

On the Eight Cold Hells



I HAVE received the narrow-sleeved robe, persimmon-colored with a gray lining, and I think it must be padded with ten *ryō* of stuffing!

Underneath the earth there are two types of hells. One type is the hot hells. Imagine that someone kindled a blaze and set fire to the fields so that they were consumed in flames and turned the color of molten iron. Offenders roasted in these hells burn up like pieces of paper cast into the flames, or like chips of wood thrown into a roaring fire. Into these hells fall those who set fire to buildings and take advantage of the confusion to steal the goods in them, those who start fires in order to attack an enemy, or women whose hearts burn with the fires of jealousy.

The other type is the cold hells, of which there are eight. The Nirvana Sutra says: "There are eight types of icy hells. These are the Hahava hell, the Atata hell, the Alalā hell, the Ababa hell, the Utpala hell, the Padma hell, the Kumuda hell, and the Pundarīka hell." The eight hells take their names from the cries uttered by those who suffer from the intense cold, or from the various colors that their bodies take on.

In our country, [the cold of] Lake Suwa, the north winds that blow over Mount Tateyama in Etchū, the birds with their frozen feathers on the peak

of Mount Hakusan in Kaga, the freezing skirts of the aged widow, the pheasants crying as the snows pile up around them—these tell you what it is like.

Tortured by the cold, their jaws going clack-clack, the sufferers cry out "Hahava!" "Atata!" "Alalā!" Tortured by the cold, their bodies, we are told, turn crimson like a crimson lotus or a great crimson lotus. And do you ask what sort of persons fall into these hells? People who in this life steal the clothes of others, people who see their parents or their teachers shivering with cold but go on wearing their own thick garments, comfortably warm day and night—they are the ones who fall into these hells!

Among the six paths, the path or realm of heavenly beings is the only one in which beings are born with clothes on. But even in the path of human beings, Shānavāsa and the nun Bright White¹ were born from the womb of their mothers wearing clothes. This was because they had [in previous existences] not only donated clothing to persons of worth, but had also made offerings of warm, pure garments to their parents, their lords, and to the three treasures of Buddhism.

The man named Shānavāsa donated a robe to a pratyekabuddha who was naked, and thereafter, for age after age

and lifetime after lifetime, he always had clothes on his body. The woman known as Gautamī² presented Shakyamuni Buddha with a woolen robe, and he predicted that she would become a Buddha named Gladly Seen by All Living Beings.

And now here is a woman who donates a robe to the Lotus Sutra. In future lives she will not only escape the sufferings of the eight cold hells, but in her present life she will be spared major calamities. Her benefits will be such

that they extend to her sons and daughters, so that they are dressed in robe upon robe, of color upon color!

Respectfully,
Nichiren

The eighteenth day of the eleventh month in the third year of Kenji [1277], cyclical sign *hinoto-ushi*

Reply to the wife of the lay priest Ōta



Background

Nichiren Daishonin sent this letter from Minobu in the winter of 1277 to the wife of Ōta Jōmyō of Shimōsa Province. In expressing his appreciation for her donation of a winter robe, the Daishonin explains the benefit of making such an offering. Briefly describing the eight hot hells and the eight cold hells mentioned in Buddhist scriptures, he identifies the people who will fall

into the cold hells as those who steal the clothes of others, or who watch while others suffer in cold but do nothing to help them. He contrasts this with the benefits accruing from offering a robe to the Lotus Sutra. Such benefits will protect the giver from calamity in this life and from the cold hells in the next life and will extend to her children as well.

Notes

1. Shānavāsa is regarded as the third of Shakyamuni Buddha's twenty-three, or the fourth of his twenty-four, successors. He was a wealthy man of Rājagriha, the capital of Magadha in India. Bright White is said to have been a daughter of a wealthy man in the state of Kapilavastu in northern India. In *Cloth for a Robe and an Unlined Robe*, the Daishonin says, "A woman called the nun Bright White was born dressed in a robe. And as she grew, this robe bit by bit

became bigger. Later, when she was ordained as a nun, it served as a nun's robe. And finally, at the assembly where the Lotus Sutra was being preached, a prediction was bestowed on Bright White that, in a future existence, she would become a Buddha. Her name would be the Thus Come One Gladly Seen by All Living Beings" (p. 602).

2. Also known as Mahāprajāpatī, the aunt and foster mother of Shakyamuni.