fifth volume of the Lotus Sutra.¹¹

In his *Outstanding Principles of the Lotus Sutra*, the Great Teacher Dengyō states: "The dragon king's daughter, an instructor of others, did not need to undergo countless kalpas of austere practice, nor do living beings, who receive instruction, need to undergo such practice. Instructors and instructed alike need no such kalpas of practice. Through the power of the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law they can attain Buddhahood in their present form."

T'ien-t'ai's commentary says: "Wisdom Accumulated, clinging to the specific teaching, doubted that such a thing was possible. But the dragon king's daughter, illustrating the perfect teaching, dispelled all such doubts. Shāriputra, limited by the provisional doctrines of the Tripitaka teaching, voiced objections, but the dragon king's daughter, relying on the teaching of the one true vehicle, banished all doubts."¹²

The Dragon King of the Sea Sutra¹³ states: "The dragon king's daughter attained Buddhahood, presiding over a land called Light Bright and bearing the name Spotless Understanding Thus Come One."

If one goes by the sutras preached prior to the Lotus Sutra, one could not imagine it would be possible even for women of the human or heavenly realms to attain Buddhahood. And yet the dragon king's daughter, a being of the realm of animals, without changing out of the form she had been born in as a result of lax observance of the precepts, attained Buddhahood in that very body. What a marvelous event!

With this as a beginning, thereafter Shakyamuni's maternal aunt, the nun Mahāprajāpatī, and the nuns accompanying her, as is related in the "Encouraging Devotion" chapter, all received a prophecy that they would attain Buddhahood, Mahāprajāpatī to be named Gladly Seen by All Living Beings Thus Come One. Rāhula's mother, Lady Yashodharā, along with the nuns attending her, was told that she would become a Buddha named Endowed with a Thousand Ten Thousand Glowing Marks Thus Come One. And the ten demon daughters, women of the realm of hungry spirits, were also able to attain Buddhahood.

This being the case, women in particular should make the Lotus Sutra the object of their faith and devotion.

Thus, reading one sentence or one phrase of this sutra, or writing out one character or one stroke of it, can become the cause that enables one to escape from the sufferings of birth and death and attain great enlightenment. So it was that a certain person, because he formed a relationship with the words of this sutra, was able to return to life from the hall of Yama, the judge of the dead.¹⁴ And because another person wrote out the sixty-four characters that make up the titles of the eight volumes of the Lotus Sutra,¹⁵ his deceased father was led to the realm of heaven.

For it is a fact that both the beings and the environment of the Avīchi hell exist within the life of the highest sage

[Buddha], and both hell and the palaces of heaven are all part of the makeup of the Thus Come One. The life and the environment of Vairochana Buddha never transcend the lives of ordinary mortals; his enlightened form never departs from the wanderings and delusions of ordinary beings.

The wonderful words of the Lotus Sutra increase the brilliance of the pure land of Eagle Peak; the sixty-nine thousand characters in which it is writ-

ten add to the glitter of the purple-tinged purest gold.¹⁶

The departed one in particular, while alive, gave evidence of an extraordinary faith in the Lotus Sutra. And now, through the power of these lectures on the sutra, that person will be reborn in the presence of the Buddha and will gain wonderful causes leading to the attainment of the Buddha's enlightenment. Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, Nam-myoho-enge-kyo.



Background

This letter is generally thought to have been written in 1265 while Nichiren Daishonin was residing in Kamakura. The recipient is unknown, but judging from the contents, is likely to have been a woman.

In this letter, the Daishonin first discusses the history of the "Devadatta" chapter of the Lotus Sutra in China, indicating that the chapter had at one time been omitted from Kumārajīva's translation, and was discovered and reinserted at a later time. Quoting various sutras, he confirms that the way to free oneself from the sufferings of birth and death is found only in the practice of the wonderful Law of the single vehicle. "With the exception of this Lotus Sutra, the attainment of Buddhahood is not regarded as a possibility," he writes. In particular, he points out that sutras other than the Lotus Sutra fail to recognize the possibility of attaining Buddhahood for women, saying, "In

fact, in the sutras preached prior to the Lotus Sutra, women are looked on with great distaste." To make his point, the Daishonin cites sutra passages that can only be regarded as demeaning toward women and as denying the possibility of their enlightenment.

He then introduces the example of the attainment of Buddhahood by the dragon king's daughter from the "Devadatta" (12th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra, indicating that it signifies that all women have the potential to gain enlightenment. He also mentions that the "Encouraging Devotion" (13th) chapter, which follows the "Devadatta" chapter, predicts that Shakyamuni's aunt and foster mother, the nun Mahāprajāpatī, and his wife before renouncing secular life, the nun Yashodharā, as well as the nuns accompanying them will become Buddhas. This further distinguishes the Lotus Sutra as confirming women's potential for Buddhahood.

Notes

1. Shakyamuni's prophecy of enlightenment for Devadatta and the attainment of Buddhahood by the dragon king's daughter. The former demonstrates that evil persons, represented by Devadatta, can become Buddhas, and the latter, that women can become Buddhas. The Daishonin

refers to the enlightenment of Devadatta and that of the dragon king's daughter as "admonitions" because the purpose of this chapter, which follows the three pronouncements in the "Treasure Tower" chapter, can be taken to mean that, by revealing the great power of the Lotus Su-

tra in this way, Shakyamuni is admonishing the assembly to embrace and propagate it. "The three pronouncements" mentioned above refers to three exhortations by Shakyamuni Buddha who, desiring to perpetuate the Lotus Sutra after his death, urges the assembly (1) to preach it, (2) to guard and uphold, read and recite it, and (3) to make a great vow so that they can accomplish these difficult things. He further explains these tasks in terms of the "six difficult and nine easy acts" (see Glossary).

2. According to the "Devadatta" chapter, in a past existence Devadatta was a hermit named Asita and taught the Lotus Sutra to a certain king. The king was reborn as Shakyamuni and attained Buddhahood.

3. A priest who was active in China during the Liang dynasty (502–557). According to *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*, in the early years of the Liang dynasty the Dharma Teacher Man preached the Lotus Sutra a hundred times and inserted the "Devadatta" chapter before the "Encouraging Devotion" chapter of the sutra, thereby restoring the Lotus Sutra to its original twenty-eight chapter form.

4. Source unknown, but a similar statement is found in *The Collected Essays on the World of Peace and Delight*.

5. The "twenty-five realms" refers to the subdivisions of the threefold world in which living beings repeat the cycle of birth and death. They consist of fourteen realms in the world of desire, seven in the world of form, and four in the world of formlessness.

6. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.

7. Kamo Shrine refers to the two independent but closely related Shinto shrines in Kyoto, Kamigamo Shrine and Shimo-gamo Shrine.

8. Jung Ch'i-ch'i was a man of the Spring and Autumn period (770–403 B.C.E.) in China. According to *Lieh Tzu*, he told Confucius that he had obtained three pleasures in this world: the first was to have been born a human being, the second was to have been born a man, and the third was to be able to enjoy a long life.

9. *Words and Phrases*.

10. Lotus Sutra, chap. 12.

11. The fifth of the eight volumes of the Lotus Sutra, which contains four chapters—the "Devadatta" (12th) chapter through the "Emerging from the Earth" (15th) chapter. Specifically the Daishonin refers to the "Devadatta" chapter.

12. *Words and Phrases*.

13. A sutra translated into Chinese by Dharmaraksha, a monk from Dunhuang who went to China during the Western Chin dynasty (265–316).

14. This story is found in *The Lotus Sutra and Its Traditions*.

15. "Sixty-four" represents the total number of characters, eight for each title of the sutra's eight volumes. "Myoho-renge-kyo" comprises five characters, and the volume number, three characters. This story is found in *The Lotus Sutra and Its Traditions* (see I, p. 515).

16. This gold is said to be supreme among all kinds of gold.