

Kamatari Suggests the Fashioning of a Buddha Image



I HAVE received two thousand coins from Musashi-bō Ennichi,¹ whom you sent as a messenger. Kōgyoku, the thirty-sixth in the line of sovereigns, was a woman. At that time, there was a minister named Iruka.² He became so arrogant that he insanely took action to seize imperial power for himself. The empress, the princes, and others felt that this was outrageous, but they found themselves utterly powerless against him.

Then the princes Ōe and Karu,³ deploring this state of affairs, consulted a court official named Nakatomi no Kamako,⁴ who said that he was convinced it was beyond human power to stop Iruka. He cited the example of Umako,⁵ and insisted that without the power of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, it would be impossible to stop him. Taking this to heart, they had an image of Shakyamuni Buddha fashioned and prayed to it, and in no time at all Iruka was struck down.

This man named Nakatomi no Kamako was later granted a new surname and became known as Fujiwara no Kamatari. He was appointed inner minister, bore the title of the rank Great Woven Cap,⁶ and was the founder of the present-day Fujiwara family. That image of Shakyamuni Buddha is the present-day object of devotion at Kōfuku-ji temple. Thus Shakyamuni

Buddha is the reason the emperor was emperor, the reason the minister was minister, and the reason this land of the gods became the land of the Buddha. Please understand this by comparing it with what I have written in my letter to Uemon no Tayū.⁷ The reason our country now faces the threat of subjugation to another nation is that people fail to pay the least attention to Shakyamuni Buddha. The power of the gods is also ineffective for this reason.

People have regarded the two of you as surely having already yielded, but you have acted in an admirable manner. You probably think this is solely due to the power of Shakyamuni Buddha and the Lotus Sutra. I believe this also. No words can express the promise of your next existence. From now on too, no matter what may happen, you must not slacken in the least. You must raise your voice all the more and admonish [those who slander]. Even if your life should be threatened, you must not falter in the least.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The twenty-first day of the eighth
month

Reply to Hyōe no Sakan

Background

This is one of the many letters written by Nichiren Daishonin to Ikegami Hyōe no Sakan Munenaga, the younger of the two Ikegami brothers. Munenaga and his elder brother, Uemon no Tayū Munenaka, were facing opposition from their father, who disapproved of their faith in the Daishonin's teaching. In this letter, written on the twenty-first day of the eighth month in 1275 at Minobu, the Daishonin, expressing his thanks for an offering of two thousand coins, encourages Munenaga to carry through his faith by citing a historical incident

that took place during the reign of Empress Kōgyoku. The empress and the princes of the imperial family succeeded in eliminating threats from Soga no Iruka, a powerful minister responsible for many violent acts, when they had had fashioned and had prayed to an image of Shakyamuni Buddha. Similarly, says the Daishonin, it is due to the power of Shakyamuni Buddha and the Lotus Sutra that the Ikegami brothers have been able to overcome numerous obstacles to their faith. He urges them to neither slacken nor falter, no matter what new challenges should arise.

Notes

1. A disciple of Nichiren Daishonin who lived in Kamakura.

2. Soga no Iruka (d. 645), the head of the powerful Soga family. During the reign of Empress Kōgyoku, he seized control of the government and perpetrated various atrocities. In 643 he attacked and defeated Prince Yamashiro no Ōe, a son of Prince Shōtoku, who fled and committed suicide. Thereafter Iruka was able to manage affairs of state as he pleased. He was finally killed, however, by Prince Naka no Ōe and Nakatomi no Kamako (Fujiwara no Kamatari).

3. Prince Ōe refers to Naka no Ōe

(626–671), a son of Empress Kōgyoku, who later ascended the throne as Emperor Tenji. Prince Karu was a younger brother of Empress Kōgyoku and later became Emperor Kōtoku.

4. Fujiwara no Kamatari (614–669), the founder of the Fujiwara family, which prospered during the Heian period (794–1185).

5. See Soga no Umako in Glossary.

6. The highest of the official ranks. In 669 Emperor Tenji bestowed this rank exclusively on Fujiwara no Kamatari.

7. Ikegami Munenaka, the elder brother of Ikegami Munenaga, the recipient of this letter.