

## Letter to Jōren-bō



I HAVE received the unlined rough-woven hemp robe<sup>1</sup> that you were kind enough to send.

The man known as the Reverend Shan-tao was a native of the region of Lin-tzu in China. When he was young, he took as his teacher a priest named Ming-sheng of the province of Michou. This priest had great reverence for the Lotus and Vimalakīrti sutras; he not only read and recited these himself but also urged others to do the same. Shan-tao also received these instructions from him, and accordingly studied these sutras and practiced their doctrines as his teacher did.

But, perhaps because of some karma from a past existence, he began to think to himself: "Buddhism sets forth countless different practices [based on its countless teachings], all of which bring benefit when they accord with the capacities of the individual. But, though a teaching may be commendable, if it does not fit the capacity of the individual, its practice is all but useless. And since my practice of the Lotus Sutra is not in accord with my capacity, how can it be of any use? One should rely [on one's capacity], not on the teaching."

With this thought in mind, he entered the storehouse where all the various sutras were kept, closed his eyes,

and reached out for one of them. His hand fell on the Meditation on the Buddha Infinite Life Sutra. When he opened his eyes, he saw that the sutra said, "For the sake of those people whose future existence is impeded by the thieves of earthly desires, I will preach a practice for the attainment of purification."

The Flower Garland Sutra, he thought to himself, was preached for the sake of people of the two vehicles, while the Lotus and Nirvana sutras were addressed to those of the five vehicles. But all these were teachings intended for sages. The only sutra that is suitable for persons like myself in this latter age is the Meditation Sutra.

For a record of the last words that Shakyamuni Buddha left to the world at the time of his passing, nothing can surpass the Nirvana Sutra. This sutra lists seven types of living beings [in a parable pertaining to the Ganges River].

First are the icchantikas, or persons of incorrigible disbelief, who on entering the water, immediately drown. That is, once they have entered the water of the realm of birth and death, they never emerge again. They are like a huge stone cast into the ocean. Their bodies are heavy, unaccustomed to floating, and hence they are always to

be found at the bottom of the sea; therefore they are called "the constantly drowned."

Second are those described as emerging but drowning again. They are like persons who have the strength to float, and hence can emerge from the water once, but, unaccustomed to floating, they sink into it again. These persons are not the same as those in the first category, the *icchantikas*, but like the *icchantikas* they are called "the constantly drowned."

Third are those who, once having emerged from the water, do not drown. That is, having emerged from the river of the realm of birth and death, thereafter they never drown. Such are the voice-hearers such as *Shāriputra* and the others.

Fourth are those who emerge from the water and then remain where they are. Fifth are those who, having emerged, look all around. Sixth are those who, having emerged, stay in a shallow place. And seventh are those who reach the other shore. These people in the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh categories are cause-awakened ones and *bodhisattvas*.

The Thus Come One *Shakyamuni* appeared in the world, and in the course of his preaching life expounded the various sutras of the five periods of his teachings. But these were designed to save people in the third category or those above it. They offered nothing to those in the first category.

The monk *Dharma Treasury*, who became *Amida Buddha*, for the sake of these people took forty-eight vows indicating his intention of welcoming them to the Pure Land. Thus, while the *Buddhas* of the ten directions and the three existences and *Shakyamuni Buddha* offer salvation to all living beings in the third category and above, *Amida Buddha* welcomes those in the first and second categories to his pure land.

Now we ordinary mortals living in the latter age belong to the first and second categories. But the Great Teacher *Ching-ying*,<sup>2</sup> the Great Teacher *T'ien-t'ai*, and the other teachers of the schools other than the Pure Land failed to understand this and believed that the Pure Land with its nine-grade distinctions is a place where sages are reborn. This is the most erroneous of all errors.

In general, the ordinary mortals living in this latter age fall into nine grades. The three upper grades are those "fitted for Mahayana," that is, they are ordinary mortals who encounter Mahayana teachings first. The three middle grades are those "fitted for Hinayana," that is, they are ordinary mortals who encounter Hinayana teachings first. The three lower grades are those "fitted for evil," that is, they are unfaithful and undisciplined ordinary mortals who spend their whole lives doing the kind of evil deeds that condemn one to the hell of incessant suffering.

When these ordinary mortals are on the verge of death, then for the first time they encounter a wise person who understands the seven categories of living beings. This wise person then sets aside the sutras that were expounded for the sake of those who have already reached the shore, and instead seeks to save those whose capacities destine them to drown in the water. The wise person accordingly teaches them to recite the words *Namu Amida Butsu*, which in the *Meditation Sutra* are set forth in order to save those who have committed great evil, those of the lowest of the nine grades of rebirth in the Pure Land.

Thus when I survey all the various sutras, I see that, given the capacities of persons in this latter age, works such as the *Lotus Sutra* cannot save even one in a thousand.<sup>3</sup> We are living beings of the first and second categories, where-

as such sutras were preached for persons with capacities of those in the third category or above. If in this latter age we should try to practice sutras such as the Lotus, we would be inflicting suffering on ourselves without the slightest gain.

Such were the words of the Reverend Shan-tao, and he forthwith cast aside the Lotus Sutra and practiced the teachings of the Meditation Sutra. He was able to gain enlightenment through meditation, see Amida Buddha, and then went on to write four volumes describing the teachings of the Meditation Sutra in a commentary on that work.<sup>4</sup>

Shan-tao in his commentary states: "Thus the great compassion of the Buddhas impels them to turn their thoughts toward those who suffer, thinking with overwhelming pity of those living beings who are 'constantly drowned.' Therefore they urge them to seek the Pure Land. And, as one would do when persons are drowning, they move as swiftly as possible in their wholehearted efforts to save them. Why should they think about saving those who are already safe on shore?"<sup>5</sup>

And again he writes: "The term 'profound mind' means a mind of profound belief. There are two types of such mind. The first type is that which understands once and for all that in one's present form one is an ordinary mortal who undergoes the sufferings of birth and death for committing offenses. Over countless kalpas one has constantly been in a drowned state, constantly transmigrating from one existence to the next without the slightest possibility of escape. This is what is meant by profound belief."<sup>6</sup>

Again he says: "The second type is that which believes once and for all that Amida Buddha's forty-eight vows will bring salvation to living beings, which believes without doubt, without hesitation, that if one entrusts oneself

to the power of those vows, one will without fail gain rebirth in the Pure Land. This is what is meant by profound belief."<sup>7</sup>

The import of Shan-tao's commentary is apparent from the passages quoted above. This is the heart and core of the teachings of the Pure Land school.

We ordinary mortals in this latter age belong to the first and second categories described in the Nirvana Sutra. In such an age as this, the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha offer no means of escape. But through the original vows taken by the monk Dharma Treasury, "one will without fail gain rebirth in the Pure Land." Shan-tao says that to believe this is, among the three kinds of mind,<sup>8</sup> what is meant by the "profound mind."

These are not private opinions put forward by the Reverend Shan-tao alone. The Meditation Master Tao-ch'o lectured twenty-four times on the Nirvana Sutra, but after he read the memorial stone inscription dedicated to the Dharma Teacher T'an-luan,<sup>9</sup> he immediately cast aside the Nirvana Sutra and turned his attention to the Meditation Sutra, and later he transmitted these doctrines to Shan-tao.

The Dharma Teacher T'an-luan lived during the Ch'i dynasty, and at that time there was no one in all of China to equal him. At first he lectured on the four treatises<sup>10</sup> and the Nirvana Sutra, but after he met the Tripitaka Master Bodhiruchi, he set aside the four treatises and the Nirvana Sutra and put his faith in the Meditation Sutra, and in time achieved rebirth in the Pure Land. Thus these doctrines were handed down during the lifetimes of these three men, T'an-luan, Tao-ch'o, and Shan-tao.

In both China and Japan, many wise persons studied the doctrines of the eight schools of Buddhism. But, considering that the Former Day of the Law had come to an end and the world

had entered the Middle Day of the Law, the wiser among them all abandoned the teachings of their own school and instead put faith in the Nembutsu of the Pure Land school.

In Japan the beginnings of this school are to be found in *The Essentials of Rebirth in the Pure Land* by Eshin of Mount Hiei. Yōkan, a priest of the Three Treatises school, who appeared later and wrote *The Ten Conditions for Rebirth in the Pure Land* and *The Rituals of the Assembly for Rebirth in the Pure Land*, was likewise a follower of these doctrines, as was the Honorable Hōnen.

I, Nichiren, have this comment to make. The persons who put their faith in this doctrine believe that those who belong to the first and second categories described in the Nirvana Sutra have the capacity to be reborn in the Pure Land. This is the essence of the Pure Land doctrine.

But now, when I examine the thirty-second and thirty-sixth volumes of the Nirvana Sutra, I see that those in the first category are the "great fish" who are constantly drowned, the icchantikas who slander the correct teaching. And those in the second category are also called "the constantly drowned." As examples of those in this second category, one could cite Devadatta, Kokālika, or Sunakshatra. These were persons who slandered the correct teaching and committed the five cardinal sins. In general, therefore, we may say that the persons of the first and second categories are guilty of slander of the Law and the five cardinal sins.

The monk Dharma Treasury stated in his vow: "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."<sup>11</sup>

Judging from this vow, the monk Dharma Treasury in fact abandoned those persons who are in the first and second categories. If we were to borrow the words of the Reverend Shantao, we would have to say that if the ordinary mortals of this latter age were to rely on this original vow of Amida Buddha, then "not even one person in a thousand" can be saved.

The Universal Worthy Sutra, which serves as an epilogue to the Lotus Sutra, indicates that those who commit the five cardinal sins or slander the Law have the capacity to attain Buddhahood through the one vehicle of the Lotus Sutra. And since this is so, then for ordinary mortals in this latter age, the Lotus Sutra is a teaching that assures that "ten persons out of ten and a hundred persons out of a hundred will be reborn"<sup>12</sup> in a pure land.

This questioning of the doctrines put forth by the Reverend Shantao is no mere private opinion of my own. At the time when [according to the Compassionate White Lotus Flower Sutra] Amida Buddha was known as King Uncontentious Mind, he had already abandoned the sahā world. At that time the Thus Come One Shakyamuni, who was the Brahman Treasure Sea,<sup>13</sup> undertook to be the savior of those in the sahā world, the world of endurance. Thus it is clear that those who slander the Law, those who commit the five cardinal sins, and the icchantikas are not admitted to the pure lands of the ten directions, because Amida Buddha and the Buddhas of the ten directions have taken a vow to that effect.

Therefore the Brahman Treasure Sea in his own vow stated: "I will gather together the living beings who have been excluded from the pure lands of the ten directions and will lead them to salvation."<sup>14</sup> And in the Lotus Sutra he

says, "I am the only person who can rescue and protect others."<sup>15</sup>

These words of the sutra, "I am the only person," may seem rather strong. But they are not a mere boastful assertion put forward by the Thus Come One Shakyamuni. Amida Buddha and the other Buddhas had already declared that they had cast aside the saḥā world. Therefore Shakyamuni, the lord of teachings, vowing that "I am the only person," made his appearance in the saḥā world. How could there be any doubt about the matter?

These six men, T'an-luan, Tao-ch'ō, Shan-tao, Eshin, Yōkan, and Hōnen, were men of wisdom, whereas I, Nichiren, am ignorant, a person of no learning. But I cannot help wondering what country these six men belonged to. Were they persons from outside the threefold world? Were they beings outside the six paths of existence? Did they meet up with Amida Buddha and thereupon leave the household life, undertake to observe the precepts, and thus become priests? [I hardly think so.]

The people of today can hardly compare in noble birth or power and influence with such figures as Masakado, Sumitomo, Kiyomori, or Yoshitomo.<sup>16</sup> But although they had demonstrated outstanding valor, because they became enemies of the emperor, men who are far less worthy than they speak of them with contempt, saying, "That Masakado!" "That Sumitomo!" and even the descendants of these men cannot put an end to the abuse.

Yoshitomo was the loving father of the late General of the Right [Minamoto no Yoritomo]. If one regards the son with respect, one ought to show the same respect toward the father. Why then do people speak with such contempt of Yoshitomo and his brother Tametomo<sup>17</sup>? They suffer this fate because they defied the august com-

mand of the emperor and incurred blame by acting as rebellious subjects.

And the six men I have cited above acted likewise. The Thus Come One Shakyamuni appeared in the world and in the course of his lifetime expounded the sacred teachings. He himself gathered the doctrines he had expounded during the entire fifty years of his preaching life and determined which are profound and which shallow, which are superior and which inferior, and which are fallacious and which true. Then the Buddha said that in those expounded in the first forty and more years of that period, he had "not yet revealed the truth,"<sup>18</sup> and that the Lotus Sutra is the foremost among all the sutras that "I have preached, now preach, and will preach."<sup>19</sup> The Buddha Many Treasures and the Buddhas of the ten directions all added their testimony to affirm the truth of this statement.

But those six men I have mentioned put their faith in the Meditation Sutra, which was preached in the period when the Thus Come One Shakyamuni had "not yet revealed the truth," and deny that the Lotus Sutra, of which the voice from the treasure tower said, "All that you [Shakyamuni] have expounded is the truth!"<sup>20</sup> is designed to save evil persons in the first and second categories. The people of today have for a number of years now been led astray by these six men. The followers of such military leaders as Masakado and Sumitomo attacked the peasants who refused to heed their orders, beating them or cutting them down, and the followers of these six men behave in the same fashion. But later the government forces came to put down the men and women who fought under the rebels like Masakado and Sumitomo, and they were beset by fire and water, and the same will happen to the followers of those six men.

The people of Japan today appear to put their faith in all the various Bud-

dhas and bodhisattvas and all the various sutras. But in mind they are one with the minds of those six men, and in body they are followers of those six. Masakado and the others like him, before the government forces launched their attack, were secure in the lands allotted to them and had their followers about them. But once the government forces drew near to attack those who refused to obey the royal command, they found themselves in the realm of the asura demons. Like so many fish in the hands of a chef, their men were carved up, plunged into flames or plunged into water. And we see the same kind of scene in Japan today.

Because people rely on the erroneous views of these six men, in their present existence they are abandoned by the benevolent deities who customarily guard and protect the country, and the country faces the three calamities and seven disasters. And in their next existence, because they must pay for the deeds they have done, they will fall into the fires of the great citadel of the Avīchi hell.

The fifth volume of the Lotus Sutra describes the powerful enemies that the Buddha has predicted will confront the Lotus Sutra in the latter age, speaking of “arhats who possess the six transcendental powers.”<sup>21</sup> And these six men I have mentioned are highly honored as though they were arhats who possess the six transcendental powers.

Honorable Jōren, your father was among the lay supporters of these men. If the teachings of the Buddha are true,

he must without doubt be in the great citadel of the hell of incessant suffering.

But it is the minister who broadens the mind of the ruler, and the child who eases the pains of the parents. The Venerable Maudgalyāyana saved his loving mother from the sufferings of the realm of hungry spirits, and the sons Pure Storehouse and Pure Eye persuaded their kind father to give up his erroneous views. The body that the father and mother leave behind is none other than the physical form and mind of the child. The blessings that you, the Honorable Jōren, acquire through your faith in the Lotus Sutra will lend strength to your kind father.

Though Devadatta fell into the Avīchi hell, the Buddha predicted that he would in the future become a Buddha named Heavenly King Thus Come One. This was because he belonged to the same extended family as the Buddha. In your case, the relationship is one of father and son. How could the fact that you embrace the Lotus Sutra fail to bring blessing to the departed spirit of your late father?

There are many other things I would like to say, but I must close now. Have someone read this letter to you three times and listen well!

With my deep respect,  
Nichiren

The twenty-seventh day of the sixth month

Be sure to urge all those in Suruga to remain united in their faith!



## Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter to Jōren-bō in reply to the offering of an unlined robe he had received from him. Written on the twenty-seventh

day of the sixth month in 1275, this is the only known letter sent by the Daishonin to Jōren-bō. Jōren-bō lived in Ihara District of Suruga Province, in a

village called Okitsu. From the content of this letter, it appears that Jören-bō's father was a believer of the Pure Land school. Around the year this letter was written, Nikkō had begun propagating the Daishonin's teachings in the Atsuhara area, and a few years later, during what is known as the Atsuhara Persecution, Jören-bō along with other disciples worked to protect the local believers. The Daishonin wrote in the postscript to this letter: "Be sure to urge all those in Suruga to remain united in their faith!"

The Daishonin begins by summarizing the doctrinal position taken by Shan-tao, the third patriarch of the Pure Land teachings in China, based on his *Commentary on the Meditation on the Buddha Infinite Life Sutra*. In Japan, Eshin, Yōkan, and Hōnen, the founder of the Japanese Pure Land school, followed Shan-tao's teachings. The Daishonin refutes their erroneous views, citing the eighteenth vow of the monk Dharma Treasury, who later became Amida Buddha, the vow to exclude

those who commit the five cardinal sins and those who slander the correct teaching from rebirth in the Pure Land. He also cites the words of Shakyamuni Buddha who states in the Lotus Sutra: "I am the only person who can rescue and protect others [all the living beings in the threefold world]." He then clarifies that the Pure Land sutras are among those expounded in the more than forty years of Shakyamuni's preaching life, during which the Buddha had "not yet revealed the truth." Because the Japanese people believe in the erroneous views of the Pure Land patriarchs, he asserts, they suffer the three calamities and seven disasters predicted in the sutras, and in the next life they will fall into the Avīchi hell. Finally, he suggests that Jören-bō's father, because he was an adherent of the Nembutsu, must now be in that hell. However, he continues, the benefit of the son's practice of the Lotus Sutra will definitely reach the deceased father and save him from his sufferings.

## Notes

1. An unlined robe for summer use, made of rough-woven hemp cloth.

2. Also known as Hui-yüan (523–592), a priest of the Treatise on the Ten Stages Sutra school in China. He is so called, because in his later years he lived in Ching-ying-ssu temple. Born in Dunhuang, he is noted for having remonstrated with Emperor Wu of the Northern Chou dynasty when the emperor threatened to abolish Buddhism. After the suppression of Buddhism ended, Hui-yüan preached Buddhism in various locations and enjoyed the favor of Emperor Wen, who sought to restore Buddhism.

3. Shan-tao says in his *Praising Rebirth in the Pure Land* that not even one person in a thousand can be saved through any teaching other than the Pure Land sutras.

4. *The Commentary on the Meditation on the Buddha Infinite Life Sutra*. Among the many commentaries on the Meditation on the Buddha Infinite Life Sutra, this is the

best known.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. The three kinds of mind are, according to the Meditation Sutra, (1) sincere mind, (2) profound mind, and (3) mind of resolve to be reborn in the Pure Land.

9. This refers to the monument that was set up at Hsüan-chung-ssu temple, where T'an-luan (476–542) lived in his later years. The people of the county built it to commemorate his achievements, describing auspicious omens that were said to appear at his death.

10. The four treatises refer to Nāgārjuna's *Treatise on the Middle Way*, *Treatise on the Twelve Gates*, and *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, as well as Āryadeva's *One-Hundred-Verse Treatise*. T'an-luan initially studied these four treatises.

11. Buddha Infinite Life Sutra.

12. This statement is found in Shan-

tao's *Praising Rebirth in the Pure Land*.

13. The name of Shakyamuni in a past existence when he practiced bodhisattva austerities. *See* p. 676.

14. This statement is based on a passage of the Compassionate White Lotus Flower Sutra.

15. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.

16. Military leaders. *See* Glossary for Masakado and Sumitomo. For Kiyomori and Yoshitomo, *see* Taira no Kiyomori and Minamoto no Yoshitomo.

17. Minamoto no Tametomo (1139-1170), a military leader and younger brother of Yoshitomo. He was especially skilled in archery. In the Hōgen Disturbance of 1156, a conflict arising from rivalries within the

imperial family, he supported the Retired Emperor Sutoku, but Sutoku's faction was soon defeated by Yoshitomo and Kiyomori and he was banished to the island of Ōshima.

18. Immeasurable Meanings Sutra.

19. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10. It reads, "Among the sutras I have preached, now preach, and will preach, this Lotus Sutra is the most difficult to believe and the most difficult to understand."

20. *Ibid.*, chap. 11. With this statement, Many Treasures Buddha testified to the veracity of the Lotus Sutra.

21. *Ibid.*, chap. 13. For six transcendental powers, *see* Glossary.