

Reply to a Communication from Gōnin



TO the Honorable Gōnin: The letter that you dispatched on the twenty-fifth day of the tenth month reached me on the twenty-sixth day of the twelfth month. Your inquiry concerns a matter that for some years now has caused me great distress, and therefore I have hastened to write a reply in hopes that I may clear up the doubts that you and others have regarding it.

Trying, however, to determine what is correct and what is not correct in matters relating to Buddhist doctrine when one is living in the countryside is, regrettably, like wearing fine brocade garments and wandering about in the dark [where no one can see them], or like a fine pine growing in the depths of the valley where no woodcutter can judge its true worth.

In addition, attempts such as this to arrive at agreement on points of doctrine are likely to become a cause for dispute. If you really wish to settle this matter, then I think that notification should be given to the imperial court and to the government in Kanto so that an official record may be drawn up and a clear decision as to the truth of the matter arrived at. In that case, the ruler will be delighted and persons of lesser status will have their doubts dispelled.

Furthermore, the World-Honored

One of Great Enlightenment entrusted the ruler and his ministers with matters relating to the Buddhist teachings. When decisions pertaining to what is correct and what erroneous are involved, whether they concern secular matters or religious ones, they should invariably be made under public auspices.

At present our country suffers greatly from two difficulties, the “calamity of revolt within one’s own domain” and the “calamity of invasion from foreign lands.”¹ If one searches the Buddhist canon for the cause of these two grave difficulties, one finds that without doubt they come about because there is a great misunderstanding in both the nation and the Buddhist teachings.

Much alarmed by the severe earthquake of the Shōka era and the great comet of the Bun’ei era,² I consulted all the various sutras and found that these two difficulties, unknown in past times, namely the “calamity of revolt within one’s own domain” and the “calamity of invasion from foreign lands,” were certain to occur. These severe afflictions have been called into being because the True Word, Zen, Nembutsu, and Precepts teachings, erroneous doctrines that are based on Hinayana or provisional Mahayana sutras, have eclipsed the correct doc-

trines of the Lotus Sutra, the repository of truth.

Because I knew that presently the forces from a foreign power would attack our nation, I offered my life before the altars of the Buddha and the gods, fearless of any attacks I might suffer from the swords of the warrior class; daily I submitted petitions to the rulers of the nation, and each evening I instructed my disciples in what should be done.

But the priests of the True Word, Zen, Nembutsu, and Precepts schools brought all manner of wild accusations against me, invented multiple slanders with which to impugn me, and so my warnings went unheeded. Everywhere I was attacked with swords and staves, twice I suffered exile due to official displeasure, and on one occasion I almost had my head cut off.

In considering this matter, I would like to leave aside a discussion of the correctness of the Buddhist teachings as they have been propagated in India and China. But with regard to the situation in this country of Japan, it is apparent that the doom that faces the nation comes from the fact that two teachers, Kōbō of Tō-ji temple, the founder of the True Word school in Japan, and Jikaku, the third chief priest of the Tendai school of Mount Hiei, went astray in judging the relative worth of the Lotus Sutra and the Mahāvairocana Sutra. Ever since they departed from and obscured the correct interpretation propounded by the Great Teacher Dengyō, the foremost sage of Japan, the temples associated with Mount Hiei have all subscribed to the erroneous doctrines of Jikaku, and Jingo-ji temple and the seven major temples of Nara have endorsed the distorted views of Kōbō. And since that time, the ruler and his ministers have paid honor to erroneous teachers and the common people have committed themselves to distorted views.

Already more than four hundred years have passed since such twisted views took root, and the country is growing enfeebled and the power of the ruler draining away.

In India King Pushyamitra burned down eighty-four thousand temples and stupas and cut off the heads of countless Buddhist monks, and in China the emperor of the Hui-ch'ang era³ wiped out forty-six hundred and more temples and forced the priests and nuns of all the nine regions⁴ to return to lay life. These were truly evil men, but their deeds hardly surpass the great slanders of the teachings perpetrated in our own nation.

As a result, the blue heavens cast angry eyes upon our country, and the yellow earth, seething with rage, is moved to put forth ill-omened prodigies. But the sovereign of the nation, no sage ruler, does not understand the situation, and his ministers, not being Confucian scholars, cannot see what is causing it. What is more, in an attempt to bring an end to these calamities they revere and look up to the teachers of the True Word school, and in hopes of escaping these great difficulties they lavish alms on the priests of the Precepts school. It is as though they were adding wood to the fire or water where there is already ice. The more they pay honor to these evil doctrines, the more great disasters fall on us, so that the nation is now on the verge of destruction.

Having seen the general trend of events from some time past, I determined to risk my personal safety in order to repay the debt I owe the nation. But, perhaps because it is the way with ignorant people to honor what is distant and despise what is near, or to believe what many assert and ignore the voice of a single person—in any event, the months and years have passed in vain [without my advice ever being heeded].

Now, fortunately, I have received this communication from you, the Honorable Gōnin, in which you enlighten me regarding your views. Under the circumstances, would this not be an appropriate time for us to make our opinions known to the ruling authorities and to settle the matter in this way?

In truth, the wording of your letter shows that it is founded upon error. If you continue to remain silent and pass your whole life in this vain manner, it is most certain that you and your lay supporters will both suffer the great pains of hell in your next existence. You must not allow the towering pride

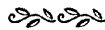
of your present lifetime to plant the seeds of deluded wandering for endless kalpas to come. Let us make all haste to appeal to the authorities, make haste to meet face-to-face before them, and to put an end to these erroneous views!

A letter cannot convey all that I would say, nor words fully express what is in my heart. All the rest must await our public debate.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The twenty-sixth day of the twelfth month

Offered to the Honorable Gōnin



Background

This letter, written at Minobu on the twenty-sixth day of the twelfth month in 1275, is a reply to a letter from Gōnin, a priest of the True Word school. Gōnin had written in an attempt to engage Nichiren Daishonin in a religious debate.

The Daishonin answers that such a debate should be held in public so that the party that wins may be universally known. He also points out that Shakyamuni Buddha entrusted his teachings to the ruler and ministers of the time, holding them responsible for making clear the correct teaching through religious debate conducted in their presence.

Then the Daishonin reminds Gōnin that the two disasters of internal strife and foreign invasion that he predicted in *On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land* occurred because the True Word, Zen, Pure Land, and Precepts schools continue to slander the correct teaching of the Lotus Sutra. Moreover, they also maneuvered to

have the secular authorities attempt to execute and to exile him.

Next the Daishonin focuses his attention on refuting the True Word school and the esoteric, or True Word, teachings of the Tendai school, because the Kamakura shogunate had ordered them to pray for the defeat of the Mongols and because Gōnin was a priest of the True Word school. Neither the ruler of the shogunate nor such priests as Gōnin were aware that the True Word prayers actually had the opposite effect of calling forth even greater disaster for Japan.

In closing, the Daishonin notes that though his admonitions have long been ignored, Gōnin has proposed holding a religious debate. He urges Gōnin to petition the ruler to hold such a debate in public to clarify what is correct in terms of Buddhist doctrine. Otherwise, the Daishonin says, Gōnin will fail to recognize his errors, and both he and his disciples will be bound to experience the pains of hell.

Notes

1. Two of the seven disasters listed in the Medicine Master Sutra.

2. Reference is to the great earthquake that devastated the Kamakura area in the eighth month of 1257 and to the huge comet that appeared in the seventh month of 1264.

3. "The emperor of the Hui-ch'ang

era" refers to Wu-tsung (814–846), the fifteenth emperor of the T'ang dynasty, who was an adherent of Taoism. In 845 he initiated a nationwide drive to destroy Buddhism.

4. "All the nine regions" refers to the entire land of China, which was composed of nine regions in ancient times.