

How the Gods Protect the Place of Practice



I HAVE safely received the five thousand coins that you sent.

As you know, I am now living deep in the mountains, far from any village, where food and clothing are scarce. [If it were not for offerings such as yours], it would be difficult for me to continue my recitations of the sutra and I could hardly go on discussing doctrines.

These divine instructions that have been delivered to you from the ten demon daughters must be some plan on their part to help you gain merit as a lay supporter of the teachings.

The eighth volume of *Great Concentration and Insight* states: "Just as the petty devils will respect and avoid entering the hall of the god Shakra, so if the gods who protect the place of Buddhist practice are powerful, then evil forces will have no way to break in and cause trouble. Likewise, if the ruler of a walled city is unbending, then those who guard the city will remain firm; but if the ruler is cowardly, then those who guard the city will grow fearful. The mind is the ruler of the body. The deities Same Name and Same Birth protect people. If one's mind is strong, then their protection is great. And if this is true of the gods who dwell on one's body, how much truer is it of the gods who protect the place of practice!"

Volume eight of *The Annotations on "Great Concentration and Insight"* says, "Though they protect people at all times, if one's mind is strong, the protection of the gods also is sure to be firm." And it also says, "The gods who dwell on one's shoulders will at all times protect one. And how much truer is this of the gods who protect the place of practice!"

From the time one is born, two gods give one protection. They are the gods Same Birth and Same Name, who are known as the gods who are with one from birth and are described in the Flower Garland Sutra.

Volume four of *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra* states: "Just by reciting the words 'Namu Buddha,' or 'Hail to the Buddha,' the thief was able to obtain the head of the image of the deity. And if a wise person recites these words, how much more certain is it that he or she will never be overlooked by the venerable gods of the ten directions! We should just be assiduous, and never give way to laziness."

The meaning of this passage of commentary is as follows. In India there was a land that worshiped the gods and paid no heed to the Buddha. When the people erected a temple, they dedicated it to the devil king of the sixth heaven, and the head of the deity was made of gold.

There was a great thief who for many years had wanted to steal the head of the deity, but had been unable to do so. One time he went to where the Buddha was, hoping to steal something, and there he listened to the preaching of the Law. The Buddha said, “*Namu* means being amazed and awakened.” The thief, hearing this, pronounced the words “*Namu Buddha!*” and in this way was able to steal the head of the deity. Later, when investigation was made, it was found that this was how the thief had done this. Thereafter all the people of the land abandoned the worship of the gods and converted to the teaching of the Buddha.

If we consider this story and apply it to the present, we see that, although a person may be guilty of certain faults, if that person has faith in the three treasures of Buddhism, he may escape major difficulties. And I have known for some time now what was indicated to you in the divine instructions you have written me about. On reflection, I think that surely they are a sign that difficulties can be averted and that good fortune is on the way.

Regarding the word *myō* of Myōhō-*renge-kyō*, Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna comments in *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* that it “can change poison into medicine.” And the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai says, “But when the Lotus Sutra predicts that these people [of the two vehicles] will eventually attain Buddhahood, the poison is changed into medicine.”¹

Though calamities may come, they can be changed into good fortune. And how much more is this so when the ten demon daughters have foreknowledge of the situation!

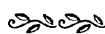
This is what is meant when it says [in *Great Concentration and Insight*] that logs make the fire burn brighter, and the wind swells the body of the *kāla-kūla* insect.

It is hard to put on paper all that I would like to say—you must use your mind to judge my meaning.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The thirteenth day of the twelfth month

Written in reply



Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month of what is thought to have been 1276. The letter is a reply, it is generally believed, to Toki Jōnin, who had apparently written about a dream in which some danger to the Daishonin and his followers was revealed by the ten demon daughters.

After thanking Toki for the offering he had also sent, the Daishonin refers to the Buddhist principle that if one’s mind is strong, the protection of the deities Same Name and Same Birth, who are always with one, will also be

firm. If this is so, he urges, how much truer must it be of the gods who protect the place of practice.

He also encourages Toki with a story from *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra* describing a thief who gained the golden head of a deity’s image simply by reciting the words “*Namu Buddha*,” or “*Hail to the Buddha*.” The Daishonin points out that, in the light of this story, even though one may be guilty of faults, one may escape major difficulties if one is devoted to the three treasures of Buddhism.

Furthermore, he says that he views

the divine instructions from the ten demon daughters as a sign that difficulties can be avoided and that good fortune is on its way.

And it is the Lotus Sutra, he emphasizes in conclusion, that allows one to change poison into medicine, difficulties into good fortune.

Note

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