

The Four Virtues and the Four Debts of Gratitude



WHEN the Buddhas of the three existences of past, present, and future appear in the world, they all, all preach the importance of repaying the four debts of gratitude. And the worthy men of antiquity, the Three Sovereigns, the Five Emperors, Confucius, Lao Tzu, Yen Hui,¹ and the others, taught the practice of the four virtues.

The four virtues are (1) filial piety toward one's father and mother; (2) loyalty to one's lord; (3) courtesy toward one's friends; and (4) pity and kindness toward those less fortunate than oneself.

First, being filial toward one's father and mother means that though a parent may act unreasonably or speak in a tone of ill will, one never shows the slightest anger or looks displeased. One never in any way disobeys a parent; is always mindful of providing a parent with all manner of good things, and if this happens to be impossible, in the course of a day one at least smiles twice or thrice in their direction.

Second, being loyal to one's lord means that one never has anything to be ashamed of in serving him. Though it may mean sacrificing one's own life, if it will benefit one's lord, one acts with a willing heart. For though one's trustworthiness may at first go

unnoticed, in time it will be openly rewarded.

Third, treating one's friends with courtesy means that, although one may encounter them ten or twenty times in the course of a single day, one greets them courteously as though they had traveled a thousand or two thousand miles to see one, never showing them indifference.

Fourth, treating those who are less fortunate with pity and kindness means that, toward those whose circumstances are inferior to one's own, one thinks of such persons as one's own children and shows them consideration at all times, exercising pity and compassion.

These, then, are the four virtues, and if you observe them in this manner, you may be called a worthy man or sage. If you pay attention to these four concerns, then although you may err in other ways, you will still deserve to be called a good man. If you can follow these four patterns of behavior, then although you have never read all the three thousand volumes of the Confucian and Taoist classics, it will be as though you had in fact read them.

Next, the four debts of gratitude of Buddhism are (1) the debt of gratitude to be paid to one's father and mother; (2) the debt of gratitude to be paid to the ruler of the nation; (3) the debt of

gratitude to be paid to all living beings; and (4) the debt of gratitude to be paid to the three treasures [the Buddha, the Law, and the Order].

First, with regard to the debt owed to one's father and mother, the two fluids, red and white, of the father and mother come together to become your body. You dwell within your mother's womb for 270 days, a period of nine months during which your mother on thirty-seven occasions undergoes suffering that is close to death. And the pains she endures at the time of birth are almost too great to imagine, the panting breath, the sweaty steam rising from her forehead till it reaches the Brahma heaven. After birth, she provides you with 180 and more measures of milk; for a period of three years you romp about the knees of your father and mother. So, when you come of age and take faith in Buddhism, you must first of all think of paying the debt you owe to your father and mother. Mount Sumeru is paltry in comparison to the towering debt you owe your father; the great ocean is shallow compared to the profoundness of the debt you owe your mother. You must bear in mind these debts you owe to your father and mother.

Second is the debt of gratitude to be paid to the ruler of the nation. From the time of your birth and on, the food, clothing, and other articles first of all, and all other things you enjoy, come to you through the kindness of the sovereign. It is only fitting, therefore, that you should pray that he will "enjoy peace and security in his present existence and good circumstances in future existences."²

Third is the debt of gratitude to be paid to all living beings. If you stop to consider, you will realize that, at one time or another in the past, all men have been your father and all women, your mother. Thus, in the course of all the many lifetimes and existences you

have lived through, you have come to owe a debt of gratitude to all living beings. And since this is so, you should help all of them to attain Buddhahood.

Fourth is the debt of gratitude to be paid to the three treasures of Buddhism. If we examine the Flower Garland Sutra, the first sutra to be preached after the Buddha attained enlightenment, we find that it is a Mahayana work preached by the Buddha in his aspect as the Thus Come One of the reward body. Thus, to the voice-hearers, cause-awakened ones, and others, it was like daytime to an owl or nighttime to a hawk; though they listened to it, it was as though they did so with deaf ears or blind eyes. This being the case, though people hoped that the sutra would enable them to pay back the four debts of gratitude, because it speaks disparagingly of women,³ it was hardly possible for them to repay the debt of gratitude owed to their mothers with the sutra.

Then for the following twelve years the Buddha preached the Āgama sutras, which are Hinayana sutras. And since they are Hinayana works, they accord with our native capacities. The Buddha then explained that men must observe the five precepts; women, the ten precepts; monks who teach the Law, the two hundred and fifty precepts; and nuns, the five hundred precepts. There are three thousand rules of conduct to be mastered. But those of us who live in this latter age can hardly be expected to abide by all these rules, and it is hard to repay the debt one owes to one's mother, particularly when these sutras too speak disparagingly of women.

In the Correct and Equal, Wisdom, and all the other sutras that were preached in this period of forty and more years, women are in all cases disparaged. Only in the Woman Born as a Man to Become a Buddha Sutra⁴ and the Meditation Sutra do we find pas-

sages that describe the possibility of a woman attaining the way. But these speak of the possibility in name only and give no actual example of the prize. Moreover, these are all sutras preached when the Buddha had “not yet revealed the truth,”⁵ so they can hardly be regarded as authoritative.

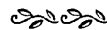
In all these various sutras expounded in the first forty and more years of the Buddha’s preaching life, women are spoken of in a disparaging manner, and they are similarly spoken of in the last sutra he preached, the Nirvana Sutra. If one asks, then, what sutra enables one to repay the four debts of gratitude, I would reply that it is none other than the Lotus Sutra, which reveals that women can attain Buddhahood. The eight-year-old daughter of the dragon king [in her reptile form] attained Buddhahood, and the Buddha’s aunt, Gautamī, and the nun Yashodharā are given prophecies of the attainment of Buddhahood. Our mothers are human women; they do not belong to the realm of animals, nor have they the bodies of reptiles. If the eight-year-old dragon king’s daughter can become a Buddha, then what reason is there to believe that our mothers, through the power of this sutra, cannot become Buddhas? Therefore a person who upholds the Lotus Sutra is repaying the

debt of gratitude owed to father and mother. Even if one does not feel in one’s own heart that one can do so, one can repay it through the power of this sutra.

Thus we know that Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the countless Buddhas of the ten directions; Superior Practices and the other bodhisattvas who emerged from the earth; Universal Worthy, Manjushrī, and the other bodhisattvas of the theoretical teaching; Shāriputra and the other great voice-hearer disciples; the great heavenly king Brahmā, the gods of the sun and moon, and the other heavenly lords and deities; the eight kinds of nonhuman beings; the ten demon daughters; as well as the great and small deities of the country of Japan, will, as a shadow follows a form, guard anyone who has firm faith in this Lotus Sutra and who remains at all times stalwart and unwavering in that faith. Think of this, think of this, never let your mind stray, be firm in faith at all times, and you will “enjoy peace and security in your present existence and good circumstances in future existences.”

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

To Ueno



Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter to Nanjō Tokimitsu in 1275 at Mount Minobu, where he had taken up residence the year before.

Tokimitsu had lost his father, who was the steward of Ueno Village of Suruga Province, at age seven. Later, with the support of his mother, Tokimitsu carried on with his father’s legacy of dedication as the Daishonin’s

disciple. At a young age he took on his deceased father’s position both as head of his family and steward of Ueno Village. For that reason, like his father, he was also known as Ueno; hence, this work is also called “Letter to Ueno.” Tokimitsu was seventeen when he received this letter.

Tokimitsu had earnestly been trying to fulfill his obligations as the steward

of his village. To help him develop as a leader in his community, the Daishonin teaches him the four virtues of Confucian-Taoist ethics and the four debts of gratitude to be paid in Buddhism. He points out that one who carries out the practice of the four virtues will embody all the Confucian and Taoist teachings in his person, and that one who believes in the Lotus Sutra will repay the four debts of gratitude. The sutra, which shows uncompromis-

ing respect for women and enables them to attain Buddhahood, provides one with the only way that can lead one's mother to Buddhahood, thereby enabling one to repay one's obligations to her. The Daishonin concludes by assuring that those who have strong and abiding faith in the Lotus Sutra will "enjoy peace and security in your present existence and good circumstances in future existences."

Notes

1. Also called Yen Yüan (514–483 B.C.E.), Yen Hui was one of Confucius's most trusted disciples.

2. Lotus Sutra, chap. 5.

3. For example, the Daishonin cites the passage "Women are messengers of hell who can destroy the seeds of Buddhahood. They may look like bodhisattvas, but at

heart they are like yaksha demons" with regard to the Flower Garland Sutra. This passage is cited in *A Collection of Treasures* as a quotation from the Flower Garland Sutra.

4. A sutra that was translated into Chinese by Dharmamitra, a monk from India, during the Liu Sung dynasty (420–479).

5. Immeasurable Meanings Sutra.