

## What It Means to Hear the Buddha Vehicle for the First Time



I HAVE received the seven strings of coins that you sent from Shimōsa Province to me here in Kai Province. These are to be used for memorial services marking the third anniversary of the passing<sup>1</sup> of your beloved mother.

Question: “There has never been anything to compare to the brightness and serenity of concentration and insight.”<sup>2</sup> Just what does this mean?

Answer: It refers to the concentration and insight of perfect and immediate enlightenment.

Question: And what does “the concentration and insight of perfect and immediate enlightenment” mean?

Answer: It is another name for the Lotus meditation.

Question: And just what does “Lotus meditation” mean?

Answer: It refers to the practice of the Lotus Sutra carried out by the ordinary people of this latter age. There are two aspects to this. One is the opening up and merging of the seeds of similar species. The other is the opening up and merging of the seeds of opposites.

Question: Where do these terms derive from?

Answer: They are taken from the “Parable of the Medicinal Herbs” chapter in the third volume of the Lotus Sutra, the passage that reads, “[Because only the Thus Come One

understands] the species, the form, the substance, the nature of these living beings.” Of these four things, the first, “species,”<sup>3</sup> has two meanings, namely, the seeds of similar species and the seeds of opposites.

Regarding the term “seeds of similar species,” a commentary says: “All living beings who possess minds have the seeds of the Buddha nature. When they hear a phrase of the sutra, they have the seeds of the wisdom to perceive their Buddha nature. And when they bow their heads and lift up their hands in reverence, this represents the seeds of the good deeds needed to develop that wisdom and realize their Buddha nature.”<sup>4</sup>

As for the “seeds of opposites,” they are the three paths of earthly desires, karma, and suffering. They in themselves become what are called the Dharma body, wisdom, and emancipation.

The doctrine regarding the seeds of similar species is embodied in the Lotus Sutra, but portions of it are also to be found in the various sutras preached prior to the Lotus. Miao-lo in his commentary states, “The specific teaching speaks only of the seeds of similar species and not of the seeds of opposites.”<sup>5</sup> Here the term “specific teaching” does not refer to the specific teaching in its original sense, but to the

perfect teaching as it is found in the sutras preached prior to the Lotus Sutra or to the perfect teaching expounded by teachers other than T'ien-t'ai.<sup>6</sup> Also, in the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra, the twenty or more lines that begin "If persons make offerings to the relics . . ." <sup>7</sup> pertain on the whole to the opening up and merging of the seeds of similar species.

Question: Just what is meant by the term "seeds of opposites"?

Answer: *Great Concentration and Insight* states: "What does it mean to hear the perfect teaching? It means to hear the doctrine that birth and death are none other than the Dharma body, that earthly desires are none other than wisdom, and that the bond of karma is none other than emancipation. These are three terms but they are not three entities. These are a single entity, though they are known by three names. These three have a single form; in truth they are not different from one another. When one succeeds in attaining the Dharma body, one also attains wisdom and emancipation. Since wisdom is pure, the other two are also pure. Since emancipation means freedom, the other two also mean freedom. The hearing of all the doctrines follows this same pattern. All the Buddhist doctrines are incorporated, and none of them are lost or missing. This is what is called 'hearing the perfect teaching.'"

This passage of commentary may serve as the model for the definition of "the seeds of opposites."

Question: And just exactly what does it mean?

Answer: It means that the realm of birth and death is one of suffering inflicted upon our persons as a result of past actions, and includes the five components, the twelve sense fields, and the eighteen elements. The term "earthly desires" refers to the three categories of illusion, namely, illusions of

thought and desire, illusions innumerable as particles of dust and sand, and illusions about the true nature of existence. The bond of karma refers to the five cardinal sins, the ten evil acts, and the four major offenses. The Dharma body is the Thus Come One of the Dharma body; wisdom is the Thus Come One of the reward body; and emancipation is the Thus Come One of the manifested body.

We living beings for vast kalpas without beginning have been endowed with these three paths of earthly desires, karma, and suffering. And now, when we encounter the Lotus Sutra, these three paths become none other than the three virtues of the Dharma body, wisdom, and emancipation.

Objection: Water does not come from fire, and grass does not grow from a stone. Evil causes produce evil effects, good causes call forth good responses—such is the fixed principle in the Buddhist teaching. If we inquire into our beginnings, we find that the seminal fluid and blood of the father and mother, the two fluids, one white, one red, come together to produce a single being. And this is the root of evil, the source of impurity. Though the great ocean itself should wash over us, it could not wash away this impurity.

And if we inquire into the root of the suffering that is inflicted upon our persons, we find that it derives from the three poisons of greed, anger, and foolishness. Through the two paths of earthly desires and suffering, karma is created. And this path of karma is none other than what binds us to the realm of birth and death. We are like birds shut up in a cage. How can these three paths of earthly desires, karma, and suffering be called three causes leading to Buddhahood? You may gather together turds and try to make sandalwood of them, but they will never have the aroma of sandalwood!

Answer: Your objection is quite rea-

sonable. And rather than try to address it, I would like simply to quote the words of Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna, the thirteenth of the Buddha's successors and founder of the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai's line, who in explaining the word *myō*, or "wonderful," in the term *myōhō* says it is "like a great physician who can change poison into medicine."<sup>8</sup>

What is the poison? It is the three paths of earthly desires, karma, and suffering that are our lot. What is the medicine? It is the Dharma body, wisdom, and emancipation. And what does it mean to change poison into medicine? It means to transform the three paths into the three virtues: the Dharma body, wisdom, and emancipation. T'ien-t'ai says, "The character *myō* is defined as being beyond ordinary comprehension."<sup>9</sup> And he also says, "Life at each moment . . . This is what we mean when we speak of the 'region of the unfathomable.'"<sup>10</sup>

This is what the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form means. In recent times the Flower Garland and True Word schools, having stolen this doctrine, treat it as their own. They are outrageous thieves, the most outrageous in the world!

Question: Can ordinary people really understand the meaning of this secret doctrine?

Answer: My own answer would be of no use in this case. But Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna in the ninety-third volume of his *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* states: "The fact that arhats who have eradicated illusions and earthly desires are now able to attain Buddhahood—this is something that only Buddhas can understand. If one is discoursing on doctrine, one ought to give a reasonable explanation, but in truth the matter goes beyond comprehension, and one should therefore not engage in idle theorizing. Once one has succeeded in attaining Buddhahood one will then be able to understand

well enough. As for other people, they should have faith, knowing that they can not yet understand."

This passage of commentary means that bodhisattvas who have cut off the first eleven of the twelve levels of ignorance in accordance with the specific teaching of the sutras preached prior to the Lotus Sutra, and great bodhisattvas who have cut off the first forty-one of the fifty-two levels of ignorance in accordance with the perfect teaching—even such great bodhisattvas as Universal Worthy and Manjushrī cannot yet understand the meaning of the Lotus Sutra. How much more so is this the case, then, of people of the three vehicles of voice-hearer, cause-awakened one, and bodhisattva who follow the first two of the four teachings, the Tripitaka and the connecting teachings? And how much more is it the case of ordinary people in this latter age?

From this we can surmise that when the Lotus Sutra says that it "can only be understood and shared between Buddhas,"<sup>11</sup> it is referring to the fact that it teaches that even for people of the two vehicles, who are depicted in the sutras preached prior to the Lotus as having "reduced the body to ashes and annihilated consciousness,"<sup>12</sup> the three paths of earthly desires, karma, and suffering are in themselves the Dharma body, wisdom, and emancipation. We may also say that, since even people of the two vehicles can attain Buddhahood, this must also be true for bodhisattvas and for ordinary people.

That is why T'ien-t'ai states: "The sense organs of people of the two vehicles have become defective [and can never be restored to their proper function]. Therefore it is said that such people have been poisoned. But when the Lotus Sutra predicts that these people will eventually attain Buddhahood, the poison is changed into medicine. Therefore the treatise says that the vari-

ous other sutras are not secret teachings, but the Lotus Sutra is secret.”<sup>13</sup> Miao-lo notes that in this passage the word “treatise” refers to *Great Perfection of Wisdom*.

Question: What benefit do we gain by hearing this doctrine?

Answer: This is what it means to hear the Lotus Sutra for the first time. Miao-lo says: “If one has faith in the teaching that the three paths of earthly desires, karma, and suffering are none other than the three virtues of the Dharma body, wisdom, and emancipation, then one can cross the two rivers of transmigration, to say nothing of making one’s way in the threefold world.”<sup>14</sup>

And when ordinary people in the latter age hear this doctrine, not only will they themselves attain Buddhahood, but also their fathers and mothers will attain Buddhahood in their present forms. This is the highest expression of filial devotion.

As I am not well, I will not go into greater detail, but will write again another time.

Nichiren

The twenty-eighth day of the second month in the fourth year of Kenji [1278], cyclical sign *tsuchinoe-tora*

To Toki



## Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter on the twenty-eighth day of the second month in 1278 to thank Toki Jōnin for his offering of seven strings of coins. The Daishonin confirms that the coins are to be used for memorial services commemorating the anniversary of the passing of Toki’s mother.

The Daishonin explains the meaning of the Lotus meditation, Toki’s practice of which, he says, will lead not only to his own Buddhahood, but to his mother’s as well. Using a question and answer format, the Daishonin elaborates on the meaning of this meditation, which, he says, refers to the practice of the Lotus Sutra carried out by ordinary people in the latter age.

Further, he clarifies what he says are two aspects to this meditation. One is the opening up and merging of the seeds of similar species, and the other is the opening up and merging of the seeds of opposite species. The terms themselves originate in the “Parable of the Medicinal Herbs” chapter of the Lotus Sutra. The first term, the seeds

of similar species, refers to the seed of the Buddha nature all living beings possess, the seed of the wisdom to perceive that Buddha nature, and the seed of the good deeds to develop that wisdom and realize that Buddha nature. The second term, the seeds of opposite species, refers to the three paths of earthly desires, karma, and suffering, and their “opposites,” the three virtues of the Dharma body, wisdom, and emancipation.

How can things of such apparently negative nature as earthly desires, karma, and suffering be changed into causes for Buddhahood? The Daishonin quotes Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna, who, referring to the word *myō* of Myoho-enge-kyo, said that it is “like a great physician who can change poison into medicine.” Thus the poison of earthly desires, karma, and suffering, which all humankind experiences, is changed into the medicine of the Dharma body, wisdom, and emancipation.

This, says the Daishonin, is what is

meant by the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form, a teaching that, though some other schools of Buddhism claim it as their own, is actually taught only in the Lotus Sutra. And hearing this teaching, the Daishonin emphasizes, means truly hearing the Lotus Sutra for the first time. With a quote from Miao-lo beginning,

"If one has faith in the teaching . . ." he indicates that "hearing" also means believing. Moreover, he concludes, not only will ordinary people who hear this teaching attain Buddhahood themselves, but also their fathers and mothers will do so in their present form. This, he encourages Toki, is the ultimate expression of filial devotion.

## Notes

1. In Japan, the third anniversary of a person's death is commemorated two years after the event. Though the first anniversary is held one year later, the third anniversary, and so on, is held starting two years after the person's passing.

2. Chang-an's words from his preface to T'ien-t'ai's *Great Concentration and Insight*. "Concentration and insight" refers to the system of meditation set forth by T'ien-t'ai in that work.

3. The Chinese character for "species" also means seed, variety, and to plant. T'ien-t'ai used the character to explain the concept of the "seeds of similar species" and the "seeds of opposites."

4. A summary of a passage from *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*.

5. *The Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra."*

6. "The specific teaching in its original sense" refers to the specific teaching that is one of the four teachings of doctrine formulated by T'ien-t'ai, the other three being the Tripitaka teaching, the connecting

teaching, and the perfect teaching. "The perfect teaching expounded by teachers other than T'ien-t'ai" refers to the perfect teaching expounded in the pre-Lotus sutras. T'ien-t'ai regards the perfect teaching expounded in the Lotus Sutra as the true perfect teaching.

7. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

8. *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*.

9. *Profound Meaning*.

10. *Great Concentration and Insight*.

11. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

12. A reference to the Hinayana doctrine asserting that one can attain nirvana only upon extinguishing one's body and mind.

13. *Profound Meaning*.

14. *The Annotations on "Great Concentration and Insight."* "The two rivers of transmigration" refers to transmigration with differences and limitations and transmigration with change and advance. Each of these two kinds of transmigration is found in Glossary.