

## Letter Sent with the Prayer Sutra



I HAVE received your letter and read it over carefully. As I have stated before, now that the world has entered the Latter Day of the Law, those who uphold the Lotus Sutra will encounter the three powerful enemies. I explained this to you in general terms at the time we met. Since all this is based upon the golden words of the Buddha, there can hardly be any doubt about it. Such being the case, I, Nichiren, because I put my faith in the Lotus Sutra, have been wounded in the head, beaten, driven away, led to the place of decapitation, and condemned to exile.<sup>1</sup> And in the end I have been exiled to this island of Sado.

Ordinary offenders, no matter how grave their crimes, are only made to endure punishment in their present existence. But it seems that Nichiren must encounter great difficulties in all three existences of past, present, and future. Therefore in my present existence I have met with the difficulties I have just listed. In a past existence, judging from what people these days say of me, when the Buddha was still in the world I was a person of great evil such as Sunakshatra or Kokālika, and having failed to fully expiate the residue of the sins I committed then, have been reborn in the present age after the passing of the Buddha and am still acting, if one goes by their asser-

tions, as an enemy of the Buddhist Law. And with regard to a future existence, these same people of our time slander me, saying that I will meet with various great difficulties while I am alive, and when I am on the point of death, I will starve and devour my own flesh and then will without doubt fall into the great Avīchi hell and there undergo boundless sufferings.

From ancient times on, lay persons and members of the clergy who had committed offenses, whether noble persons or humble, of high social station or low, whether observers of the precepts or breakers of the precepts, ordinary mortals or sages—many as these have been, they have suffered the effects in their present existence only. But I must of course suffer such effects not only in my present existence, but in past and future existences as well, meeting with great difficulties in all these existences. This is wholly due to the Lotus Sutra. The great difficulties I encounter in these three existences are evidence that in these three existences I am a recipient of the blessing and benefits of the Lotus Sutra. From far distant kalpas in the past until numberless kalpas in the future, these blessings of the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law will be with me over the three existences, never to be exhausted.

I, Nichiren, have to some small de-

gree acted as an ally of the Lotus Sutra, and as a result I have met with these great difficulties. How immense, then, must be our gratitude toward Shakyamuni Buddha who, in lifetime after lifetime, has championed the cause of the Lotus Sutra! It is beyond the power of reckoning. Therefore the task set forth in the "Encouraging Devotion" chapter must never for a moment be neglected.<sup>2</sup> More than ever, I look on it as a truly worthy one!

You speak of your desire to retire to the mountains. Although to do so would in general be to forsake the task of carrying out shakubuku, the practice essential to this, the Latter Day of the Law, still I know that you are suffering from illness. Moreover, when we are beset by so many natural disasters and problems of state, and when, no matter how often I warn the ruler, because he fails to understand how he himself is responsible, he refuses to believe my words, even I long for a life of retirement. How much more so must that be true in your case!

But if you should for a time retire to a dwelling in the mountain valleys, once your illness is mended and conditions are favorable again, you should set aside thoughts of personal well-being and devote yourself to the propagation of the teachings.

In accordance with your request, I have written out on a separate scroll of paper the prayer for preventing disaster and prolonging life that is appropriate for a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Day of the Law and am sending it herewith. You should recite it once every day without fail. I myself, since the day I first took faith [in the Lotus Sutra], have recited these passages every day, making a vow and praying to the Buddhas and the gods, and although I have encountered great difficulties of various kinds, because of the profound influence of the benefits bestowed by the Lotus Sutra and the

golden words of Shakyamuni Buddha, I have managed to survive until today.

Thus you should understand that so long as a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra remains unwavering in faith, free of all false alliances, entrusting himself wholeheartedly to the Lotus Sutra and practicing in accordance with the Buddha's golden words, he will without fail be able to prevent disaster and prolong his life in this present existence, to say nothing of in the life to come. Splendid recompense will be his, and he will fulfill his great vow to broadly proclaim and propagate the Lotus Sutra.

You say in your letter that you became a priest at the age of seventeen and since then have never had a wife or family or eaten meat. But when one has committed a great slander of the Law by putting faith in the provisional teachings, then no matter how carefully one has observed the precepts in one's practice, one is guilty of the fault of slandering the Law by turning one's back on the Lotus Sutra. And therefore one is a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand times inferior to lay believers who follow the correct teaching but break the precepts. Any priest who slanders the Law, no matter how he may observe the precepts, is destined to fall into the hell of incessant suffering. And likewise lay believers who follow the correct teaching, though they may break the precepts, are without doubt certain to attain Buddhahood.

But now you have cast aside the Nembutsu and the other beliefs of the provisional teachings and have put your faith in the correct teaching. Hence you are in truth among the purest of the observers of the precepts, a sage. To begin with, anyone who is a priest, even if he is a follower of the provisional schools of Buddhism, should be pure [in the observance of the precepts], and how much more one who is a votary of the correct teaching! Though one may have had a wife and

family when one was a follower of the provisional schools, in a time of great trouble such as the present, he should cast all these aside and devote himself to the propagation of the correct teaching. And in your case you were a sage to begin with [because you observed the precepts]. How admirable, how admirable!

Take care that in the future, though you may be tempted to have a wife and family, that you keep your distance from such matters. Stay unimpeded, berate the slanderers of the Law throughout the country, and be one who works to assist Shakyamuni Buddha in his labors to convert others!

Also, from now on recite the scroll

of prayer I have written out for you, make your vow and pray to the Buddhas and gods, and work to propagate the teachings. Please note, however, that this prayer is for the use of those who are devoted to the work of propagation. It is suitable for votaries of the Lotus Sutra, but should not be casually handed out to persons who do not know how to use it.

With my deep respect,  
Nichiren

The twenty-eighth day of the first month in the tenth year of Bun'ei [1273], cyclical sign *mizunoto-tori*

Reply to Sairen-bō



## Background

Nichiren Daishonin sent this letter to the priest Sairen-bō. It is dated the twenty-eighth day of the first month in 1273. Attached to it was a separate scroll on which the Daishonin had written out passages from the Lotus Sutra for Sairen-bō to recite as a prayer. Sairen-bō, a scholarly priest originally of the Tendai school, had been in exile on Sado, where he encountered the Daishonin and became his disciple.

Sairen-bō had been suffering from illness and had asked the Daishonin what prayer would be effective in curing his illness and prolonging his life. The Daishonin responded by sending him a scroll known as “the prayer sutra” containing Lotus Sutra passages describing such benefits. But that document has been lost and it is not known what passages were cited therein. In this letter Nichiren Daishonin points out that the key to having this prayer answered is unwavering devotion to the practice and propagation of the Lotus Sutra; hence he states that

only those dedicated to this task should offer this prayer.

The Daishonin’s teachings in this letter may be summed up in the following four points. First, he describes the ordeals he has experienced in his present life because of the Lotus Sutra. He then goes on to say that the people of his time further denigrate him by saying that in his past existence, when the Buddha was in the world, he was a person of great evil, and that in a future existence he will starve to death, devour his own flesh, and fall into the Avīchi hell. Thus, through these slanders, he in effect endures difficulties in all three existences of past, present, and future. And the fact that he does so is proof that he is a recipient of the blessing of the Lotus Sutra, which predicts that those who uphold its teachings will encounter such difficulties.

Second, the Daishonin responds to Sairen-bō’s desire to retire to the mountains to recover his health. He acknowledges that Sairen-bō’s circum-

stances may make this choice advisable, but admonishes him to return when he has recovered and to devote his life to the practice of shakubuku, the key to attaining Buddhahood in the Latter Day of the Law.

Third, as mentioned earlier, the Daishonin advises Sairen-bō to maintain an unwavering faith, entrust himself to the Lotus Sutra, and practice as the sutra teaches in order to fulfill the

“prayer for preventing disaster and prolonging life.”

Fourth, the Daishonin praises Sairen-bō as a sage because he has abandoned the provisional teachings and converted to the Lotus Sutra while remaining a pure observer of the precepts. The Daishonin encourages Sairen-bō to devote himself entirely to refuting slander of the correct Buddhist teaching and to converting others.

## Notes

1. “I have been wounded in the head” refers to the Komatsubara Persecution of 1264, when, on his way to visit a believer named Kudō Yoshitaka, the Daishonin was attacked at Komatsubara by Tōjō Kagenobu, the steward of Tōjō Village, and suffered a sword cut to his forehead; “beaten” refers to the fact that, when Hei no Saemon, a high government official, went to arrest the Daishonin in the ninth month of 1271, Shō-bō, one of Hei no Saemon’s retainers, struck the Daishonin with a scroll of the fifth volume of the Lotus Sutra, wrapped around a heavy wooden roller; “driven away” indicates the Matsubagayatsu Persecution of 1260, when a group of Nembutsu followers attacked his dwelling at Matsubagayatsu in Kamakura and he nar-

rowly escaped; “led to the place of decapitation” indicates the Tatsunokuchi Persecution of 1271, when he was nearly beheaded at Tatsunokuchi; and “condemned to exile” refers to the Izu Exile of 1261, when he was exiled to Itō in the Izu Peninsula, a stronghold of the Pure Land school.

2. In the “Encouraging Devotion” (13th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra, “eight hundred thousand million nayutas of bodhisattvas” make a vow to teach the sutra in the frightful evil age after the Buddha’s death. Their vow is referred to as the twenty-line verse, which enumerates the types of persecutions that will be met in propagating the sutra in that latter age. Miao-lo later summarized these persecutions and their perpetrators as the three powerful enemies.