THE Tripitaka Master Shan-wu-wei, or Shubhakarasimha, was the crown prince of King Buddha Seed of the state of Udyāna in India. He ascended the throne at the age of seven, but at the age of thirteen he relinquished rule of the kingdom to his older brother and left the household life to become a monk. Traveling about through the five regions of India in the course of his religious practice, he pursued to the end the five vehicles of human being, heavenly being, voice-hearer, cause-awakened one, and bodhisattva, and mastered the three types of learning, precepts, meditation, and wisdom.

He encountered a sage named Dharmagupta and immediately received instruction in the various mudras of the True Word doctrine. On the very same day he underwent the ceremony of anointment that acknowledged him as worthy to be a teacher of human and heavenly beings.

Entering Mount Kukkutapāda, he shaved the hair on the head of the Venerable Mahākāśyapa. In the capital of the kingdom when he prayed for rain, Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World’s Sounds came forth from the sun and poured down water from a water jar. At the stupa erected by King Golden Grains in northern India, he offered prayers to the Law of the Buddha, whereupon Bodhisattva Manjushrī appeared and presented him with the Womb Realm mandala of the Mahāvairochana Sutra.

Later, in the fourth year of the K’ai-yüan era [716], cyclical sign ping-ch’ en, he journeyed to China. There Emperor Hsüan-tsung looked up to him with veneration as though he were the sun or moon. One time there was a great drought and the emperor commanded him to pray for rain. The Tripitaka master poured water into a bowl and for a while performed incantations. In the water something about the size of a finger appeared, which changed into a dragon that was red in color. White vapor rose up, and then the dragon emerged from the bowl and ascended to the sky, and suddenly rain began to fall.

This was the kind of wonderful person he was. Once he died suddenly and then came back to life again. “When I died,” he said, “the wardens of hell came and bound me with seven cords of iron, beat me mercilessly with iron staves, and took me to the court of King Yama, the lord of hell. At that time I could not remember a single word or phrase of the eighty thousand sacred teachings of the Buddha; only the title of the Lotus Sutra remained in my mind. As soon as I recalled that title, the iron cords binding me loos-
ened a little. Recovering my breath, I then sang out in a loud voice: 'But now this threefold world is all my domain, and the living beings in it are all my children. Now this place is beset by many pains and trials. I am the only person who can rescue and protect others.'

"The seven iron cords broke apart and fell away in all directions. King Yama tipped his crown, came down into the southern courtyard and, facing me, told me that my life span had not yet run out and that I would be returned to life."

Today I, Nichiren, have certain doubts about this account. The Tripitaka Master Shan-wu-wei in his previous existences gained power by his observance of the ten good precepts and was able to serve five hundred Buddhas. Yet in his present existence he cast aside a royal throne, a thing that is very hard to cast aside, as though it were a mere mouthful of spit, and at the young age of thirteen he left the household life and became a monk. He traveled about the lands of India, mastering the teachings of the various schools of Buddhism, enjoying the care and protection of the heavenly gods, and devoting himself wholeheartedly to the conversion of others. Then he journeyed to the land of China, where he propagated the great True Word doctrines.

By performing no more than a single mudra and reciting no more than a single mantra, or "true word," he should have been able to wipe out all the countless offenses of his past and present existences. What crime, therefore, obliged him to undergo the censures of King Yama? I find this puzzling in the extreme! If the Tripitaka Master Shan-wu-wei, wielding all the power of the True Word teachings, was still not able to escape King Yama's censures, then how can the True Word teachers of the lands of India, China, and Japan hope to escape the torments of hell?

But let us examine the matter in greater detail. This Tripitaka master was not guilty of any of the lesser offenses of ordinary life. All these had been wiped away by his study of the various schools of Buddhism and by the power of the True Word practices. Therefore these censures of King Yama could not have had any other cause—they were due to the fact that Shan-wu-wei was guilty of slandering the Lotus Sutra.

In his Commentary on the Meaning of the Mahāvairochana Sutra, Shan-wu-wei states: "This sutra is the secret treasure of the Dharma King—do not show it to mean and unworthy persons! Shakyamuni appeared in the world, and after forty and more years, because Shāriputra three times earnestly requested him to do so, he proceeded to give a summary explanation of the doctrines of the Lotus Sutra. In similar fashion now Mahāvairochana, the Buddha body in its original state, embodies the most profoundly secret truth of the Buddha body. The 'Life Span' chapter [of the Lotus Sutra] says: 'Constantly I have dwelled on Holy Eagle Peak and in various other places. . . . My pure land is not destroyed, yet the multitude see it as consumed in fire.' This expresses the meaning of the yoga of this [True Word] school. Because Bodhisattva Maitreya, who will succeed Shakyamuni as the next Buddha, three times earnestly requested him to do so, the Buddha preached these words."

What this commentary is telling us is that the Mahāvairochana Sutra sets forth two types of teaching, a theoretical teaching and an essential teaching, and the doctrines of the replacement of the three vehicles with the one vehicle and the opening of the near and the revealing of the distant. It is thus the same as the theoretical teaching and essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra.
But although its doctrines are the same as those of the Lotus Sutra, this Mahāvairochana Sutra also contains mudras and mantras, and thus represents the three mysteries of body, mouth, and mind.

The Lotus Sutra contains only the mystery of the mind and lacks the two other mysteries, practices pertaining to the body and to the mouth. That is why, the commentary states, it refers to the Lotus Sutra as a “summary explanation” and to the Mahāvairochana Sutra as a “broad explanation.”

This is the primary doctrinal error of the commentary and the basic reason why it represents a slander of the Law.

There are two errors in the text. The commentary also states, “This sutra in its scope brings together all the teachings of the Buddhas.” The Mahāvairochana Sutra represents a sutra limited to a certain dimension, in that the Buddha sets forth teachings that accord with the minds of others. But Shan-wu-wei mistakenly believed that it was a sutra that extends beyond that dimension and accords with the Buddha’s own mind.

Thus he committed various errors with regard to the truth of the matter, and that was why King Yama censured him. But, because he was a man of wisdom, he repented the fact that he had slandered the Law and transferred his allegiance to the Lotus Sutra, and therefore he was able to escape further censure.

The Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai in his commentary states: “The Lotus Sutra constitutes a summation of all the other sutras. . . . If one persists in viewing it with contempt, then that person’s tongue will fester in his mouth.” And the Great Teacher Miao-lo writes: “Concerning the sutra passage that states that this wonderful sutra surpasses all those of past, present, and future, such a person persists in going astray. His tongue will fester unceasingly as an omen of what awaits him in the future. For the offense of slandering the Law, he will suffer for many long kalpas to come.”

These passages by T’ien-t’ai and Miao-lo indicate that anyone who states that there is a sutra superior to the Lotus Sutra is bound to fall into the hell of incessant suffering. The Tripitaka Master Shan-wu-wei writes that, although the Lotus Sutra and the Mahāvairochana Sutra are alike in principle, the latter is superior in practice because of its mudras and mantras.

Of these two persons, T’ien-t’ai and Shan-wu-wei, one must undoubtedly be destined to fall into the evil paths of existence. T’ien-t’ai’s commentary is clearly supported by passages in the sutras, but Shan-wu-wei’s commentary has no such passages of proof in the sutras. Moreover, when King Yama censured him, Shan-wu-wei did not recite any passages from the Mahāvairochana Sutra or the other two True Word sutras, the works that embody the essentials of his inner enlightenment, but instead recited the Lotus Sutra passage and thereby escaped further censure. Without doubt he did so because he repented having erroneously held that the True Word sutras are superior to the Lotus Sutra.

Furthermore, in The Rules of Rituals Based on the Lotus Sutra by the Tripitaka Master Pu-k’ung, the disciple of the Tripitaka Master Shan-wu-wei, the Thus Come One Mahāvairochana of the Mahāvairochana Sutra and the Thus Come One Mahāvairochana of the Diamond Crown Sutra are ranged on the right and the left, while the Buddha Many Treasures of the Lotus Sutra is designated as the central Mahāvairochana, the unparalleled one, and it is as though the other two Mahāvairochanas are serving him as his ministers of the left and right.

In the twenty-third year of the
Enryaku era [804], the Great Teacher Dengyō went to China, where, from the Reverend Shun-hsiao of Ling-kanssu temple, he received instruction in the secret doctrines of the three True Word sutras. And from Hsing-man, chief priest of Fo-lung-ssu temple, he was granted instruction in the precious jewel of T’ien-t’ai’s Great Concentration and Insight.

This man, who had thus fathomed all the most profound teachings of both the exoteric and esoteric branches of Buddhism, wrote such works as A Clarification of the Schools Based on T’ien-t’ai’s Doctrine, An Essay on the Protection of the Nation, and The Outstanding Principles of the Lotus Sutra. In these works he recorded how the proponents of the Flower Garland, Three Treatises, Dharma Characteristics, and Precepts schools in China, who had boasted of the superiority of their own schools’ teachings, had abandoned their own prejudiced views and converted to the doctrines of the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai. And he noted that Shan-wu-wei, Chin-kang-chih, and Pu-k‘ung in the end embraced the teachings of the T’ien-t’ai school, acknowledging the Great Teacher [T’ien-t’ai] Chih-che as their true teacher.

If we stop to consider, it would seem that in all cases, when a religious school is founded, it is customary for its proponents to praise that particular school and disparage other schools. The teachings of Hōnen may be cited as an example. He speaks of T’an-luan’s difficult-to-practice and easy-to-practice ways, Tao-ch’o’s Sacred Way and Pure Land teachings, and Shan-tao’s correct and sundry practices, and claims that the great doctrines of the Tendai, True Word, and other schools are no more than an expedient means leading to the practice of the Nembutsu.

This is like trying to pour the waters of the great ocean into a cow’s hoof-print, or like nailing a sign saying “County Seat” to the headquarters of an entire province. In the realm of worldly affairs, when inferiors overturn superiors, when people turn against those above them and ally themselves with those below, this leads to confusion and downfall in the nation. And in matters relating to the Buddhist teachings, to take sutras that are provisional in nature or that belong to the Hinayana category as the basis of one’s faith and to treat the true sutra with disdain is to commit a great slander of the Law. This is something fearful, fearful indeed!

The Great Teacher Chi-tsang of Chia-hsiang-ssu temple, the first patriarch of the Three Treatises school, at one time divided the sacred teachings of the Buddha’s lifetime into five periods, and at other times treated them as belonging to two storerooms or categories. However, he held The One-Hundred-Verse Treatise [of Bodhisattva Āryadeva and] The Treatise on the Middle Way, The Treatise on the Twelve Gates, and The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom of Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna in great respect, and relied for his interpretations on the Wisdom sutras, maintaining a highly biased view of the doctrines of the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai.

After he read the commentary on the Brahmā Net Sutra and other works by the Great Teacher Chih-che, however, he began to have some understanding of his teachings, and little by little became more receptive to his doctrines. In the end, he cast aside his own hundred and more disciples, ceased to lecture on the Wisdom sutras or the Lotus Sutra, and for seven years served the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai, acknowledging him as his mentor.

In a collection of the biographies of eminent priests it is stated that he “dispersed his disciples and made a bridge of his own body.” That is, when the
Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai ascended the high seat to deliver a lecture, Chi-tsang lent him his shoulder to step up on, and when they traveled along a road, Chi-tsang took him on his back and carried him across the ditches.

Eminent as he was, Chi-tsang served his teacher in this manner because he was fearful of slandering the Law. And yet the followers of the True Word, Three Treatises, Dharma Characteristics, and the other schools of Buddhism even at this late date continue to adhere to their biased views. Their own actions create the destiny that awaits them.

In the world today there are schools of Buddhism such as the Pure Land and Zen schools that cannot even compare to the True Word and Flower Garland schools, which have been refuted by the leaders of the T’ien-t’ai or Tendai school. They base their doctrines on sutras such as the Lankāvatāra Sutra or the Meditation Sutra. But these sutras do not represent the true reason for which the Buddha appeared in the world. They are minor sutras preached for one particular time or one particular group of listeners. They cannot be used as a standard by which to judge the sacred teachings of the Buddha’s lifetime.

And yet, on the basis of such sutras, the proponents of these schools pass judgment on the sacred teachings of the Buddha’s lifetime, dividing them up into such categories as the Sacred Way and the Pure Land, the difficult-to-practice way and the easy-to-practice way, sundry practices and correct practices, or declare that their own doctrines represent a “separate transmission outside the sutras.” They are like commoners who try to lord it over a king, or little rivers that try to swallow up the great ocean.

How can anyone put faith in such teachers as these, men who slander the Law, and still hope in their next existence to avoid falling into the hell of incessant suffering? On the other hand, ignorant people of the present age, so long as they acknowledge Shakyamuni Buddha as their proper object of devotion, will automatically escape any accusation of unfilial conduct; so long as they put their faith in the Lotus Sutra, though that may not have been what they had in mind, they will be cleared of any fault of slandering the Law.

Furthermore, women are traditionally said to be hindered by the five obstacles and three obediences. They are looked down on by both the secular and religious worlds, and are cast aside in nearly all the sacred teachings of the Buddha’s lifetime. Only in the Lotus Sutra do we find the account of how the dragon king’s daughter attained Buddhahood, and the prophecies of the attainment of Buddhahood given by the Buddha to the nuns of the Buddhist Order. Therefore if all women were to reject this sutra, then what other sutra could they rely upon?

The Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai of China appeared in the world some fifteen hundred years after the Buddha’s passing and, acting as an envoy of the Buddha, wrote commentaries on the Lotus Sutra in thirty volumes. In volume seven of the commentary entitled The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra, he states, “The other sutras predict Buddhahood only for men, but not for women.”

As a matter of fact, the sutras other than the Lotus Sutra do not admit that men can attain Buddhahood either, but we will assume for the moment that they do. In any event, all the sutras other than the Lotus state that women can never hope to do so. And even if women were promised the attainment of Buddhahood by a thousand or ten thousand other sutras, if the Lotus Sutra denied that they could do so, then where could they turn in hopes of attaining it?
Shakyamuni, the lord of teachings, expressed regret, saying that in the sutras that were preached “in these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth.”

He also looked with disfavor on the Nirvana Sutra and other sutras, which he would preach later, and the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra, which he was preaching at the time.

And the Buddha declared in the Lotus Sutra, which surpasses all the sutras he has preached, now preaches, or will preach, “Honesty discarding expedient means, I will preach only the unsurpassed way,” and “The World-Honored One has long expounded his doctrines and now must reveal the truth.” After Shakyamuni had made this declaration, the Buddha Many Treasures of the World of Treasure Purity emerged from the earth and testified to the truth of the Buddha’s words, and the Buddhas of the ten directions who were emanations of Shakyamuni Buddha extended their long broad tongues up to the Brahma heaven. The tongues of these Buddhas, who were numerous as the dust particles of the lands of the ten directions, responded to the power of the Buddha’s observance of the precept against lying, and therefore they appeared in the form of an eight-petaled red lotus.

The tongues of the Buddhas—of one Buddha, two Buddhas, three Buddhas, and so on to ten Buddhas, a hundred Buddhas, a thousand, ten thousand, a million Buddhas, and of Buddhas filling four hundred ten thousand million nayutas of lands—all testified to the principle that women can attain Buddhahood.

If a woman relies upon this sutra, the Lotus, and never slanders the Law, then though she may commit the ten evil acts and the five cardinal sins and be guilty of greed and stinginess, jealousy, and anger enough to fill the whole sky in the ten directions, all these faults will blow away like dew on the grass and trees before a great wind, will melt like the three-month-long winter’s ice on a summer day.

But the sin of slandering the Lotus Sutra is difficult indeed to wipe out. You may build a fire, using all the plants and trees in the major world system as firewood, but this will not have the slightest effect upon Mount Sumeru. Seven suns may come out together and shine for a hundred thousand days, but this will never dry up the waters of the great ocean. And in like manner, you may read all the eighty thousand sacred teachings of the Buddha, build stupas as many as the dust particles of the land, observe to the fullest all the precepts of Mahayana and Hinayana doctrines, and treat all the living beings of the lands in the ten directions as though they were your only child, but such actions will never wipe out the sin of slandering the Lotus Sutra.

In all one’s past, present, and future existences to be destined never to attain Buddhahood, but to undergo suffering in the six paths—such a fate comes solely because one is guilty of slandering the Lotus Sutra. And to be born a woman and have to endure a hundred evils—this fate too comes about basically because of slander of this sutra.

Therefore, if a woman has the good fortune to encounter this sutra, though she might strip off her skin to use as paper, draw her blood for ink, break her bones for a pen, and shed tears of blood to wet the inkstone, and with these transcribe the words of the sutra, she could never repay the debt she owes it. How much less could she hope to do so, then, through donations of clothing, gold and silver, cows and horses, or fields and farmlands, however numerous these might be?
ON SHAN-WU-WEI

Background

In this letter, Nichiren Daishonin refutes key doctrines of the True Word school by drawing from accounts of Shubhakarasimha, a monk of Indian origin known in China as Shan-wu-wei. Though the exact date and recipient of this letter are unknown, it is thought to have been written in 1275. The Daishonin addresses the principle of the enlightenment of women at some length, and so it appears to have been written for a woman believer.

Shan-wu-wei was known for first introducing esoteric Buddhism to China. Born a prince of the state of Udyāna in India, he became king at an early age. Not long after, he abdicated the throne to his elder brother, who had envied him the position, and became a monk in the Buddhist Order, studying esoteric Buddhism under Dharmagupta at Nālandā Monastery. In 716 he traveled to China and was welcomed there by Emperor Hsüan-tsung of the T'ang dynasty, who gave him the title Teacher of the Nation. Shan-wu-wei translated a number of esoteric Buddhist scriptures into Chinese, including the Mahāvairochana and Susiddhikara sutras.

The Daishonin examines the account of how Shan-wu-wei at one point died, fell into hell, and then by reciting a passage from the Lotus Sutra was able to emerge from hell and return to life. His descent into hell, the Daishonin says, occurred solely due to his slander of the Lotus Sutra. Shan-wu-wei propounded the True Word doctrine that its core scripture, the Mahāvairochana Sutra, is superior to the Lotus Sutra, claiming that though the Lotus Sutra contains the same key philosophical elements as the Mahāvairochana Sutra, it lacks descriptions of mudras and mantras. The Daishonin points out that there is in fact nothing in the text of the Mahāvairochana Sutra that accords with the key principles that T'ien-t'ai established on the basis of the Lotus Sutra. The Daishonin then introduces the story of Shan-wu-wei's disciple, Pu-k'ung, who ultimately acknowledged the superiority of the Lotus Sutra. Dengyō, who established T'ien-t'ai's teachings in Japan, wrote that the True Word patriarchs such as Shan-wu-wei eventually revered T'ien-t'ai as their teacher.

The Daishonin then cites the example of Chi-tsang, an eminent priest of the Three Treatises school in China, who converted to T'ien-t'ai's teachings on the Lotus Sutra, took T'ien-t'ai as his teacher, and humbly served him for seven years. Lacking in such sincerity, the Daishonin asserts, are the teachers of the Pure Land and Zen schools, whose doctrines are inferior even to those of True Word. Their error and offense against Buddhism, therefore, are even greater.

The Daishonin closes by pointing out that only the Lotus Sutra has brought the hope of enlightenment to women, and that for this reason women owe the sutra a debt of gratitude that is especially profound.

Notes

1. A king of Udyāna, located to the north of Gandhāra, who lived around the seventh century. His Sanskrit name is unknown.

2. The standard account of Shan-wu-wei's life says that he ascended the throne at the age of thirteen. It is not known just what source the Daishonin is following here.

3. Little is known about King Golden Grains. It is said that at the beginning of the eighth century Shan-wu-wei offered prayers at a stupa erected by the king and achieved sudden understanding of the Ma-
hāvairochana Sutra. Because no Sanskrit texts that mention him remain, only his Chinese name is known.

4. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.

5. The Benevolent Kings Sutra states, "Now when I use the five types of vision to clearly perceive the three existences, I see that in their past existences all the rulers served five hundred Buddhas, and that is the reason that they were able to become emperors and sovereigns."

6. In the "Expedient Means" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, after Shāriputra listened to Shakyamuni Buddha preach the true aspect of all phenomena and the ten factors of life, he entreated the Buddha three times on behalf of the assembly to continue to preach, saying, "What causes and conditions lead you to earnestly praise expedient means, the foremost device of the Buddhas, the profound, subtle, and wonderful Law that is difficult to understand?... We beg that the World-Honored One will expound this matter." But Shakyamuni refuses three times to proceed with his preaching, which shows how profound the wisdom of the Buddhas is and how difficult it is to preach the Lotus Sutra.

7. Yoga is aimed at stilling the body and mind, and thus liberating one from their limitations. In esoteric Buddhism it means that the workings of the body, mouth, and mind of the practitioner attain unity with those of the body, mouth, and mind of Mahāvairochana Buddha.

8. In the "Life Span" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni describes his immeasurably long life span as a Buddha.

9. Teachings limited to a certain dimension are partial doctrines expounded in a particular context for people of a particular capacity, while those that extend beyond it are complete and profound.

10. Preaching that accords with the Buddha's own mind means the Buddha's direct preaching of his enlightenment, irrespective of the capacity of his listeners.


13. The Diamond Crown Sutra and the Susiddhikara Sutra, along with the Mahāvairochana Sutra, are collectively called the three True Word sutras.

14. This metaphor is cited in the Vimalakīrti Sutra.

15. This analogy is cited in The Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra." In the administrative system of the T'ang dynasty in China, provinces were made up of several counties.

16. Teachings for voice-hearers and for bodhisattvas. The former refers to the doctrines of the four noble truths and the twelve-linked chain of causation, and the latter to the six pāramīs.

17. A statement to this effect is found in The Continued Biographies of Eminent Priests and The Supplement to "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra." For these two works, see Glossary.

18. The "Encouraging Devotion" chapter predicts that Mahāprajāpati, the foster mother of Shakyamuni, will become a Buddha named Gladly Seen by All Living Beings, and that Yashodharā, formerly the wife of Shakyamuni, will assume the name Endowed with a Thousand Ten Thousand Glowing Marks when she becomes a Buddha.

19. Immeasurable Meanings Sutra.

20. Chapter ten of the Lotus Sutra 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." T'ien-t'ai defines these three groups of sutras as follows: "The sutras I have preached" refers to all the sutras prior to the Lotus Sutra, "the sutras I now preach" to the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra, and "the sutras I will preach" to the Nirvana Sutra.

21. This and the following quotations are from the second chapter of the Lotus Sutra.

22. Chapter eleven of the Lotus Sutra says, "And bit by bit the Buddhas from the ten directions all came and assembled in this way and were seated in the eight directions. At this time each of the directions was filled with Buddhas, Thus Come Ones, in four hundred ten thousand million nayutas of lands."

23. The three-month-long winter refers to the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth months of the lunar calendar, the winter months.

24. All manner of evil acts. "A hundred" is not to be taken literally, but simply indicates a large number, or all.