

The Large Carriage Drawn by a White Ox



IN the second volume of the Lotus Sutra we read of how one is “[to join the bodhisattvas and the multitude of voice-hearers] in mounting this jeweled vehicle and proceeding directly to the place of practice.”¹

On the twenty-eighth day of the fourth month in the fifth year of Kenchō [1253] I, Nichiren, for the first time clearly described the lineage of this large carriage drawn by a white ox, the one vehicle of the Lotus Sutra.

The teachers of the other schools of Buddhism gathered around like clouds and mist. And those of the True Word, Pure Land, and Zen schools rose up like hornets to attack me. I contended with them, describing the horns of this white ox that draws the jeweled carriage, which is foremost among all. These two horns are the doctrines set forth in the theoretical teaching and the essential teaching—the attainment of Buddhahood by persons of the two vehicles, and the attainment of Buddhahood in the remote past.

Already in the past the Great Teacher Kōbō, speaking of these horns, had declared that the Lotus Sutra, the foremost of all the sutras, should be ranked in third place, and that the doctrines of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, of the attainment of Buddhahood in the remote past, and of the attainment of Buddhahood in

one’s present form, which are enunciated only in the Lotus Sutra, are found in the True Word sutras as well.

My intention was to censure the errors committed by these persons who slander the Law, but when I attempted to do so, they became more hostile than ever. It would seem as though, in attempting to straighten the ox’s horns, I was in danger of killing the ox, though how could that have been my intention?

Again, this carriage I have been describing has the two doctrines, the theoretical teaching and the essential teaching, as its wheels, and it is hitched to the ox of Myōhō-*renge-kyō*. It is a carriage that goes round and round in the cycle of birth and death, birth and death, in the burning house that is the threefold world. But with the linchpin of a believing mind [to keep the wheels in place] and the oil of determination applied to them, it can carry one to the pure land of Eagle Peak.

Or again, we might say that the mind king² acts as the ox, while birth and death are like the wheels. The Great Teacher Dengyō states, “The two phases of life and death are the wonderful workings of one mind. The two ways of existence and nonexistence are the true functions of an inherently enlightened mind.”³ And T’ien-t’ai says, “The ten factors are

[the true aspect of the Lotus and also the reality of the carriage drawn by a white ox] . . . the ultimate realm is the true aspect of life.”⁴

You should think these passages of commentary over very carefully. Nam-

myoho-renge-kyo, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

Nichiren

The seventeenth day of the twelfth month



Background

This letter is thought to have been sent in 1277 to Nanjō Tokimitsu, a leading lay disciple of Nichiren Daishonin who lived in Ueno Village in Fuji District of Suruga Province. In it the Daishonin explains the superiority of the Lotus Sutra with the example of “the jeweled carriage,” or the great white ox cart described in the sutra’s parable of the three carts and the burning house. In this parable from the “Simile and Parable” (3rd) chapter of the sutra, a rich man offers three kinds of carts as gifts to lure his children from a burning house. These represent the three vehicles of voice-hearer, cause-awakened one, and bodhisattva—the provisional teachings expounded before the Lotus Sutra. When the children emerge from the house, instead of these carts, he

gives them each a great carriage drawn by a white ox, which represents the one Buddha vehicle of the Lotus Sutra.

The Daishonin cites as reasons for the superiority of the Lotus Sutra two unique principles from its theoretical teaching and essential teaching, respectively, the attainment of Buddhahood by persons of the two vehicles and the revelation of Shakyamuni Buddha’s enlightenment in the remote past. Then he criticizes Kōbō, the founder of the True Word school in Japan, for claiming that the core principles of the Lotus are present in the True Word teaching, and ranking the Lotus as inferior. He concludes that the carriage will carry one with faith and determination to the pure land of Eagle Peak, or Buddhahood.

Notes

1. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.
2. The “mind king” refers to the core of the mind, which controls the various workings of the mind. Here the mind king corresponds to the “one mind” in Den-gyō’s quotation.

3. *The Essential Doctrines Transmitted within the Tendai Lotus School.*

4. This passage is found in Miao-lo’s *Annotations on “Great Concentration and Insight.”*