

Propagating the Law at the Appropriate Time



I HAVE received the horseload of polished rice that you sent.

All affairs whatsoever depend on the time. We speak of “blossoms in the spring, the moon in autumn” because those are the things that are appropriate to the time.

In the case of the Buddha, he appeared in the world for the sake of the Lotus Sutra, but for the first forty and more years of his teaching life he did not expound it. The reason, as explained in the sutra itself, was that “the time to preach so had not yet come.”¹

In summer we may be pleased to receive a heavily padded jacket, and in winter to receive a sheer summer robe, but how much more delightful to receive a padded jacket in winter, or a sheer robe in summer! Money may be welcome when we are hungry, and an imperial gift when we are thirsty, but can never compare to food in time of hunger or drink in time of thirst. The boy who gave the Buddha a pie made of mud and attained Buddhahood thereby,² and the person who offered a jewel but fell into hell instead,³ are illustrations of this principle.

I, Nichiren, was born in this country of Japan, have never deceived others, never stolen, or committed any sort of offense. I am a teacher of the Law in this latter age of few offenses. But in

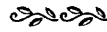
the time of a ruler who favors civil affairs, the military arts will be neglected. And those who live for love have no liking for persons of strict morals. Because, born in an age that puts its faith in the Nembutsu, Zen, True Word, and Precepts teachings, I propagate the Lotus Sutra, I am hated by the ruler and high ministers and by the common people. And so in the end I live in the mountains. What plans, I wonder, do the heavenly deities have for me?

Snow piles up five feet deep, blocking the mountain trails that are deserted to begin with, and no one comes to visit. My clothes are thin and hardly keep out the cold, my food supplies are exhausted, and it would seem that my life must come to an end. At such a moment, to receive a gift like yours, one that has saved my life, is an occasion for both joy and lamentation. Just when I had resigned myself to the thought of starvation, your gift came like oil added to a lamp that could hardly last much longer. How wonderful, how welcome, how generous the heart of the giver! Surely it must have been the design of Shakyamuni Buddha and the Lotus Sutra.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The twenty-seventh day of the
twelfth month in the second year
of Kōan [1279]

Reply to Ueno



Background

This letter, written at Minobu on the twenty-seventh of the twelfth month in 1279, is a reply to Nanjō Tokimitsu, who had sent Nichiren Daishonin two bags of rice. Because Tokimitsu's donation arrived at a time when the Daishonin was most in need of food, he begins by speaking of the importance of the time.

He points out that Shakyamuni Buddha waited more than forty years to expound the Lotus Sutra, until the time was right to do so. Next, he cites examples of gifts that take on even greater value when they are given at the right time. Similarly, he states that he propagates the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Day of the Law, the time for which it is most appropriate, but also

a time in which erroneous teachings dominate. For this reason he has been persecuted.

Conditions at Minobu in the winter were very harsh, and access limited. As a result, the Daishonin was frequently short of food and supplies because of the deep snow. He makes clear that Tokimitsu's gift of life-sustaining rice arrived just when he had run out of food. He says that it is "an occasion for both joy and lamentation" because he had been prepared to die of starvation. Ultimately, the Daishonin praises the generous heart of his disciple who has provided food, calling it the design of Shakyamuni Buddha and the Lotus Sutra.

Notes

1. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.
2. A reference to Virtue Victorious (*see* Glossary).
3. The source of this story has not been traced.