

## The Importance of the Moment of Death



**I**N your letter you write that your husband chanted Nam-myohorenge-kyo day and night. You say that when the time drew near he chanted twice in a loud voice. And that his complexion was whiter than it had been in life, and that he didn't lose his looks.

The Lotus Sutra reads, "[This reality consists of] the appearance . . . and their consistency from beginning to end."<sup>1</sup> *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* reads, "Those with a dark complexion at the moment of death will fall into hell."<sup>2</sup> The Protection Sutra reads, "There are fifteen types of signs that appear at one's death showing that one will fall into hell. There are eight types of signs showing that one will be reborn in the realm of hungry spirits. There are five types of signs showing that one will be reborn in the realm of animals." The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai's *Great Concentration and Insight* reads, "The body turning dark represents the darkness of hell."<sup>3</sup>

Looking back, I have been studying the Buddha's teachings since I was a boy. And I found myself thinking, "The life of a human being is fleeting. The exhaled breath never waits for the inhaled one. Even dew before the wind is hardly a sufficient metaphor. It is the way of the world that whether one

is wise or foolish, old or young, one never knows what will happen to one from one moment to the next. Therefore I should first of all learn about death, and then about other things."

So I gathered and considered the sacred teachings of Shakyamuni's entire lifetime, as well as the writings and commentaries of scholars and teachers. Then I applied them as a bright mirror to the moment of people's deaths and what followed after death, and found not the slightest discrepancy.

I saw that this person had fallen into hell, or that that person had been reborn in the world of human or heavenly beings. On the other hand, people in society were hiding the truth about the last moments of their teachers or their parents, saying only that they had been reborn in the Pure Land in the west. How pitiful that when their teacher has fallen into the evil paths of existence and is facing numerous unbearable sufferings, the disciples who remain in this world are praising his death, only making his sufferings in hell worse. They may be compared to one who clamps shut the mouth of a person guilty of a serious offense when he is being questioned, or to one who leaves another's boil unopened so that it festers.

Be that as it may, you say in this let-

ter that his complexion was whiter than it had been in life and that he didn't lose his looks.

T'ien-t'ai says, "Pure white represents the realm of heavenly beings."<sup>4</sup> *Great Perfection of Wisdom* says, "Those whose faces are pink and white, and whose features retain their proper shape, are reborn in the realm of heavenly beings."<sup>5</sup> The record regarding the death of the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai reads, "His countenance was fair."<sup>6</sup> The record about the death of the Tripitaka Master Hsüan-tsang reads, "His countenance was fair."<sup>7</sup> A standard that identifies the sacred teachings of the Buddha's entire lifetime is the teaching that "those who have performed evil deeds will remain in the six paths of existence, and those who have performed good deeds will be reborn in the four noble worlds."<sup>8</sup>

Judging from these passages of proof from the texts and this actual proof, I would say that your husband has surely been reborn in the realm of heavenly beings.

You also say in your letter that at the moment of death he chanted the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra twice. The seventh volume of the Lotus Sutra reads, "After I have passed into extinction, [one] should accept and uphold this sutra. Such a person assuredly and without doubt will attain the Buddha way."<sup>9</sup> There is not a single insignificant matter among all the sacred teachings of the Buddha's entire lifetime. All are the golden words of Shakyamuni Buddha, who is our father, the great sage, and the lord of teachings; all are the truth; all are true words. They may be categorized as Hinayana or Mahayana, exoteric or esoteric, provisional Mahayana or true Mahayana. When we compare the teachings of the Buddha with the teachings of the two deities<sup>10</sup> and three ascetics, Taoists, and other non-Buddhists, these latter are false words and the Buddha's teachings true words.

But among these true words, there are lies, true words, words of excessive flourishes, and abusive words. Among these, the Lotus Sutra is the truest of true words, and the truest of truths.

Schools such as the True Word, Flower Garland, Three Treatises, Dharma Characteristics, Dharma Analysis Treasury, Establishment of Truth, Precepts, Nembutsu, and Zen are all schools formulated from the lies found amidst the true words. The Lotus school is true words that bear no resemblance to those schools. And not only are the words of the Lotus Sutra true, but when the false words of the sutras of Shakyamuni's entire lifetime enter the great sea of the Lotus Sutra, compelled by the power of the Lotus Sutra, they become true words. How much more so, then, must this be the case with the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra.

White face powder has the power to make black lacquer as white as snow. Any color approaching Mount Sumeru takes on a golden hue. One who upholds the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra transforms the black lacquer of the evil deeds of a lifetime, and of countless kalpas of lifetimes in the past, into the great merit of good deeds. All the more so is this true of one's good roots from the beginningless past, which all take on a golden hue.

And when your deceased husband chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo at the end on his deathbed, the evil deeds of a lifetime, and from the beginningless past, changed into the seeds of Buddhahood. This is what is meant by the teachings called "earthly desires are enlightenment," "the sufferings of birth and death are nirvana," and "attaining Buddhahood in one's present form."

And because you are the beloved wife of such a man, the teaching of women attaining Buddhahood without doubt also applies to you. And if this were to be a lie, Shakyamuni, Many

Treasures, and all the Buddhas of the ten directions, who are Shakyamuni's emanations, would be liars, great liars, evildoers, and those who deceive all living beings and cause them to fall into hell. Devadatta would become the lord of the pure land of Tranquil Light. Shakyamuni, the lord of teachings, would be choked in the inferno of the great citadel of the Avīchi hell. The sun and moon would fall from the sky, the earth would overturn, the rivers would run backwards, and Mount Sumeru would crumble into dust.

It would not be Nichiren's lie; rather it would be the lie of all the Buddhas in the ten directions and three existences. But consider: How could such a thing ever be? I will explain this matter in detail when we meet.

Nichiren

The fourteenth day of the seventh month

Please read this to the lay nun Myōhō.



## Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter on the fourteenth day of the seventh month in 1278 to comfort and encourage the lay nun Myōhō, whose husband had just passed away earlier that month. Myōhō lived at Okamiya in Suruga Province. The Daishonin reiterates her report that her husband chanted Nam-myoho-rence-kyo to the very end of his life, and that after death his complexion was fair and he retained his looks, and he assures her that one's appearance at the moment of death may be seen as a sign of the state

of one's life after death. That is why, he notes, he began his Buddhist studies in order to learn about death before any other matter. He reassures Myōhō that her husband's bright appearance signifies that the evil deeds of his past existences have changed into the seeds of Buddhahood. And in conclusion, he encourages her that since she is the wife of such a man, naturally the Lotus Sutra's teaching of women's ability to attain Buddhahood will apply to her as well.

## Notes

1. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.
2. This passage is not found in the extant edition of *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*.
3. T'ien-t'ai quotes this passage as a statement from the Meditation on the Correct Teaching Sutra.
4. In his *Great Concentration and Insight* T'ien-t'ai quotes this passage as a statement from the Meditation on the Correct Teaching Sutra.
5. This passage is not found in the extant edition of *Great Perfection of Wisdom*.
6. Source unknown.
7. *The Biography of the Tripitaka Master of Ta-tz'u-en-ssu Temple*. "The Tripitaka Master of Ta-tz'u-en-ssu Temple" refers to Hsüan-tsang.
8. Source unknown.
9. Lotus Sutra, chap. 21.
10. Shiva and Vishnu.