

The Span of One Kalpa



I HAVE received the basket of mandarin oranges and the various other articles that you sent.

The seventh volume of the Lotus Sutra, the "Medicine King" chapter, states: "Just as among all the stars and their like, the moon, a god's son, is foremost, so this Lotus Sutra is likewise. For among all the thousands, ten thousands, millions of types of sutra teachings, it shines the brightest."

This passage means that, among the various stars in the sky, some light a distance of half a *ri*, some one *ri*, some eight *ri*, some sixteen *ri*, but the full moon in the heavens lights a distance of eight hundred *ri*.

The sixty or eighty volumes of the Flower Garland Sutra, the six hundred volumes of the Wisdom sutras, the sixty volumes of the Correct and Equal sutras, the forty or thirty-six volumes of the Nirvana Sutra, the Mahāvairocana Sutra, the Diamond Crown Sutra, the Susiddhikara Sutra, the Meditation Sutra, the Amida Sutra, and the countless and numberless other sutras are like the stars, but the Lotus Sutra is like the moon—this is what this passage of scripture is saying. And these are not the words of the Buddhist scholars or teachers such as Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna, Bodhisattva Asanga, the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai, or the Tripitaka Master Shan-wu-wei. These are

the golden words of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, which may be likened to the words spoken by the Son of Heaven.

The "Medicine King" chapter of the Lotus Sutra also says, "A person who can accept and uphold this sutra is likewise foremost among all living beings."

This passage means that a person who upholds the Lotus Sutra, if a man, though he may be a mere country bumpkin, is superior to the great heavenly king Brahmā, who is the lord of the threefold world, the god Shakra Devānām Indra, the four heavenly kings, the wheel-turning sage kings, and the rulers of the countries of China or Japan; which means, needless to say, that he is likewise superior to the high ministers and nobles of Japan, the warriors of the Minamoto and Taira clans, and the other people of the country. And if such a person is a woman, she will be superior to Lady Kaushika, the goddess Auspicious, the court ladies Lady Li¹ or Yang Kuei-fei of China, or to all the other countless and boundless numbers of women.

When we stop to consider, we realize that if we speak out in accordance with these passages of the sutra, we will raise a storm of protest and will have difficulty persuading others. But if we fail to have faith in such passages, we will be doubting the golden words of

the Thus Come One, a fault that, as the Lotus Sutra itself makes clear, will destine us to fall into the Avīchi hell. We find ourselves perplexed, uncertain whether to proceed or not.

Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, for forty and more years kept this doctrine hidden in his breast. But then, when he had reached the age of seventy-two, he expounded it on Mount Gridhrakūta northeast of the city of Rājagriha in central India in the southern continent of Jambudvīpa.

Some fourteen hundred years after the passing of the Buddha, this doctrine was first brought to this country of Japan, and over seven hundred years have passed since then. But during those first fourteen hundred years, among the people of Japan, the ruler, the high ministers, and so on down to the common people, there was not one who knew of this doctrine.

These days, to be sure, the Lotus Sutra is known in Japan. But some people recite the Nembutsu, some adhere to the True Word teachings, while others follow the Zen school or the observers of the precepts. There are of course some persons who recite the Lotus Sutra, but throughout the whole land of Japan there was not one person who chanted the words Nam-myōhō-*renge-kyō*.

I, Nichiren, at the beginning of summer in the fifth year of the Kenchō era [1253] began chanting them. And for the following twenty and more years, I alone have continued to chant them as the great majority of people of our time recite the Nembutsu. And for that, people have all laughed at me, and in the end have cursed, struck, or wounded me; I have been exiled and have almost had my head cut off. Not for just one day or two, one month or two, one year or two did this continue, until I thought it was more than I could bear.

But when I read this sutra, I see that

there was a king named Suzudan who for a thousand years worked hard like a servant in the service of the seer Asita, even offering his own body as a couch for him to sit on. And that the monk named Bodhisattva Never Disparaging for many years was cursed and defamed or was attacked with swords and staves, shards and rubble. The bodhisattva named Medicine King burned his body for a period of twelve hundred years, and burned his arms for seventy-two thousand years.

And when I looked at these examples, I knew that, whatever chastisements I might undergo, I must never allow myself to be dissuaded from my purpose. So I have continued without ceasing or turning aside down to the present.

You, however, are a member of the laity, and I am wondering, when I am hated by all others and when you and I have yet to meet in person, why you have been able to put faith in my teachings. This must be entirely because the roots of goodness were planted in you in some past existence, and because the time has now come for you to work to attain Buddhahood in the existence to come.

Moreover, passages in the sutra tell us that when demons have entered a person's body, that person cannot take faith in the sutra, but when the spirit of Shakyamuni Buddha has entered one's body, then one can believe in this sutra. When the reflection of the moon enters the water, the water becomes pure. In the same way, the reflection of the moon that is Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, has entered the waters of your heart, [and your heart has become pure]. I find this most reassuring.

The fourth volume of the Lotus Sutra, the "Teacher of the Law" chapter, states: "If there is someone who seeks the Buddha way and for the space of a kalpa presses palms together in my

presence and recites numberless verses of praise, because of these praises of the Buddha he will gain immeasurable blessings. And if one lauds and extols those who uphold this sutra, one's good fortune will be even greater."

This passage of the sutra means that if one offers alms to a votary of the Lotus Sutra in this latter age, one who is of paltry wisdom, oppressed by a myriad people high and low, a monk on the verge of death by starvation, one will gain more blessings than if one had given alms to Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, for the space of a whole kalpa.

This thing called a kalpa—suppose that there is a blue stone measuring eighty thousand *ri*, so hard that it could never be completely filed away although one worked at it with a file for an immeasurable period. And suppose that a heavenly being, wearing a Brahmā's featherweight robe,² should descend from the sky once every three years and brush the stone with the wonderfully beautiful heavenly feathered robe that she wears. When the stone has finally been completely worn away, that period of time would be what is called a kalpa. And the sutra passage is saying that the blessings one gains by giving alms to a votary of the Lotus Sutra in this muddy age are greater than those gained by giving countless treasures to the Buddha over a period of time as long as that just described.

This may seem hard to believe, but the Lotus Sutra abounds with numerous incredible pronouncements such as this. And though you may be inclined to disbelieve them, you must remember that Many Treasures Buddha testified to the truth of the sutra.³ Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, has assured us of the truth of his golden words. And the various other Buddhas extended their long broad tongues up to the Brahma heaven as

further testimony. It is as though the father had handed down a deed of transfer, the mother had added her endorsement, and the worthy ruler had then issued it in the form of a royal proclamation. Since all three persons agree in giving their certification, who could have any doubt as to its veracity?

Nevertheless, there were those who doubted: the Scholar Vimalamitra, whose tongue split into five pieces; the Dharma Teacher Sung,⁴ whose tongue festered in his mouth; the Meditation Master San-chieh, who while he was still alive turned into a huge snake; and Tokuitsu, whose tongue split into eight pieces. And these were not all—in India and China there have been countless persons who, failing to heed the words of the Lotus Sutra and its votaries, have destroyed themselves, ruined their families, and brought destruction to the nation.

Most important, one must understand that when the god of the sun rises at dawn in the east, he sends forth his rays of light, opens his heavenly eyes, and observes the southern continent of Jambudvīpa. If there he sees a votary of the Lotus Sutra, he rejoices in heart. But if he sees a country that hates the votary, then his eyes flash with anger and he glares at that country. And if that country in the end refuses to heed the votary and its people are hostile to the votary, then for no apparent reason armed conflict will occur, and the country will be destroyed by forces from another country. This is what the sacred texts tell us.

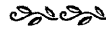
Long ago, the boy called Virtue Victorious fashioned a mud pie and offered it as alms to Shakyamuni Buddha, and later he was reborn as King Ashoka, ruler of Jambudvīpa, and in the end became a Buddha. And now you, the donor, have sent these fruits and other items as an offering to the Lotus Sutra. How great must be the joy of the ten demon daughters!

Words cannot express all that I would say. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

Nichiren

The seventeenth day of the second month

Reply to Matsuno



Background

This letter, written in the second month of 1276, is thought to have been addressed to the lay priest Matsuno Rokurō Saemon. In response to the offerings of mandarin oranges and other items received, Nichiren Daishonin tells of the wonderful benefit that derives from making offerings to the votary of the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Day of the Law. First, he points out that the Lotus Sutra is superior to all other sutras, and that the person who embraces and upholds the sutra is also superior to all other persons.

In the more than seven hundred years since Buddhism first came to Japan, though some had read and studied the text of the Lotus Sutra, none had chanted or spread its essence, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, which the Daishonin first proclaimed in 1253. The Daishonin spread this teaching in order to lead all people to Buddhahood, but

the military government persecuted him, exiling him to the province of Izu and then to Sado Island. Citing the severe persecutions faced by past votaries, he states that he could never abandon his purpose. Then he praises Matsuno who as a layman took faith in his teaching without having ever met him.

Moreover, though the Daishonin was regarded as an enemy of the Japanese people, Matsuno sent him offerings. In praising this rare devotion, the Daishonin speculates that the spirit of Shakyamuni Buddha entered the body of Matsuno, and states, "If one offers alms to a votary of the Lotus Sutra in this latter age . . . one will gain more blessings than if one had given alms to Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, for the space of a whole kalpa." The Daishonin then illustrates the unimaginable length of one kalpa.

Notes

1. Lady Kaushika is the wife of the god Shakra. Kaushika is the name of Shakra when he was at one time a Brahman, according to *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*. Auspicious was originally a goddess of Indian mythology, later incorporated into Buddhism. She is known as the goddess of fortune and beauty, and is said to bestow fortune and benefit on living beings. Lady Li is the consort of Emperor Wu (156–87 B.C.E.) of the Former Han dynasty. For Yang Kuei-fei, see Glossary.

2. Featherweight robe is the translation

of the expression "three-*shu* robe," which often appears in Buddhist scriptures to indicate the robe of a heavenly being. *Shu* is a small unit of weight, and three *shu* equals approximately one-tenth of an ounce.

3. In the "Treasure Tower" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, Many Treasures Buddha says, "Shakyamuni, World-Honored One, all that you have expounded is the truth!"

4. A Buddhist priest in sixth-century China. He was also known as Wei Yüan-sung. See Glossary under Wei Yüan-sung.