I WAS delighted to have word from you, and I have received the fifty mandarin oranges and five thousand coins that you were kind enough to send by the messenger. I was told that these are offerings from the various members of your family.

In your letter you say that on the sixteenth day just passed, when you met with a certain priest, you held a debate with him on the doctrine of "the true aspect of all phenomena."

The Lotus Sutra represents the true reason why the Buddha made his appearance in the world. It embodies the basic teaching by which all living beings are able to attain the Buddha way. And that teaching is found nowhere but in these four characters that express the idea of the true aspect of all phenomena. Therefore when the Great Teacher Dengyō traveled ten thousand miles over the sea to China, what he brought back for us was this one phrase, a single phrase with ten thousand meanings.

But these days when the members of the Tendai school conduct their interpretations of doctrine, in which they "open up and merge" [the provisional teachings with the true teaching], they understand this passage of the sutra wrongly, and this leads them into opinions that are erroneous.

The proper understanding of the "opening up and merging" effected by this phrase, "the true aspect of all phenomena," is simply to uphold the Lotus Sutra, chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, and have faith in the words "honestly discarding expedient means, I will preach only the unsurpassed way." This is because Shakymuni Buddha, the Thus Come One Many Treasures, and the Buddhas of the ten directions and the three existences have all testified to the truth of these words.

You should be prepared to approach the matter in this way, and thus from time to time taste the flavor of these four characters that represent "the true aspect of all phenomena."

Does one deliberately mix poison in with good medicine? Does one go to the tides of the sea and try to dip up from them the river waters? The moon comes out at night, but during the day the sun shines—would anyone dispute the truth of this? In the future, you should follow these instructions when engaging in debate. Only do not go into great detail regarding difficult points. If your opponent still wishes to continue the debate, then just smile and say, "May I ask you to take up this doctrine with my teacher, the priest Nichiren?" Repeat this request as many times as you wish.

I was so busy writing you about doctrinal matters that I could not thank
you for your offerings. Thank you, thank you! I will write you in more detail at a future time.

Nichiren

The twenty-second day of the

Background

In the seventh month of 1275, Shijō Kingo reported to Nichiren Daishonin that he had recently engaged a priest of another Buddhist school in a debate on the doctrine of “the true aspect of all phenomena” from the “Expedient Means” chapter of the Lotus Sutra. In this reply, the Daishonin discusses the importance of the doctrine, and points out that the Tendai school at the time misinterpreted the concept of “opening up and merging” with regard to “the true aspect of all phenomena.” They erroneously asserted that the three vehicle teachings (provisional teachings), once opened up and merged, are equal to the one vehicle teaching of the Lotus Sutra. But the Daishonin says that the proper understanding of this concept is to believe only in the Lotus Sutra and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Further, he offers Shijō Kingo advice on how to approach a religious debate.

Notes

1. The teaching of “opening up and merging” is found in the Lotus Sutra, which opens up and merges the provisional teachings with the one vehicle teaching of Buddhahood. The scholars of the Tendai school held that the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings, when opened up and merged with the Lotus Sutra, are the same as the Lotus Sutra itself. There is an essential difference, however, between the two views: while the Lotus Sutra has the principle of “opening up and merging,” the other sutras do not. Another essential difference is that while the Lotus Sutra expounds the truth in its entirety, the other sutras preach only part of it. Partial truth has meaning only when it is viewed in the light of the whole; if taken alone, partial truth is useless. “This passage of the sutra” refers to “the true aspect of all phenomena,” found in the “Expedient Means” (2nd) chapter of the Lotus Sutra.

2. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.