YOUR letter dated the eighteenth day of this month arrived around noon on the twenty-third day of the same month. I opened and read it immediately. I have received the offerings listed in the letter, namely, ten thousand coins, a long sword, a fan, and twenty nyāḍ of incense.

Looking over your letter, I see you say that you have turned fifty-seven this year, and that fifty-seven is regarded as a dangerous year in a man’s life.\(^1\) You do not know if this is the reason, but from the latter part of the first month on down to the present fourth month, you have experienced many sufferings in both body and mind. Granted that, since human beings are endowed with bodies, they are certain to suffer various illnesses that drag on and to be much troubled in their five extremities,\(^2\) still in your case these seem excessive.

This, indeed, is the prime source of our sorrows. Buddhism teaches the doctrine of the twelve-linked chain of causation, which states, in effect, that our bodies are endowed with various sufferings. Because we created karma in a previous existence, we become subject to various sufferings in this life; the earthly desires accumulated in a previous existence call forth the sufferings of the present.

The two causes or links in the chain of causation [ignorance and action] that pertain to one’s past existence; the five links in one’s present existence [consciousness, name and form, the six sense organs, contact, and sensation] that are the results of these; the three links [desire, attachment, and existence] that act as causes in one’s present existence; and the two links [birth and aging and death] that are the result of these in one’s future existence, cause one to experience all the sufferings that span the three successive existences of past, present, and future.

When the Buddha was in the world, persons of the two vehicles, hoping to rid themselves of these sufferings, sought to immerse themselves in the truth of non-substantiality, making ashes of their bodies and wiping out their consciousnesses; they abandoned any hope of carrying out the striving and assiduousness that characterize the bodhisattva, and believed instead that the highest truth was to be found in the realization of the principle of non-substantiality.

In the period when the Buddha was preaching the correct and equal sutras, he chastised those who adopted this ideal. How can anyone who receives life in this threefold world hope to free himself from suffering? Even those who attain the status of arhat and are worthy to receive alms cannot do so, much less those who are mere ordinary
morts on a much lower level. Therefore the Buddha urged his followers to make haste and depart from the sufferings of birth and death entirely.

But I will say no more regarding this doctrine. You state that this is a dangerous year for you. Long ago, in the reign of Fu Hsi, a water creature known as a turtle emerged in the Yellow River, floating on the surface, and on its shell it bore the markings known as the eight trigrams.3 When the people of the time took up these markings and examined them, they found that they could clearly distinguish which years were "dangerous" or unlucky in the course of people's lives from the year they were born to the year of their death.

The danger that confronts a person in one of these so-called unlucky years is like the danger from kites or maggots that fish face when they are in shallow water, or like that faced by summer insects when they are around a torch and may bumble into the flame.

Demons may hover around the spirit of the person in a dangerous year and seek to do it harm. When the gods are "at home," it means that the various gods are dwelling in your body, and hence all affairs go as you wish them to. But when the gods are "abroad," it means that these gods have left the house that is your mind or consciousness and are observing affairs on the outside. The year that you are now in can be called one in which the gods are abroad. They have gone off on a journey to other lands, and so you must be careful and pray that you may escape peril and gain happiness.

[According to the theory of the five phases], you belong to the agent wood, but, although this year is a dangerous year for persons whose nature is dominated by wood, you will probably not encounter any difficulty in the spring and summer [when trees flourish].

The scripture called The Supreme Gate to the Nature of Reality5 states: "When wood encounters metal, it is broken; when fire meets up with water, its light is extinguished; when earth comes into contact with wood, it is depleted; when metal enters fire, it melts away; and when water encounters earth, its progress is halted."

This is a scripture passage that is hardly worth citing, but when I am dealing with doctrinal matters I try to keep in mind the four ways of preaching, and so I have cited it. So long as it does not go against the principles for the attainment of Buddhahood, it may be of use in understanding the ordinary ways of secular life.

However that may be, the sutra known as the Lotus Sutra is good medicine for the various ills of body and mind. Thus it states: "This sutra provides good medicine for the ills of the people of Jambudvīpa. If a person who has an illness is able to hear this sutra, then his illness will be wiped out and he will know neither old age nor death."6

Again it states: "[Once these living beings have heard the Law], they will enjoy peace and security in their present existence and good circumstances in future existences."7

And again: "All others who bear you enmity or malice will likewise be wiped out."8

I am copying out and sending you two chapters in particular, the "Expedient Means" chapter and the "Life Span" chapter, to act as protection for you. I could in fact copy out the whole sutra, but at the moment I am tied up with other affairs, so I am limiting myself to these two chapters. Treat them with the utmost care, the utmost care—never let them be apart from your person. Wrap them up carefully and make them your constant possession.

The "Expedient Means" chapter constitutes the heart of the theoretical
teaching. In this chapter the Buddha expounds the doctrine of the ten factors and the true aspect of all phenomena, and makes clear how living beings in the Ten Worlds can attain Buddhahood.

When Shāriputra hears this, he is able to cut off the illusions about the true nature of existence and attains the level at which he comprehends the true cause for enlightenment. Moreover, he is assured that in the future he will become a Buddha called Flower Glow Thus Come One, a moon of enlightenment shining in the dawn sky of the realm called Free from Sain.

This represents the first step in the attainment of Buddhahood by the living beings of the Ten Worlds. But the Nembutsu believers and True Word priests of the present time believe that the attainment of Buddhahood can be achieved only through the sutas that they themselves rely on, clinging assiduously to their belief and refusing to familiarize themselves with the doctrines of the Lotus Sutra. They cling to the prophecies of the attainment of Buddhahood that are prophecies in name only, set forth in sutras preached when the Buddha had “not yet revealed the truth.”

In the past you always mistakenly adhered to these same doctrines, but now you have listened to my doctrines and become wise. Not only have you speedily repudiated your earlier beliefs and embraced those of the Lotus Sutra, but in fact you now look on this sutra as dearer to you than life and limb. This is the most wonderful of wonders! Such an occurrence cannot be adequately explained in terms of your present existence alone, but must have its origin in your relationship with the sutra in past existences—only thus can it be understood. Marvelous, truly marvelous!

Speaking next of the “Life Span” chapter, it constitutes the heart of the essential teaching, and in fact the heart of the entire Lotus Sutra. Not only is it the heart of all the sacred teachings of the Buddha’s lifetime, but it embodies the most important message conveyed in all the ceremonies on the preaching of the Law conducted by the Buddhhas of the three existences of past, present, and future. This is because in the “Life Span” chapter Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, reveals the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, which he has come to understand and which is equal to the inner enlightenment of all the Buddhhas of the three existences.

This doctrine thus represents not only the personal enlightenment attained by a single Buddha, Shakyamuni, but the enlightenment of all other Buddhhas as well. We living beings, who from time immemorial have floundered in the waves of the six paths of birth and death, now encounter the Lotus Sutra preached by Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, because in a past existence we listened to the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life that is found in this “Life Span” chapter, the doctrine the Buddha realized when he originally attained enlightenment in the far remote past. It is a most wonderful doctrine!

The founders of the Flower Garland and True Word schools, Fa-tsang, Ch’eng-kuan, Shan-wu-wei, Chinkang-chih, Pu-k’ung, and the others, stole the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life from the “Life Span” chapter, the heart of all the sacred teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha’s lifetime, and then claimed that this doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life was to be found in the Flower Garland and Mahāvairochana sutras, the sutras that their own schools were founded on and which had never from the beginning ever contained such a doctrine.
And the scholars of later ages, deceived by these thieves, firmly believe that what they say is true. What foolishness, what foolishness!

As a result of all this, the teachers of the True Word school state, "[The Buddhist teachers of China] vied with one another to steal the ghee [of True Word] and claim that it is the possession of their own school." Or they say that the attainment of Buddhahood by persons of the two vehicles and the attainment of Buddhahood in the remote past described in the Lotus Sutra belong to the region of darkness, but the doctrines set forth in the Mahāvairochana Sutra represent the realm of enlightenment. And the Flower Garland teachers say that the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life set forth in the Lotus Sutra is a mere branch or leaf; the doctrine as expounded in the Flower Garland Sutra is the root, the original doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life.

Statements such as these represent erroneous views that have no ground or basis to support them. If anyone claims that the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life is to be found in the True Word and Flower Garland sutras, he is merely playing with words. How ridiculous! Such a doctrine has no more reality than turtle fur or rabbit horns!

The fact is that the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life that was expounded by the Buddha who attained enlightenment in the remote past was kept secret when the Buddha set forth the teachings that correspond to the first four of the five flavors, and when he preached the first fourteen chapters of the Lotus Sutra, those that embody the theoretical teaching. It was only when he came to the revelation section of the essential teaching as expounded in the "Life Span" chapter that he revealed it.

This priceless gem, the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, was then placed in a bag diamond-like in its indestructibility, the five characters of Myoho-renge-kyo, and left behind for the sake of us, the troubled and impoverished living beings of this latter age.

The Buddhist scholars and teachers who lived in the Former and Middle Days of the Law were not aware of this most important matter. Only Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu had some knowledge of it deep in their hearts, but they did not let it show in their faces.

The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai seems to have kept it hidden when he preached The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra, The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra, and Great Concentration and Insight. For the sake of those in the Latter Day of the Law, in the seventh chapter of the ten chapters that make up Great Concentration and Insight, that entitled "Correct Meditation," he described it in brief. But he gave only a superficial explanation and left the matter there. He revealed only a portion, the meditation on the true principle, and refrained from discussing the actuality of three thousand realms in a single moment of life.

The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai was a disciple of the Buddha in his transient status. But I, Nichiren, am a disciple of the Buddha in his true identity, and thus I am able to expound in full these matters that pertain to the essential teaching.

And now I have written out and am sending you [chapters from] this sutra that, as I have explained, embodies doctrinal principles of the greatest importance. You must have ever greater faith in it!

The "Encouragements" chapter says, "[If you see a person who accepts and upholds this sutra], you should rise and greet him from afar, showing him the same respect you would a Buddha."

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The “Peaceful Practices” chapter states, “The heavenly beings day and night will for the sake of the Law constantly guard and protect them... The young sons of heavenly beings will wait on him and serve him.”

And the “Simile and Parable” chapter says, “[But now this threefold world is all my domain], and the living beings in it are all my children.”

And since those who uphold the Lotus Sutra are children of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, how could Brahmā, Shakra, the gods of the sun and moon, and the host of stars fail to watch over you day and night, morning and evening? What secret teaching could surpass the Lotus Sutra in dispelling all the perils and disasters that may face one in a dangerous year? You can count on it, count on it!

When I was in Kamakura, we could keep in very close contact, but now that I am living in a remote region, I have no opportunity to meet with you in person. The thoughts I have in my heart can only be conveyed by way of messengers and letters. It is sad, sad indeed!

As for this year of danger that you face, trust in me. See whether the promises made in the Lotus Sutra by Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the Buddhas of the ten directions, emanations of Shakyamuni, are trustworthy or not. Try putting your trust in them!

There is much more I would like to say.

Nichiren

The twenty-third day of the fourth month in the first year of Kōan [1278], cyclical sign tsuchinoe-tora

Reply to Ōta Saemon-no-jō

Background

This is Nichiren Daishonin’s reply to a letter from his follower Ōta Saemon-no-jō, also known as Ōta Jōmyō, who lived in Shimōsa Province. From the content it is clear that in 1278 Ōta sent offerings with a letter to the Daishonin at Minobu. In the letter, Ōta had reported his recent sufferings, physical and spiritual, and his concern that his present age, fifty-seven, was considered a “dangerous year,” or an “unlucky age,” in Japanese and Chinese tradition. He was the same age as the Daishonin.

The Daishonin responds that various sufferings are unavoidable, but that the Lotus Sutra provides “good medicine” to alleviate the sufferings of body and mind.

Suffering is a result of the karma one created in past existences, the Daishonin explains. He then cites the Buddhist principle of the twelve-linked chain of causation, which defines the links of causation between the previous existence and the present, between the present existence and the future.

He also discusses the yin and yang theory of the five agents, sharing some knowledge of a dangerous year with Ōta based on the so-called precept of adapting to local customs.

The Daishonin tells Ōta that he is copying for him two chapters of the Lotus Sutra. They are the second chapter, “Expedient Means,” and the sixteenth, “Life Span,” the core chapters respectively of the theoretical teaching and the essential teaching. He also addresses errors and falsehoods promulgated by the True Word and Flower Garland schools, which stole the T’ien-t’ai school’s principle of three thousand realms in a single moment of life. This principle, the Daishonin says, is
found only in the Lotus Sutra, and it was expounded by Shakyamuni Buddha when he originally attained enlightenment. The Daishonin identifies himself as "a disciple of the Buddha in his true identity," that is, as a Bodhisattva of the Earth.

In closing, the Daishonin advises Ōta to trust in him concerning "this year of danger that you face," and see whether the promises of Shakyamuni and all the other Buddhas made in the Lotus Sutra to protect its believers are trustworthy.

Notes

1. The idea of "dangerous year" or "unlucky age" derives from the ancient Chinese philosophy of yin and yang. In Japan, the ages of twenty-five, forty-two, and sixty are considered unlucky for men, and the ages of nineteen, thirty-three, and thirty-seven for women, though there are local and historical variations.

2. The "five extremities" refers to one's whole body, though explanations vary according to the source. One account defines them as one's head, both hands, and both feet.

3. Eight signs that form the basis of the I-ching, or Book of Changes, and from which sixty-four symbolic hexagrams are derived. Each trigram consists of three lines, each of which may be either yin or yang. According to tradition, a dragon horse rose from the Yellow River with extraordinary markings on its back and a turtle emerged from the Lo River, carrying diagrams on its back. From these markings and diagrams the legendary emperor Fu Hsi derived the eight trigrams.

4. A concept from ancient Chinese cosmology, used to explain the nature of all things including the progress of change in the universe. The five agents are metal, water, wood, fire, and earth. In the cycle of the five phases, each phase is considered to produce the next in the above cycle, and to restrict the one following it in the cycle of wood, earth, water, fire, and metal.

5. Little is known about this scripture.


7. Ibid., chap. 5.

8. Ibid., chap. 23.

9. One of the three categories of illusion (see Glossary).

10. Immeasurable Meanings Sutra.

11. A Comparison of Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism by Kōbō.

12. This statement is based on passages in The Precious Key to the Secret Treasury and Exoteric and Esoteric.

13. This statement is based on commentaries on the Flower Garland Sutra, including The Meaning of the Flower Garland Sutra Based on an Earlier Commentary by Ch'eng-kuan.

14. Here the Daishonin identifies himself as one of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth described in the "Emerging from the Earth" (15th) chapter of the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra, or one of the disciples whom Shakyamuni had taught in his capacity as the Buddha who attained enlightenment in the remote past, or in his true identity. T'ien-t'ai is said to have been a reincarnation of Bodhisattva Medicine King, the disciple whom Shakyamuni taught in his capacity as the Buddha who first attained enlightenment in this lifetime in India, or in his transient identity.