

The Refutation of the Three Great Teachers

Nichiren



YOUR letter dated the nineteenth day of the seventh month reached me on the thirtieth of the same month. I will not for the moment comment on the state of worldly affairs. I simply wish to point out that, speaking of a person who goes against the Buddha's teachings, volume two of the Lotus Sutra says, "When his life comes to an end he will enter the Avīchi hell."¹

Question: Just what sort of persons are meant by the word "he"?

Answer: A little before the passage quoted above, the sutra states, "I am the only person who can rescue and protect others, but though I teach and instruct them, they do not believe or accept my teachings."² It also says, "If a person fails to have faith..." And again, "Or perhaps he will scowl with knitted brows," and "If this person... on seeing those who read, recite, copy, and uphold this sutra, should despise, hate, envy, or bear grudges against them,..."

Volume five says, "If with regard to this sutra one should harbor doubt and fail to believe, one will fall at once into the evil paths."³ And volume eight says, "If there is anyone who disparages or makes light of them [those who uphold the Lotus Sutra], saying, 'You are mere

idiots! It is useless to carry out these practices—in the end they will gain you nothing!'"⁴

The "he" in the first passage quoted above therefore refers to persons such as these. For the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai in China, these passages referred to the leaders of the ten schools of Buddhism in northern and southern China⁵ in his time. And for the Great Teacher Dengyō of Japan, it is clear that these passages referred to eminent priests of the six schools of Nara. Now I, Nichiren, declare that these passages refer to the three Great Teachers Kōbō, Jikaku, and Chishō, as well as to Sanchieh, Tao-ch'ō, and Shan-tao.

With regard to the words "he will enter the Avīchi hell" in the quotation above, volume nineteen of the Nirvana Sutra says: "If one should fall into this hell when one is alone, one's body will become eighty thousand yojanas in size so that one fills up the entire area of hell with no space left over, and the entire surface of one's body will be subjected to various types of affliction. And if a number of persons should fall into hell together, their bodies will likewise fill up the entire area without impeding one another." And the thirty-sixth volume of the same sutra states, "He will sink down into the

Avīchi hell, where the size of his body will become eighty-four thousand yojanas in total length and breadth.”

The Universal Worthy Sutra says, “Suppose one should slander the correct and equal sutras . . . As recompense for such acts of great evil, one is certain to fall into the evil paths more swiftly than a torrent of rain falling down. Inevitably one will fall into the Avīchi hell.”⁶ These passages clearly mean that such a person is destined for the Avīchi hell.

And I, Nichiren, say: The country of Japan consists of seven marches, 68 provinces,⁷ 604 districts, and over 10,000 villages. It measures 3,587 *ri* in length, and has a population of 4,589,659 persons or, by another reckoning, 4,994,828 persons. Its temples number 11,037, and its shrines number 3,132. And when the Lotus Sutra speaks of persons entering the Avīchi hell, it is referring to these very persons.

Question: Among living beings there are two types of persons, evil persons and good persons. And among the various realms into which one may be born there must be good paths and evil paths. Why then should all the people in this country of Japan uniformly be destined to “enter the Avīchi hell”?

Answer: Although the number of people is very great, the karma that they create is the same in nature. Therefore they are all alike destined for the Avīchi hell.

Objection: Among all the living beings of Japan, some are good persons and some are evil persons. The good persons observe the five precepts, the ten precepts, or the two hundred and fifty precepts, while the evil persons kill living beings, steal, or commit the five cardinal sins or the ten evil acts. Why then do you say that the karma these people create is the same?

Answer: Small acts of goodness and small acts of evil differ from one another. But if people are guilty of slander-

ing the Lotus Sutra, then good persons and evil persons, wise persons and foolish ones, are all in the same category. Therefore I say they are all uniformly destined to enter the Avīchi hell.

Question: Why do you say that the people in the country of Japan are all alike slanderers of the Lotus Sutra?

Answer: Although the people of Japan are very numerous, they do not exceed 4,589,659 persons in number. These various persons differ in social station, some being superior in rank and others inferior, but they all alike rely upon the three great teachers to be their teachers in Buddhism. They never turn elsewhere than to these three great teachers. There are, to be sure, a few others who do not rely on the three great teachers, but these all belong to the followers of Hsin-hsing,⁸ Shan-tao, or others like them.

Question: Who are these three great teachers you speak of?

Answer: The three great teachers are Kōbō, Jikaku, and Chishō.

Objection: What crime have these three great teachers committed, that you say that all the people in Japan are the ones spoken of in the sutra passage as being destined to “enter the Avīchi hell” because of them?

Answer: These three great teachers were men who abided by the Mahayana and Hinayana precepts. To all appearance they were men of wisdom, scholars of both the exoteric and esoteric teachings, who observed all the eighty thousand rules of behavior⁹ or the three thousand rules of conduct. Therefore in Japan, for over four hundred years¹⁰ all, from the sovereign on down to the common people, have looked up to them as though they were the sun and moon, have paid them honor as though they were the World-Honored One himself.

Indeed, they seemed to possess virtue loftier than Mount Sumeru, and wisdom that was deeper than the blue

sea. But there was one thing regrettable about them. When they came to compare the Lotus Sutra with the Mahāvairochana Sutra of the True Word teachings and to pass judgment on their relative worth, they declared that the Lotus Sutra represented “a doctrine of childish theory,”¹¹ that it should be ranked in second or third place,¹² that Shakyamuni, the lord of teachings, who preached it, deserved to be called one who was still “in the region of darkness,”¹³ or that its practitioners deserved to be called “thieves.”¹⁴

In the case of the four kinds of believers numbering six hundred forty thousand million nayutas, who lived in the age after the passing of the Buddha Great Adornment, though they all differed in the actions they had done and the causes they had created, they all entered the hell of incessant suffering along with their four teachers, Shore of Suffering and the others. And the countless number of followers who lived in the Latter Day of the Law of the Buddha Lion Sound King, though they differed in social standing, because they were followers of the monk Superior Intent, all alike fell into the great citadel of the Avīchi hell. The same thing will happen to the people of Japan today.

During the years of the Enryaku and Kōnin eras, the Great Teacher Dengyō admonished the priests and lay supporters of the six schools of Nara, saying: “The place that the teachers of these doctrines fall into in their next existence the disciples will likewise fall into, and the place the disciples fall into the lay supporters will likewise fall into. Should one not therefore take care to abide by the teachings clearly enunciated by the golden mouth of the Buddha? Should one not?”¹⁵

Objection: What business does a person of your social standing have in attempting to refute these three great teachers?

Answer: I would not venture to try to refute these three great teachers.

Question: Then what is the meaning of what you have just been saying?

Answer: The sutras and treatises brought from India to China and to our own country run to five thousand or seven thousand volumes, and I am roughly familiar with these works. Regarding Kōbō, Jikaku, and Chishō I will say nothing here as to what their secular faults may be, but in terms of their approach to the Buddha’s teachings I must state that they are to be counted among the foremost slanderers of the Law.

The Thus Come One has told us in his own golden words that those who speak slanderously of the Mahayana teachings will fall into hell more swiftly than an arrow in flight.¹⁶ And Kōbō, Jikaku, and their like have spoken in the same terms regarding the gravity of the sin of slandering the Law. But I will leave aside the pronouncements of such men.

If the golden words of the two Buddhas, Shakyamuni and Many Treasures, are not fallacious,¹⁷ then Kōbō, Jikaku, and Chishō must certainly be destined for the great citadel of the hell of incessant suffering. And if the tongues of the Buddhas of the ten directions who were emanations of Shakyamuni Buddha did not fall to the ground [when they testified to the truth of the Buddha’s words], then all the persons living in Japan, 4,589,659 in number, will be like the disciples and lay supporters of the monk Shore of Suffering and the other teachers whom I mentioned earlier, who fell into the Avīchi hell. There they lay facing upward on burning iron for nine hundred ten thousand million years, lay facing downward for nine hundred ten thousand million years, lay on their left side for nine hundred ten thousand million years, and lay on their right side for nine hundred ten thousand mil-

lion years. Thus they spent thirty-six hundred ten thousand million years lying on burning iron. After that they migrated out of the Avīchi hell and were born in a great hell in another land, where they spent countless hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of nayutas of years undergoing great pain and agony.

Shore of Suffering and the others were guilty only of using the Hinayana sutras to refute the provisional Mahayana teachings, and yet they had to suffer all this. How much worse, then, must be the suffering of these three great teachers, who not only use sutras that have “not yet revealed the truth”¹⁸ to try to refute the teachings that reveal the true intentions of the Buddhas of the three existences of past, present, and future,¹⁹ but who furthermore destroy the path by which all living beings may attain Buddhahood. Their guilt is so weighty and so profound that even the Buddhas of the past, the present, and the future could never finish describing it. What salvation could they ever hope for?

The fourth volume of the Lotus Sutra states, “Among the sutras I have preached, now preach, and will preach, this Lotus Sutra is the most difficult to believe and the most difficult to understand.”²⁰ And the sutra also says, “Among the sutras, it [the Lotus Sutra] holds the highest place.”²¹ And the “Medicine King” chapter gives ten similes [to illustrate how the Lotus Sutra is foremost among all the sutras].

The other sutras such as the Flower Garland Sutra, the Correct and Equal sutras, the Wisdom sutras, the Profound Secrets Sutra, the Great Cloud Sutra, the Secret Solemnity Sutra, and the Golden Light Sutra contain, among their teachings, certain passages relating to the relative superiority and inferiority of the various sutras. But these are merely saying that this particular sutra is foremost when compared with

the Hinayana sutras; or that this sutra is foremost because it reveals the truth of the Middle Way as opposed to the spiritual truth, or the truth of non-substantiality, and the worldly truth, the truth of temporary existence; or that this sutra is foremost because it contains an explanation of mudras and mantras.

But these assertions are completely different from that contained in the Lotus Sutra, which covers all sutras preached in the past, present, or future. Despite this fact, however, the Buddhist scholars and teachers of this latter age go on year after year adhering to erroneous teachings, and they have many followers.

And then, because I, Nichiren, reprove such persons for relying on sutras that will not lead them to enlightenment, they become more and more enraged and, without looking into the truth of the matter, invent great lies and thereby deceive and mislead the ruler and the people of the land, hoping to do me harm. Thus I have not only been forced to endure thousands of hardships, but have twice been condemned to exile and at one point very nearly had my head cut off. These great trials I have been subjected to surpass the sticks and staves that Bodhisattva Never Disparaging had to endure, and are more fearful than the swords and staves described in the “Encouraging Devotion” chapter.

The “Teacher of the Law” chapter states that in the latter age if there are persons who broadly expound the Lotus Sutra, they are envoys of the Thus Come One. Anyone who despises or looks down on such persons is committing a crime graver than that of treating Shakyamuni, the lord of teachings, with contempt for the space of a medium kalpa.

In Japan today there are persons guilty of crimes who, like Devadatta or the Great Arrogant Brahman, are des-

tined to fall into the hell of incessant suffering. The 4,589,659 inhabitants who fill the 3,587 *ri* of this country are just such persons. And the unspeakably grave faults committed by Devadatta and the Great Arrogant Brahman are among the lightest of light offenses in comparison to the faults of these 4,589,659 persons of this country of Japan.

Question: Why do you say that?

Answer: Because, although Devadatta and the Great Arrogant Brahman were evil men, they were not guilty of slandering the Lotus Sutra. Devadatta was numbered among the second type of persons who enter the Ganges River and the second type is *icchantikas*, or persons of incorrigible disbelief.²² But the 4,589,659 inhabitants of Japan today are all offenders who belong to the first type of persons who enter the Ganges. Therefore the three cardinal sins that Devadatta committed are in comparison light as a feather, while the grave offenses committed by the persons of Japan I have just mentioned are weighty as a huge stone.

There can be no doubt that as a result, Brahmā and Shakra have abandoned Japan, the gods Same Birth and Same Name have taken leave of its inhabitants, and the Sun Goddess and Great Bodhisattva Hachiman no longer guard and protect this country of ours.

In the *Jishō* era [1177–1181] and thereafter, five great rulers, the eighty-first, eighty-second, eighty-third, eighty-fourth, and eighty-fifth sovereigns of the imperial line,²³ contended with Yoritomo and Yoshitoki for possession of this country; the Son of Heaven and his subjects confronted one another in battle. One would suppose that the Son of Heaven would be as certain to win victory over Yoritomo and the others as a fierce hawk is to overcome a pheasant. And yet all five of these great rulers were in the end defeated. It was as though a lion

king had been defeated by a mere hare.

And not only did these rulers suffer defeat. In addition, one drowned in the depths of the sea, while others were banished to distant islands. And all this happened at a time when slandering of the Lotus Sutra was still a recent occurrence. But now it has gone on much longer and spread widely, so that the situation is far graver than it was then.

Those earlier rulers merely faced disasters within the country. But, as I sought to discover to some degree the cause for these misfortunes, I observed that, even before the official announcement came from the Mongols, there had occurred the great earthquake in the *Shōka* era and the huge comet in the *Bun'ei* era.²⁴ Regarding these as omens of foreign invasion, I two or three times submitted warnings to the authorities. But the rulers of the nation did not deign to heed my advice.

It would seem, however, that the letters of warning I submitted were in accord with the will of the Buddha. For already we have become engaged in this fierce struggle with the Mongol forces. Thus the inhabitants of this country in their present existence have one and all been plunged into the realm of asuras, and in their next existence will without doubt all enter the great citadel of the *Avīchi* hell.

Now you and I are joined together as teacher and lay supporter. But so long as you live, endowed with the sense organs and subject to the outflows of defilement,²⁵ you must follow and obey the ruler of the nation. Thus you are going to face this present perilous situation, but I can hardly hold back my tears [thinking how your personal crisis will serve to relieve you of your past offenses].

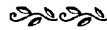
In what future existence shall we meet again? I urge you to single-mindedly aspire to be reborn in the pure land of Eagle Peak [where we will meet]. Though your body must face

the perils of the present crisis, your mind is one with the mind of the Buddha. And though in your present existence you must enter the realm of asuras, in your future existence you will without doubt dwell in the Buddha land.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The first day of the intercalary seventh month in the fourth year of Kōan [1281]

Reply to the lay priest Soya Jirō



Background

This letter dated the first day of the intercalary seventh month of 1281 was addressed to the lay priest Soya Jirō Kyōshin of Shimōsa Province.

That year the Mongol forces made their second attempt to invade Japan. In the fifth month, some forty thousand troops of the Yüan dynasty (the name of the Chinese dynasty under the Mongols) were dispatched from Korea, attacking the islands of Tsushima and Iki off the coast of Kyushu in southern Japan, and in the sixth month, some one hundred thousand more were sent from China to join them and attack Kyushu. Soya Kyōshin sent a letter dated the nineteenth day of the seventh month to the Daishonin, in which he very likely mentioned that he would be sent to the battleground. The Daishonin responds at the end of this letter: “Now you and I are joined together as teacher and lay supporter. But so long as you live, endowed with the sense organs and subject to the outflows of defilement, you must follow and obey the ruler of the nation. Thus you are going to face this present perilous situation, but I can hardly hold back my tears [thinking how your personal crisis will serve to relieve you of your past offenses].”

The Daishonin affirms that this calamity is a result of the entire nation’s slander of the correct Buddhist teaching, and the primary source of that slander was the three great teachers of

the True Word doctrines, Kōbō, Jikaku, and Chishō. Hence the title of this writing, *The Refutation of the Three Great Teachers*.

With the threat of an invasion by the Mongols looming, both the leadership of the Kamakura shogunate and the imperial court had been relying on the esoteric True Word school and the esoteric tradition of the Tendai school to bring defeat upon the enemy.

In this context, the Daishonin begins this letter by citing a passage from the Lotus Sutra that states that those who slander the sutra will fall into the Avīchi hell, or the hell of incessant suffering. Destined for that hell, he says, are the Great Teachers Kōbō, Jikaku, and Chishō, and their followers, as well as the early patriarchs of such traditions as the Pure Land teachings and their followers. Because the people of Japan believe in the doctrines of these teachers and slander the Lotus Sutra, they are likewise destined for that hell.

He then poses a question: Among the people of Japan there are both good and bad, but why does he hold them all to be guilty of the same offense that condemns them equally? In response, he explains that, while distinctions may be made between acts of relatively minor good or evil, such distinctions pale in significance when compared with the fundamental evil act of slandering the Lotus Sutra, in which all the people of Japan engage.

Kōbō, Jikaku, and Chishō led the people to slander the Lotus Sutra by preaching that among Shakyamuni's teachings the Lotus Sutra ranked second or third in relative superiority. The Daishonin points out that, though he has exposed the errors of these three teachers as well as the doctrines of other schools, the contemporary Buddhist scholars and teachers continue to adhere to their doctrines, hate him even more, and contrive to persecute

him. He says such persecution of the votary of the Lotus Sutra constitutes an offense far greater than that committed by Devadatta, and for this reason, calamities of unprecedented scale have assailed the country. In closing, the Daishonin assures Kyōshin that, even if he is plunged into battle, "the realm of asuras," he will definitely achieve Buddhahood. The Daishonin urges Kyōshin to aspire to meet him again in "the pure land of Eagle Peak."

Notes

1. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.
2. Ibid. The three other passages cited in this paragraph are from the same chapter.
3. Ibid., chap. 15.
4. Ibid., chap. 28.
5. See three schools of southern China and seven schools of northern China in Glossary.
6. The Daishonin cites this passage as a general statement, though the text refers to "a ruler, a high minister . . . an official, or some other person of this sort."
7. The "68 provinces" refers to the entire country of Japan in the Daishonin's time. This division of the country was in force from 813 until the Meiji Restoration in 1868.
8. Another name for San-chieh, the founder of the Three Stages school. See San-chieh in Glossary.
9. Rules of behavior for Mahayana bodhisattvas to observe. The figure "eighty thousand" is not to be taken literally but simply indicates a large number, innumerable, or all. For three thousand rules of conduct mentioned subsequently, see Glossary.
10. This refers to the period from 823, when Emperor Saga granted Tō-ji temple to Kōbō, to the time when this letter was written.
11. *The Precious Key to the Secret Treasury*.
12. The "second place" refers to the interpretation set forth by Shan-wu-wei and espoused by Jikaku and Chishō, that the Lotus Sutra and the Mahāvairochana are equal in terms of principle but that the latter is superior in terms of practice. The "third place" refers to the view formulated by Kōbō in *The Treatise on the Ten Stages of*

the Mind, in which he ranks the Mahāvairochana Sutra in first place, the Flower Garland Sutra in second place, and the Lotus Sutra in third place.

13. *Precious Key to the Secret Treasury*.
14. *A Comparison of Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism*.
15. *An Essay on the Protection of the Nation*.
16. The source of this statement is unknown.
17. Shakyamuni says in the second chapter of the Lotus Sutra that he "has long expounded his doctrines and now must reveal the truth," and Many Treasures lends credence to Shakyamuni's teachings in the Lotus Sutra when he proclaims in the eleventh chapter, "All that you have expounded is the truth."
18. Immeasurable Meanings Sutra.
19. The "true intentions" indicates the Lotus Sutra. The second chapter says, "Following the same fashion that the Buddhas of the three existences employ in preaching the teachings, I now will do likewise, preaching a Law that is without distinctions."
20. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10.
21. Ibid., chap. 14.
22. The Nirvana Sutra refers to the "seven types of living beings in the Ganges River." Among these, the Daishonin gives his own interpretation to the first two types. The first type are icchantikas who, according to the sutra, on entering the water, immediately drown and never emerge again; the second type are also icchantikas who are described as emerging but drowning again. The Daishonin regards the first type as icchantikas who slander the

Law and the second type as *icchantikas* who commit the five cardinal sins but do not slander the Law.

23. Emperors Antoku, Gotoba, Tsuchimikado, Juntoku, and Chūkyō, respectively. Antoku, a grandson of Taira no Kiyomori and still a child at the time, drowned in 1185 during a sea battle at Dannoura, where the Taira met their final defeat at the hands of Minamoto no Yoritomo, the first shogun of the Kamakura shogunate. In 1221, three retired emperors—Gotoba, Tsuchimikado, and Juntoku—together with the reigning emperor Chūkyō, plotted to overthrow the

military government in Kamakura. Their forces were defeated by those of the regent Hōjō Yoshitoki. Chūkyō was deposed, and the retired emperors were exiled to distant islands.

24. In 1257 a great earthquake devastated Kamakura, and in 1264 a huge comet, generally considered at that time to be an ominous sign, appeared.

25. “Outflows” refers to that which flows out from the six sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind), i.e., earthly desires or illusions.