Reply to the Honorable Kōnichi

In the second volume of the Lotus Sutra it says, "When his life comes to an end he will enter the Avīchi hell."

"Avīchi" is a word from India. In China and Japan we call it "incessant suffering." "Incessant" is expressed literally in the Chinese characters as "without respite."

Among the 136 hells, 135 have moments of respite. Though it is hot for twenty-four hours, then again there will be a spell of cool. Though it is hard to bear, then again, there are moments when it lets up.

This hell of incessant suffering is so called because one is never free of great suffering, not even for a single instant of all the hours in the day. This hell is in the depths of the earth where we dwell, over twenty thousand yojanas down in the deepest place.

It is the way in the world as well that lighter things are found above while heavier things are found below. Water sits above the earth, water being lighter than earth. Fire burns above water, fire being lighter than water. Wind blows above fire, wind being lighter than fire. The sky spreads out above the wind, the sky being lighter than wind.

Human beings too are fashioned from these four elements. Evil persons [upon death] first lose wind and fire, but retain earth and water. Thus, their heaviness when they die is a sign that they will fall into hell.

Good people first lose earth and water, but retain wind and fire. Because the heavy elements have vanished and the light remain, their bodies are light when they die, and this is a sign that they will be reborn in the realm of human or heavenly beings.

The nature of hell is such that the heaviest beings are found in the hell of incessant suffering. The hell of incessant suffering is twenty thousand yojanas in length and twenty thousand yojanas in width. The circumference in the eight directions is eighty thousand yojanas.

The body of each of those who fall into that hell becomes immense, measuring eighty thousand yojanas around. And such a thing occurs to numerous dwellers in this hell.

The bodies of these dwellers are as soft as cotton, and the flames are as fierce as the scorching that occurs in huge winds, or as the flames of burning iron. A close examination reveals that the flames that shoot out from the bodies of hell-dwellers are thirteen in number. Two flames leap out from their legs and pierce their heads. Another two flames leap out from their heads and pierce their feet. Another two flames pierce their backs and shoot out from their chests. Another two
flames penetrate their chests and leap out of their backs. Another two flames penetrate their left sides and leap out of their right. Another two flames enter their right sides and flare out from their left. And one flame twists its way down from their heads as if it were clouds enwrapping a mountain.

The bodies of the offenders in this hell burn in the flames as if they were withered grass. Whether they run east, west, south, or north, there is no refuge.

But let me set aside for the time being the matter of the other sufferings. I have merely described the single suffering of the great flames. Had the Buddha preached in detail about the enormous sufferings of this great hell, we living beings would all surely have perished simply hearing it. For this reason, it seems that the Buddha refrained from going into further details.

Every one of the 4,589,658 people in Japan today will surely fall into this hell of incessant suffering. Not a single one of them, however, thinks that he or she will do so. Similarly, before the fifth month of this fourth year of Kōan [1281], not a single one of all the people in Japan, either high or low, thought that we would experience an attack by the Mongols. In all of Japan, only Nichiren knew beforehand that such a thing would without fail occur in this land. I warned that at that time all 4,589,658 people in Japan, without exception, would be subjected to attack from another country.

That great suffering, I said, will be comparable to what happens when one puts water in a cooking pan, adds plenty of tiny fish, and cooks them over a fire of withered brushwood.

Because I said this, people cried out, “He’s dangerous, he’s cursed! Beat him, force him out of his dwelling, exile him, kill him, take away the farmlands of his believers, strip them of their wealth, and confiscate their estates!”

But because in the fifth month of this year they were subjected to an attack by the great Mongol kingdom, they were amazed and confounded. As a result, it is likely that there are now those who think, “Perhaps it is just as he said.”

It is unpleasant to people, and so they wish to avoid mentioning it. But because it is a fact they cannot help acknowledging, “What Nichiren said was right! It was right!” Some may feel, however, that my words are no more than those of the transformed body of an evil spirit.

Some while ago, at the time of the Jōkyū Disturbance, completely uninformed court ladies such as Lady Kyō-no-nii met in the presence of the Retired Emperor of Oki and encouraged him to start a war. Yoshitoki defeated him, however, and panic reigned over them.

Look carefully at the present situation. Is it due to the offense of slandering the Lotus Sutra, or is it punishment for belittling Nichiren, or is it because of the great offense of slandering the three treasures—the Law, the Buddha, and the Order? Because of these circumstances, in their present existence these people have brought the world of asuras into this country, and in their next existence they will without fail fall into the hell of incessant suffering.

This situation is also solely the result of the offense of slander against the Lotus Sutra by the three great teachers, Kōbō, Jikaku, and Chishō. It is due too to the offense of slander of the one vehicle by those such as Bodhidharma, Shan-tao, and the Precepts priests. And to the offense of the rulers, who have supported these people. There is also the great offense of not only ignoring, but actually harming one who, out of compassion for his country and concern for his homeland, has for some time now been considering the matter and warning people about this situation.
Let us look at some similar cases from the past. King Fu-ch’a of the state of Wu refused to heed the warnings of his minister Wu Tzu-hsi, and was destroyed by King Kou-chien of the state of Yu-eh. King Chou of the Yin dynasty had nothing but contempt for the warnings of Pi Kan, and he lost his kingdom to King Wu of Chou.

Thus what karmic bond is responsible for the lay nun Könichi believing in the Lotus Sutra? Could it be because your son, the deceased Yashirō, who believed in it, recommended it to you? Since the good fortune gained from this will no doubt bear fruit, it is certain that you will meet and be together with your son in the pure land of Eagle Peak.

A man named Wu-lung slandered the Lotus Sutra and fell into hell. But because his son, who was named I-lung, copied the Lotus Sutra as an offering, his father became a Buddha. Also, though King Wonderful Adornment was an evil king, led to the way by his sons Pure Storehouse and Pure Eye, he became the Buddha Sal Tree King.

The reason in each of these instances was that the flesh of the child is the flesh of the mother; and the bones of the mother are the bones of the child. When the pine flourishes, the cypress is overjoyed; when grasses wither, orchids weep.

Even insentient plants and trees share as one a friend’s joys and sorrows. How much truer must this be of the bond between parent and child? You carried your child in your womb for nine months, then gave birth and devoted years to nourishing him. You thought that in your old age you would be supported by him and then be mourned by him. But what in heaven’s name is to be done about the inexpressible sorrow you feel when instead you must mourn him, about your anguished heart when you wonder what has become of your child?

Out of its love for its child, the pheasant plunged into flames to save it. Out of her love for her child, the poor woman drowned in the Ganges River. The pheasant is now Bodhisattva Maitreya. The woman who drowned in the Ganges has been reborn as the great heavenly king Brahmā.

How much more will this be so of the present-day Honorable Könichi, who out of her great affection for her son became a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra? Without fail both mother and child will go to the pure land of Eagle Peak. At that time, how joyful your meeting will be! How joyful it will be!

Respectfully,
Nichiren

The eighth day of the eighth month
Reply to the Honorable Könichi

Background
Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter at Minobu on the eighth day of the eighth month in 1281 to the lay nun Könichi, who was living in Amatsu in Awa Province. In the fifth month of that year the Mongols had launched a massive military attack against Japan.

Explaining that those who slander the Lotus Sutra fall into the hell of incessant suffering, the Daishonin says that this is the reason their nation is experiencing the great suffering of attack from the Mongol Empire. He alone, he says, has been warning people about
this situation. The Daishoin praises Kōnichi for believing in the Lotus Sutra in such circumstances, and her deceased son, Yashirō, for having recommended faith in the Lotus to her. Referring to Buddhist stories about the depth of the bond between parent and child, the Daishoin assures Kōnichi that she will meet her son again in the pure land of Eagle Peak.

Notes

1. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.
2. Kyō-no-nii was a title of Fujiwara no Kenshi (1155–1219), who had served as nurse to Emperor Gotoba and later exercised influence in political affairs. The Retired Emperor of Oki refers to the Retired Emperor Gotoba. He attempted to overthrow the Kamakura government but was defeated by Hōjō Yoshitoki, the leader of the government. Gotoba was exiled to the island of Oki, and came to be called the Retired Emperor of Oki.
3. Fu-ch’a (d. 473 B.C.E.) was the twenty-fifth ruler of the state of Wu. His father was killed by Kou-chien, king of the state of Yüeh, and Fu-ch’a took revenge two years later by defeating him in battle. Kou-chien proposed a peaceful settlement with Fu-ch’a, but really planned to attack the state of Wu again. Wu Tzu-hsü, a loyal minister of Fu-ch’a, discovered the plot and urged the king to kill Kou-chien, but the king refused to listen. Instead, he compelled Wu Tzu-hsü to commit suicide in 485 B.C.E.
4. The story of Wu-lung and his son, I-lung, appears in The Lotus Sutra and Its Traditions, an eighth-century Chinese work. Both were skilled calligraphers. Wu-lung, a believer in Taoism, hated Buddhism, and on his deathbed enjoined his son never to transcribe any Buddhist scriptures, especially the Lotus Sutra. According to this work, Wu-lung fell into hell after his death. Later, at the command of his lord, I-lung, much against his will, transcribed only the sixty-four Chinese characters that constitute the titles of the eight volumes of the Lotus Sutra, having refused to copy the entire sutra. Nonetheless, his father was saved from the agonies of hell.
5. A similar passage is found in the fu, or rhyme-prose, poem entitled “Lament on Death” by Lu Chi (261–303) contained in chapter eight of the Wen-hsüan, or Literary Anthology.
6. This anecdote is found in Examples of Aspiration for Awakening, a collection of Buddhist tales compiled by the poet and critic Kamo no Chômei (d. 1216).
7. This story appears in the Nirvana Sutra. Driven out by the master of an inn, the poor woman, together with her baby, set off to journey to another land. She came to the Ganges River, clasped her child in her arms, and began to cross. Even though the current was very swift and powerful, she firmly held on to her child, but in the end both mother and child were drowned. As a result, the Nirvana Sutra says, this woman was reborn in the Brahma heaven.