A Mother’s Gift of a Robe

Reply to Toki

I HAVE gratefully received the unlined robe\(^1\) that you sent.

Once there was a monk, a disciple of the Buddha, who, concerned for the sake of the Buddha in a time of famine, sold his monk’s robe and presented the money to the Buddha.

When the Buddha inquired why he had done this, he explained his reasons for doing so. The Buddha said, “The monk’s robe is the Dharma garment by which the Buddhas of the three existences of past, present, and future gain emancipation. I can hardly repay you for the offering of such money,” and he declined the gift.

The monk then said, “What am I to do with the money from this robe?” The Buddha said, “Is your mother still alive?” “She is,” replied the monk. “In that case,” said the Buddha, “give her the money as an offering.”

The monk said to the Buddha, “The Buddha is the most highly honored of all persons in the threefold world, the very eye of all living beings. Even a garment wide enough to cover all the worlds in the ten directions, a monk’s robe that enfolds the entire earth, would be no more than a fitting gift for him. But my mother is as ignorant as a cow, more foolish than a sheep. How could she be worthy to receive the money from a monk’s robe?”

The Buddha replied in this way: “Who gave birth to this body of yours? It was your mother who did so. In view of what she has done for you, she fully deserves to receive the money from your monk’s robe.”

And now a kind mother, ninety years of age, has fashioned this garment for her beloved son, straining her eyes, putting into it every bit of strength she has. Perhaps you, her son, thinking you can scarcely repay the debt you owe her for the making of this unlined robe, offered it to me. But I, too, can scarcely repay the kindness of such a gift.

On the other hand, it would hardly be right to return it. So I shall don the robe, and in the presence of the god of the sun relate in detail how I came to possess it. Then assuredly Shakra, Brahmā, and the other heavenly deities will learn of the matter. Though it is only a single unlined robe, all the gods of the ten directions will come to know of it as well. Like the dew merging with the great ocean or soil added to the great earth, [the benefit from this robe] will remain in lifetime after lifetime, and never abate for existence after existence.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The fifth day of the second month
Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter at Minobu in the second month of 1275 to Toki Jōnin in reply to an offering of an unlined robe Jōnin had sent him. The robe had been sewn by Jōnin’s aged mother who originally intended it as a gift to her son. With deep gratitude, Nichiren Daishonin relates a story, the source of which is unknown, about a monk who offered Shakyamuni Buddha the money he had received from selling his religious robe.

Toki Jōnin’s mother was ninety years old at the time of this letter, and the Daishonin carefully paints a picture of the heartfelt love, devotion, and energy she must have poured into sewing this robe for her son, and how difficult a task it must have been for a woman of her age. The Daishonin in this way compares its preciousness to that of the monk’s robe in the story, and, as the Buddha did, expresses hesitation to accept it. Yet refusing it would be to disregard the earnest spirit behind this offering. To show his appreciation and reply to the sincerity of mother and son, the Daishonin promises to relay to the gods how he came to possess it. He assures Toki Jōnin of the great and enduring benefit such an offering will bring.

Note

1. An unlined robe for summer use, made of hemp cloth or crinkled silk.