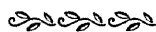


Understanding the Meaning of “The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind”



I HAVE received one thousand coins, one white thick-quilted cotton robe, ten writing brushes, and five sticks of ink.

As you know, here at Mount Minobu in winter the storm winds blow fiercely and the heaped up snow never melts. Because of the extreme cold, it is difficult and painful to carry out Buddhist practice day and night when one is not adequately clothed. But with this quilted robe to wear, I know I will not feel the cold at all.

Shānavāsa, the third of Shakyamuni Buddha's successors, was a sage. Regarding the deeds he carried out in the past, the Buddha said: “Long ago in the past he gave a robe to an ailing monk, and as a result, in life after life, existence after existence, he received a wonderful robe that always fitted him in size.”¹

And now, in giving me this robe, you are like Shānavāsa. I do not know exactly how much merit you may acquire by doing so, but I will leave all such matters up to Shakyamuni Buddha.

According to your letter, the lay priest Kyōshin,² basing himself on the passage in *The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind* in which I said that the theoretical teaching fails to lead to enlightenment, wonders if we should

not cease to read the theoretical teaching entirely. But this is an erroneous view, one that I myself have never expounded. During the Bun'ei era I wrote to you in detail explaining the proper interpretation of this treatise, *Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind*, and you should therefore instruct him exactly as I have written.

To be sure, I have in many places and on many occasions written that the theoretical teaching should be abandoned. But by that I did not mean the theoretical teaching section of the Lotus Sutra that we at present read.³ What I meant was the theoretical teaching taught in past times by the Tendai school of Mount Hiei.

Even though one might practice the sutra teaching just as T'ien-t'ai and Dengyō taught, now that we have entered the Latter Day of the Law, to do so is as useless as following last year's calendar. And this is even more so when we consider that, beginning with Jikaku, the doctrines [propounded on Mount Hiei] have confused the distinction between Mahayana and Hinayana and between provisional and true teachings, and are comparable to a major slander of the Law. Such doctrines could have no value even in the Middle Day of the Law, much less now in the Latter Day!

You also state that a teacher of Kitakata⁴ has criticized me, saying: "Although Nichiren urges us to cast away the sutras preached prior to the Lotus Sutra because they represent a period when the Buddha had 'not yet revealed the truth,'⁵ in his *On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land* he cites the pre-Lotus sutras to support his argument, thus contradicting his own line of reasoning." I have commented concerning this matter many times in the past.

Generally speaking, the sacred teachings of the Buddha's lifetime may be divided into two large categories, those that act as the main chord of the net, and those that represent the net's finer meshes.

First comes the main chord, which is the teaching that leads to the attainment of Buddhahood and achievement of the way. This teaching of the attainment of Buddhahood is the Lotus Sutra.

After that come the finer meshes, which are the sutras preached prior to the Lotus. These sutras embody teachings that do not lead to the attainment of Buddhahood. Though they may say that they lead to the attainment of Buddhahood and achievement of the way, this is just so many words. The true attainment is found through the Lotus Sutra.

As the Great Teacher Dengyō states in his *Treatise Defining the Provisional and the True*, "The writings that embody provisional wisdom represent an attainment of Buddhahood that exists in name only and not in reality." But the doctrines other than that pertaining to the attainment of Buddhahood and achievement of the way that are set forth in the provisional teachings are not mere empty preachings, because they act as the finer meshes for the Lotus Sutra.

In effect, we may say that the main chord of the net, that which deals with the attainment of Buddhahood, is

expounded in the Lotus Sutra, while the finer meshes of the net are made clear in the various other canonical texts. They function as finer meshes for the Lotus Sutra, and therefore it is perfectly proper to cite them as proof to support the validity of the Lotus Sutra. Moreover, because the reality of the attainment of Buddhahood is found only in the Lotus Sutra and the attainment expounded in the sutras preached prior to the Lotus exists in name alone, it is clear that the latter were preached solely for the sake of the Lotus Sutra. In this sense, these other sutras serve as proof of the validity of the Lotus Sutra.

Question: What proof is there that the Lotus Sutra is the main chord?

Answer: T'ien-t'ai says, "One should understand that this sutra [the Lotus] only sets forth the main chord of the Thus Come One's teachings and does not go into details regarding the finer meshes."⁶

Question: What proof is there that the pre-Lotus sutras represent the finer meshes?

Answer: Miao-lo states, "The skin, the complexion, the hair, the coloring—these are set forth in the various other canonical texts."⁷

Question: What proof can you give that the attainment of Buddhahood is limited to the Lotus Sutra?

Answer: The Lotus Sutra states, "There is only the Law of the one vehicle, there are not two, there are not three."⁸

Question: What proof can you give that the sutras preached prior to the Lotus were preached for the sake of the Lotus Sutra?

Answer: The Lotus Sutra states, "Though they [the Buddhas] point out various different paths, in truth they do so for the sake of the Buddha vehicle."⁹

I would like to go into these matters in greater detail, but I am not feeling well at the moment, and so I will end here.

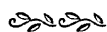
With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The twenty-third day of the
eleventh month

Reply to Toki

Sotsu¹⁰ has told me that in Shimōsa
there is a magnolia tree. I would like

you to dig up a root and apply a hot
iron to both ends of twenty pieces
you have cut from it. Then wrap
them well in plenty of paper to pro-
tect them from the air. When Tayū
Jirō¹¹ comes here again, please tell
him to bring them with him.



Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this work at Minobu on the twenty-third day of the eleventh month in 1275. It is addressed to Toki Jōnin, a leading lay follower who lived in Shimōsa Province.

It is a response to Toki Jōnin’s report regarding two issues related to the Daishonin’s doctrine. The first concerns a statement made by Soya Kyōshin, a fellow lay believer in Shimōsa. Kyōshin had misinterpreted the following passage from the Daishonin’s writing *The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind*: “All the teachings other than the ‘one chapter and two halves’ are Hinayana in nature and erroneous. Not only do they fail to lead to enlightenment, but also they lack the truth” (I, p. 369). “One chapter and two halves” constitutes what the Daishonin described as the revelation section of the Lotus Sutra, the second half of the “Emerging from the Earth” (15th) chapter, the entire “Life Span” (16th) chapter, and the first half of the “Distinctions in Benefits” (17th) chapter, in which Shakyamuni’s original enlightenment in the far distant past is revealed.

Toki Jōnin wrote to the Daishonin about Kyōshin’s assertion that if all teachings other than the “one chapter and two halves” of the essential teaching section of the Lotus Sutra “fail to lead to enlightenment,” then there is no point in reciting any portion of the

theoretical teaching, or first half of the Lotus Sutra. This is a reference to the first part of the daily practice carried out by the Daishonin and his followers, which consisted of reciting the “Expedient Means” (2nd) chapter and the “Life Span” chapter, and chanting the daimoku of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo.

The Daishonin states that, in including the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra among those teachings that fail to lead to enlightenment, he is referring to the theoretical teaching as taught by T’ien-t’ai, Dengyō, and others. He is not referring to the theoretical teaching he and his disciples read and recite, a practice based on an understanding of the fundamental Law revealed in the essential teaching of the sutra.

Toki Jōnin then addressed the criticism of a priest of the Tendai school who had claimed that while the Daishonin in *On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land* urges one to abandon the provisional, pre-Lotus Sutra, teachings, in that same treatise he quotes from provisional sutras in order to support his assertions. This, the priest claimed, is self-contradictory.

Here the Daishonin points out that while the provisional teachings do not in themselves lead to enlightenment, the Buddha’s purpose in expounding them was to direct people to the true

teaching of the Lotus Sutra. When this point is made, it is proper to quote them in support of the Lotus Sutra. In making his argument, he compares the various provisional sutras to the meshes of a net and the Lotus to the main

chord that controls the net, indicating that the finer meshes function for the main chord.

In closing, the Daishonin requests Toki's aid in obtaining cuttings of magnolia root.

Notes

1. A summary of a passage from *A History of the Buddha's Successors*.

2. A reference to Soya Kyōshin, who was a fellow practitioner of Toki Jōnin, the recipient of this letter.

3. The issue of whether to read the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra, or more precisely the "Expedient Means" chapter, concerns the daily practice of sutra recitation in the Daishonin's Buddhism. The theoretical teaching "that we at present read" means reading it in the light of the Buddha's original enlightenment revealed in the "Life Span" chapter of the essential teaching. Nichiren Daishonin identified Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō as the eternal Law to which the Buddha was originally enlightened. From this viewpoint, the theoretical teaching, though it does not reveal the Buddha's original enlightenment, is seen as an explanation of the eternal Law. This is why the Daishonin practiced the recitation of the "Expedient Means" chapter in addition to the "Life Span" chapter in daily prayer.

4. "A teacher of Kitakata" is thought to refer to a priest of the Tendai school who lived at Kitakata near Wakamiya, the location of Toki Jōnin's residence, in Shimōsa Province.

5. A passage from the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra, in which Shakyamuni Buddha says, "In these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth."

6. *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*.

7. *The Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra."*

8. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

9. Ibid.

10. Sotsu refers to Nikkō (1257–1314), a disciple of Nichiren Daishonin. Nikkō's father, Ōta Jōmyō, lived near Toki Jōnin, and along with Toki Jōnin and Soya Kyōshin was a pillar among the believers of Shimōsa Province.

11. Details about Tayū Jirō are unknown. He is thought to have been a follower of Nichiren Daishonin and an acquaintance of Toki Jōnin.