

Reply to the Wife of Gyōbu Saemon-no-jō



THIS month I received your letter informing me that, as the third day of the tenth month marks the thirteenth anniversary¹ of your mother's death, you are enclosing an offering of twenty thousand coins.

The more than three thousand volumes that make up the non-Buddhist classics have as their very core the two concepts of loyalty and filial piety, while the more than five thousand volumes of Buddhist scriptures have as their eye that of filial devotion. It seems that the sun and moon begrudge their light to one who is unfilial, and that the gods of the earth look upon such a person with wrath. A certain sutra tells us that at one time all the living beings of the six paths of existence gathered in the presence of the Buddha, and the Buddha questioned each of them about their personal circumstances. Addressing the gods of the earth, he said, "Tell me, is there anything that is weightier than the great earth?" The gods of the earth replied in a reverent manner that there was indeed something weightier than the great earth.

"You earth gods!" said the Buddha. "Why do you utter such distortions! This major world system of ours in all its parts sits upon the great earth. Mount Sumeru, which measures 168,000 yojanas in height and 3,360,000 *ri* in breadth, the great ocean, which

is 84,000 yojanas in length and breadth, as well as all the living beings and the plants and trees—all these rest upon the great earth. Since the earth is capable of upholding all of these, how could there be anything that is weightier than it?"

The earth gods replied, "Since the Buddha knows the answer, he is perhaps asking so that others may be informed of it. We earth gods have existed for twenty-nine kalpas, and during all that time, we have held up and supported the great earth without suffering any pain in our necks or our backs. Moreover, while holding it up, we run about in space, now east, now west, now south, now north, and yet we do not feel that it is weighty. It is only the place where an unfilial person dwells that is heavy, heavier than we can bear. It causes our necks to ache, our backs to feel as though they would break, our knees to weaken, our feet to become immovable, our eyes to swim, and our spirits to fail. Ah, when we encounter a place where a person of unfilial conduct dwells, we think again and again how we would like to cast off the earth and throw it away! That is why the earth constantly trembles in the place where an unfilial person dwells.

"So it was with the man called Devadatta. He was a cousin of Shakyā-

muni Buddha, the lord of teachings, and a member of the royal clan, one of the most highborn persons in the continent of Jambudvīpa. Nevertheless, he was unfilial, and for that reason we could not hold up the earth under him. So the earth split apart and he fell into the hell of incessant suffering. Our strength was powerless to prevent it.”

Thus did the gods of the earth expound in detail to the Buddha, and the Buddha nodded in agreement, saying, “Indeed, indeed!” And then the Buddha sighed and said, “After I have passed away, people will be even more unfilial in their conduct than Devadatta was. They will surpass even Kokālika.” (This is the essence of the sutra.²)

The Nirvana Sutra says that, in the evil world of the latter age, unfilial persons will be more numerous than the dust particles of the land, while those who perform their filial duties with devotion will be fewer than the specks of dirt that can be placed on a fingernail.

I, Nichiren, would observe now that in my opinion this sutra passage states the case correctly. There is no need at this late date to emphasize how great is the debt one owes to one’s father and mother. But I would like to stress that the debt to one’s mother is particularly important and worthy to be taken to heart.

When we observe how even the birds on the wing nourish their young, how even the beasts that range the fields take thought for their offspring, our eyes turn aside in amazement and we are lost in wonder. In particular, we should recall the debt of gratitude we owe our mother because of the pains she suffers during the nine months when the child is in the womb. At that time her belly is swelled as tight as a drum and her neck looks like a needle. Her breath comes in pants, she can barely breathe in, and her complexion

is the color of withered grass. When she lies down, her belly seems about to split apart; when she sits up, she can find no restful position for her limbs. And as the time for her delivery draws near, the pain becomes so great that her hips seem to be torn in two and stripped from her body, and her eyes start as though they would fly out of her head up into the heavens.

Once she has succeeded in giving birth to this enemy who has caused her such pain, one might suppose that she would fling it to the ground, tear open its belly, and toss it aside. But such, of course, is not the case. On the contrary, she forbears to think of her own pain, but hastens to take the child in her arms, wipes away the blood, washes off the unclean matter, and clasps it to her breast, and for a period of three years assiduously nourishes it.

During this period the child consumes 180 *koku*, three *shō* and five *gō*³ of the mother’s milk. In truth, even one *gō* of such milk is as precious in value as an entire major world system. And what is the value of one *shō* of this milk? In terms of rice, it is the equivalent of 11,850 *koku* and five *shō*; in terms of rice plants, more than 21,700 sheaves; in terms of cloth, 3,370 rolls. How great, then, must be the worth of 180 *koku*, three *shō* and five *gō* of such milk!

If we were to steal so much as one coin or one *gō* of rice from another person, then we would end up in prison. And yet a mother may put forth the kind of nourishment I have described for ten children, but those children may fail to look after their only mother. A wife may embrace and warm the body of her husband, but there is no wife to warm the chilled legs of a mother.

The golden pheasant of Jetavana Monastery⁴ flew into the fire in an attempt to save its offspring. But Lady Kaushika,⁵ because of something her

husband did, brought about the death of her own father. The Buddha said, "Fathers and mothers constantly think of their children, but children do not think of their fathers and mothers." And King Bimbisāra said, "The father thinks of his child but the child does not think of its father."⁶ They had incidents such as this in mind when they made these statements.

Even though one may wait upon one's parents with filial devotion during their present lifetime, there are few persons who think what will become of their parents in their next existence. Thus, while one's mother is still living, though one may not be greatly concerned about her, one will go to visit her once a month or once a year. But after she has died, one will pay respects to her memory only for the first or second seven-day period, or at most up through the beginning of the third year, and this only in a perfunctory manner and because other people are watching. But no one would think to keep up the observances for a period of thirteen years, some four thousand or more days [as you have].

While the mother is living, even a day or an hour away from her offspring seems as long as a thousand or ten thousand days. After her death, then, how long must thirteen years, four thousand or more days, seem to her, when she hears not the slightest word from her offspring! How she must long for some news of the living!

The Classic of Filial Piety, one of the non-Buddhist classics, merely teaches one how to take care of one's parents with filial devotion during their present lifetime. It says nothing about what to do concerning their next existence. This is like healing the ills of the body but doing nothing to relieve the sorrows of the mind. Similarly, the more than five thousand volumes of Buddhist scriptures [preached before the Lotus Sutra] tell one how to enter the realms

of human or heavenly beings, or the two vehicles of voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones, but they do not lead one on the path to Buddhahood.

The father of the Venerable Maudgalyāyana was Kissen Shishi and his mother was Shōdai-nyo.⁷ After his mother died, she was reborn in the realm of hungry spirits. Her son Maudgalyāyana, being at this time an ordinary mortal, had no knowledge of this. Later, when he attained the degree of enlightenment that goes with a person in the two vehicles, he became endowed with the heavenly eye,⁸ and looking about him, saw that his mother had fallen into the realm of hungry spirits. He was so startled that he could not even cry out at the pity of it.

He went to the realm of hungry spirits and offered rice to his mother, but no sooner had a morsel of it entered her mouth than it would turn into flames. Her mouth was like a cauldron and the rice like bits of live coals. Her whole body burned like a flaming torch, but when Maudgalyāyana, employing his transcendental powers, produced water to put out the fire, the water changed into flames and the fire burned more fiercely than ever.

Maudgalyāyana, realizing that it was beyond his power to effect a remedy, hastened to appear before the Buddha and report the situation. [Then, just as the Buddha had instructed him] he made offerings of rice to the sage monks of the ten directions and, taking some of this rice and offering it to his mother, he was only just barely able to bring her some relief from the sufferings of the realm of hungry spirits.

On the seventh day after Shakyamuni Buddha was born, his mother, Lady Māyā, left him and departed from this life. Shakyamuni, being no more than a common mortal at that time, did not know where she had been reborn. After he became a Buddha at the age of thirty, he converted his father, King

Shuddhodana, to his teachings in this present life and led him to become an arhat who obtained the fruit of emancipation. Meanwhile, the Buddha for his mother's sake ascended to the heaven of the thirty-three gods and preached the Māyā Sutra for her. Thus both his father and mother were able to attain the stage of arhat.

Because of the facts I have described above, in the sutras preached before the Lotus Sutra Maudgalyāyana was regarded as a man of the two vehicles who was marked by filial devotion, and Shakyamuni as a Buddha marked by filial devotion. But if we take the longer view of things, then Maudgalyāyana was in fact an unfilial voice-hearer and Shakyamuni an unfilial Buddha. As much as a sage as the Venerable Maudgalyāyana was, he did not guide his mother into the path that leads to Buddhahood. And as truly great a sage as Shakyamuni was, he merely led his father and mother into the path of the two vehicles, where they would lament more sorrowfully than ever the fact that they could never attain Buddhahood. Can this be called filial devotion, or does it deserve to be called unfilial conduct?

Therefore the layman Vimalakīrti criticized Maudgalyāyana, calling him a disciple of the six non-Buddhist teachers. And the Buddha spoke reproachfully of himself, saying, "[If I used a lesser vehicle to convert even one person], I would be guilty of stinginess and greed, but such a thing would be impossible."⁹ Maudgalyāyana did not know any better, and so his guilt is somewhat less weighty. But the Buddha knew of the teachings that were to be set forth in the Lotus Sutra, yet he stingily withheld them from his father while the latter was still alive. And when he was reunited with his mother, who had died earlier, he did not preach them to her. Could we find anyone guilty of greater stinginess than this?

If we go to the heart of the matter and give it thoughtful consideration, we would have to say that the Buddha in effect broke all the two hundred and fifty precepts and violated the ten major precepts. If he had failed to preach the Lotus Sutra, he could never have escaped the grave charge of leading all the people of the ten directions into unfilial conduct. Therefore the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai, referring to this fact, said, "The blame is to be placed upon the Buddha."¹⁰ And another person said, "He turned his back upon the original vow made by the Buddhas of the ten directions and the three existences and cheated and deceived people."

No matter what acts of filial piety they perform, as long as the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, persons of the two vehicles, Brahmā, Shakra, the gods of the sun and moon, and others described in the sutras—Mahayana and Hinayana, exoteric and esoteric—preached for more than forty years by the Buddha, and the founders of the True Word, Flower Garland, Three Treatises, Dharma Characteristics, Dharma Analysis Treasury, Establishment of Truth, Precepts, Pure Land, and Zen schools fail to follow the Lotus Sutra, they will be unable to escape the charge referred to by the Buddha when he said, "I would be guilty of stinginess and greed." Therefore the Buddha, honoring his original vow, proceeded to preach the Lotus Sutra.

But the Buddha's father and mother were no longer in this world when he came to preach the Lotus Sutra. Therefore he sent it as a gift to the Land of Transition¹¹ where his parents had been reborn. This is what he meant when he said, "Those disciples will in that other land seek the Buddha wisdom and will be able to hear this sutra."¹² This sutra passage should be taken to heart by persons who are truly wise. The Lotus is a sutra that was preached

by Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, for the sake of his father and mother. But the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai was the only person who understood this doctrine. The people of the other schools did not understand it. In my heart I, Nichiren, believe that it is the most important of all doctrines.

Persons who are intent upon exercising filial devotion toward their parents should therefore send them the gift of the Lotus Sutra. Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, sent this sutra to his parents as an act of filial devotion toward them.

When my own mother was still living, I went too much against her words. Now that she has preceded me in death, I cannot help but feel deep regret. That is why I have reviewed the sacred teachings put forward by the Buddha in the course of his lifetime in order to determine what actions are most appropriate to show filial devotion to my mother. And when I see peo-

ple praying for their departed mother, I feel as though it is my own concern and seeing you do so makes me very happy. Therefore I have outlined here what I think ought to be done.

I have not the slightest doubt that the spirit of your late mother will immediately leave the defilements of the six paths and that she will make her way to the pure land of Eagle Peak. You should meet with those who can instruct you in Buddhism from time to time and let them explain this doctrine to you. It is a doctrine known to few people in the country of Japan. I will speak to you in more detail on some further occasion.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The twenty-first day of the tenth
month

Reply to the wife of Gyōbu
Saemon-no-jō of Owari



Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter in response to an offering of twenty thousand coins from the wife of Gyōbu Saemon-no-jō in Owari Province, which she had made to honor the thirteenth anniversary of her mother's death. The identity of her husband is not certain, but from the large offering of coins she was able to provide, it appears he was a samurai of considerable rank.

Though the year is not indicated, the letter is thought to have been written in 1280.

The Daishonin begins by citing a story from a sutra about an exchange between the Buddha and the earth gods on the importance of filial piety, the commitment and actions to repay

the debt of gratitude one owes to one's parents. He emphasizes that the debt owed to one's mother is especially profound, describing in moving detail the sufferings a mother endures in giving birth to and caring for her children.

He then praises as extraordinary the filial devotion of the wife of Gyōbu Saemon-no-jō in making offerings on behalf of her late mother. While parents' devotion to their children is not uncommon, it is rarer for the child to respond in kind. Next, he delves more deeply into the concept of filial piety in Buddhism. *The Classic of Filial Piety*, a Confucian text, addresses only devotion to one's living parents, while failing to consider their next existence. Buddhism, on the other hand, deals

with saving one's parents not only in this life, but also after their death. However, he asserts, there are distinctions in the Buddhist teachings.

To illustrate this, he cites the famous story from Buddhist scriptures of Maudgalyāyana's efforts to rescue his deceased mother from the realm of hungry spirits. This story is held as a model of Buddhist filial devotion. But although Maudgalyāyana relieved his mother of the agony of hunger, there is no mention of his enabling her to attain Buddhahood.

Notes

1. The so-called "thirteenth anniversary" is actually the twelfth anniversary of a person's death. According to Japanese custom, the second year following a person's death is regarded as the third anniversary. Hence there is one year's discrepancy in the number of anniversaries. Japanese hold memorial services on the 7th, 49th, and 100th day after a relative's death, and then on the 1st, 3rd, 7th, 13th, 17th, 23rd, 27th, 33rd, and 50th anniversaries.

2. Which sutra the Daishonin refers to here is uncertain.

3. *Koku*, *shō*, and *gō* are units of volume equal to about 180 liters, 1.8 liters, and 0.18 liters, respectively.

4. A monastery in Shrāvastī, India, which Sudatta, a wealthy lay patron, built as an offering to Shakyamuni Buddha.

5. The wife of the god Shakra. Kaushika is the name of Shakra when he was once a Brahman. According to the Ocean of Meditation on the Buddha Sutra, when she saw Shakra dallying with other women, she became intensely jealous of him and told her father, the asura king, about it. The king, angered at Shakra, did battle with him.

6. According to *On the Destruction of the*

The Daishonin explains that even Shakyamuni Buddha could not save his own departed parents until he preached the Lotus Sutra. He expresses his conviction, therefore, that Shakyamuni Buddha preached the Lotus Sutra in order to enable all people to help their deceased parents attain Buddhahood.

The Daishonin closes by confirming that the filial devotion of Gyōbu's wife based on faith in the Lotus ensures that her mother "will make her way to the pure land of Eagle Peak," that is, attain Buddhahood.

Order, Bimbisāra's son, Ajātashatru, at the urging of Devadatta, imprisoned Bimbisāra and ascended the throne. When Ajātashatru later fell seriously ill, Bimbisāra felt deep pity for him. Realizing this, Ajātashatru regretted his actions and sent his men to release Bimbisāra. However, Bimbisāra, thinking that they were coming to torture him, took his own life.

7. Kissen Shishi and Shōdai-nyo are the Japanese names for this couple. Their Sanskrit names are unknown.

8. One of the five types of vision. The heavenly eye means the ability of heavenly beings to see beyond the physical limitations of darkness, distance, or obstruction.

9. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2. During the first more than forty years of his preaching life, Shakyamuni Buddha expounded only provisional teachings, and had never revealed the true teaching, or the Lotus Sutra.

10. *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*.

11. One of the four kinds of lands. A realm inhabited by voice-hearers, cause-awakened ones, and bodhisattvas in the lower stages of practice. See also four kinds of lands in Glossary.

12. Lotus Sutra, chap. 7.