

Concerning the Statue of Shakyamuni Buddha Fashioned by Nichigen-nyo



I HAVE inscribed the Gohonzon for your protection. I have previously received two thousand coins, and now receive another thousand from my lay supporter, Lady Nichigen-nyo, who fashioned the wooden statue, three inches in height, of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings of the three-fold world.

In the “Life Span” chapter of the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha says, “Sometimes I speak of myself, sometimes of others.”¹ The Buddha Good Virtue of the eastern region, the Thus Come One Mahāvairocana of the center, the Buddhas of the ten directions, the seven Buddhas of the past, the Buddhas of the three existences, Bodhisattva Superior Practices and the other bodhisattvas, Manjushrī, Shāriputra and the others, the great heavenly king Brahmā, the devil king of the sixth heaven, the heavenly king Shakra Devānām Indra, the sun god, the moon god, the morning star god, the seven stars of the Big Dipper, the twenty-eight constellations, the five planets, the seven stars, the countless eighty-four thousand other stars,² the asura kings, the heavenly gods, earthly gods, gods of the mountains, gods of the seas, household gods, village gods, and the rulers of all the various countries of the world—not one of these is other than [a provisional manifestation

of] Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings! The Sun Goddess, Great Bodhisattva Hachiman—both these in their original form are Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings.

Shakyamuni Buddha is like the one moon in the sky, and the various other Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and beings are like the reflections floating on ten thousand different bodies of water. Thus a person who fashions a single image of Shakyamuni Buddha is in effect making images of all the Buddhas of the worlds in the ten directions.

When you shake your head, your hair sways; when your mind begins to work, your body moves. When a strong wind blows, the grass and trees can no longer remain still; when the earth shakes, the seas are atremble. Thus if one can move Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, can the grass and trees fail to respond, can the waters remain calm?

Now, Nichigen-nyo, you are in your thirty-seventh year, an unlucky age.³ The word “unlucky” means something that is like the corners on a pair of dice or the corners of a square measuring cup, or like the joints in a person’s body or the points in between the four cardinal ones of the compass. When the wind blows from the cardinal points, it is mild; but when it blows from the points in between, it is strong.

If an illness arises in the muscles, it can be easily cured; but if it arises in the joints, it is hard to cure. If a house has no fence around it, robbers can break in; if a person has faults, his enemies can use them to get at him. An unlucky year is like a joint, or like a house that lacks a fence, or a person with faults. But if one has good soldiers on hand to guard the house, they can seize the robbers. And if the ailment in the joints can be cured in good time, one may live a long life.

Now fashioning an image of Shakyamuni Buddha is like a woman of humble rank giving birth to a prince and heir to the throne. Even the father, the ruler of the nation, will surely pay honor to such a woman, to say nothing of his ministers and those below them. And the great heavenly king Brahmā, the heavenly king Shakra Devānām Indra, and the sun and moon gods will protect a woman who fashions such an image, to say nothing of the other gods great and small.

King Udayana fashioned an image of Shakyamuni Buddha, whereupon the great heavenly king Brahmā, the gods of the sun and moon, and other beings appeared in order to pay their respects to the wooden image. But the image said, "Rather than paying veneration to me, it is better to pay veneration to King Udayana." And the same thing happened when King Bimbisāra produced a painted image of Shakyamuni Buddha.

In the Lotus Sutra the Buddha says: "If there are persons who for the sake of the Buddha fashion and set up images, . . . then all have attained the Buddha way."⁴

This passage in effect indicates that all women who fashion images of Shakyamuni Buddha will day after day and month after month be spared both major and minor difficulties in their present life and in their next existence will invariably attain Buddhahood.

In the five thousand or seven thousand volumes of sutras expounded by the Buddha in the course of his preaching life, it is nowhere stated that a woman can attain Buddhahood. Only in the Lotus Sutra did he say that women could become Buddhas. The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai Chih-che in his commentary says, "[The other sutras predict Buddhahood only for men], but not for women."⁵ He means by this comment that in all the other sutras women are said to be incapable of attaining Buddhahood. But then he says, "This [Lotus] sutra predicts Buddhahood for all."⁶ For in "this sutra," the Lotus, we see how the dragon king's daughter becomes a Buddha.

This man known as the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai Chih-che appeared in the land of China fifteen hundred years after the demise of the Buddha. Fifteen times he read through the entire body of sutras, and he declared that nowhere outside of the Lotus Sutra was it stated that women could attain Buddhahood. The Great Teacher Miao-lo in his commentary says that the Buddha "made this prediction only once in his preaching life."⁷ By this he means that this doctrine is to be found nowhere else in the entire body of sutras.

Among the heavenly bodies [at night], the Lotus Sutra is comparable to the moon; among persons it is comparable to the king. Among mountains it is Mount Sumeru, among waters, the great ocean. And if so wonderful a sutra as this declares that women may attain Buddhahood, then what does it matter whether all the other sutras look down on them? Though thieves, housebreakers, burglars, beggars, or lepers may despise you, if the ruler of the nation praises you, you should rather rejoice, should you not?

This country of Japan may be called a women's country. These islands were created by the Sun Goddess.⁸ In this

land of Japan there are 1,994,828 men and 2,994,830 women. These men and women are all followers of the Nembutsu. And because they practice the Nembutsu, they make Amida Buddha their object of devotion, and the prayers of their present existence are likewise directed at him. Even if they should fashion or paint an image of Shakyamuni Buddha, their aim would be to attain rebirth in the pure land of Amida Buddha. Their real purpose is not to pay honor to Shakyamuni Buddha, so it would be better if they did not fashion or paint such an image at all.

Now, Nichigen-nyo, though you have fashioned this image of Shakya-

muni Buddha, the lord of teachings, because you wish to pray for [peace and security in] your present existence, you are without doubt assuring the same in your next existence as well. Among all the 2,994,830 women of Japan, you should think of yourself as number one.

I will write in more detail at another time.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The second day of the second
month in the second year of
Kōan [1279]

Reply to Nichigen-nyo



Background

This letter was written in the second month of 1279 to Nichigen-nyo, the wife of Shijō Kingo, in praise of her sincerity in fashioning a wooden statue of Shakyamuni Buddha. The Daishonin expresses appreciation for the coins he received as an offering. According to *Reply to Kyō'ō*, written in 1273, the Daishonin bestowed the Gohonzon upon Kyō'ō, the daughter of Shijō Kingo and Nichigen-nyo, who was then seriously ill. In that reply he explained the significance of the Gohonzon. That may be why in the current letter he simply states that he inscribed the Gohonzon for Nichigen-nyo.

As this letter indicates, worship of the Buddha Amida was widespread in Japan at the time. But Nichigen-nyo, crafting a statue of Shakyamuni, had rejected Amida, an imaginary Buddha, in favor of Shakyamuni, the real Buddha whose spirit is embodied in the Lotus Sutra. The Daishonin praises her, saying, "A person who fashions a single image of Shakyamuni Buddha is in

effect making images of all the Buddhas of the worlds in the ten directions." This statement is based on the view that the Buddhas of the ten directions are manifestations of Shakyamuni, the Buddha who originally attained enlightenment in the remote past. The Daishonin regards the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra as the Law that made the original enlightenment of Shakyamuni possible. And in the treatise *Questions and Answers on the Object of Devotion* written the previous year, the Daishonin makes it clear that the people in the Latter Day of the Law "should make the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra their object of devotion" (p. 787).

Nichigen-nyo made this offering in her thirty-seventh year. In Japan thirty-seven was considered one of several climacteric years in a woman's life. The Daishonin instructs Nichigen-nyo that her pure faith and spirit of offering will keep her under the protection of all the deities. Citing passages from the Lotus Sutra and its commentaries, the Dai-

shonin asserts that Nichigen-nyo will attain Buddhahood because she upholds the sutra that guarantees enlightenment for women. He also states that

her prayer for safety in her so-called unlucky year will be answered, and that she is foremost among all women in Japan.

Notes

1. In the passage "others" refers to Shakyamuni's manifestations in various figures.

2. The five planets are Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. In the thirteenth century the more distant planets were as yet unknown, and Earth was not known to be among the planets. The seven stars are the above-mentioned five planets plus the sun and moon. The figure eighty-four thousand is not to be taken literally, but simply indicates a large number, innumerable, countless, or all.

3. The idea of unlucky ages derives from the ancient Chinese philosophy of yin and yang. The ages of nineteen, thirty-three, and thirty-seven were considered unlucky for women. It was customary at such times to perform various religious acts in order to ward off ill luck.

4. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

5. *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra.*

6. *Ibid.*

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

8. According to Japanese mythology, the male and female deities Izanagi and Izanami stood on the Floating Bridge of the Heavens and plunged a jewel-crested spear into the ocean below. When they pulled it free, the water that dripped from it coagulated to form the first island of the Japanese archipelago. The two gods descended to the island and performed a marriage rite. Then Izanami gave birth to the islands of Japan. The Sun Goddess was born from the left eye of Izanagi while he was purifying himself in a river. She was assigned to rule the High Celestial Plain and is regarded as the progenitor of the Japanese imperial line.