On a Disciple’s Attitude in Court

To the lay priest Toki

N. Nichiren

I HAVE received word that both sides in the case are to be summoned for questioning today. Since this seems to be what each of you has longed for, it must be as if you had encountered the udumbara flower, which blossoms and bears fruit only once every three thousand years. And your state of mind must be similar to that of Tung-fang Shuo,¹ who obtained peaches from the garden of the Queen Mother of the West three times in nine thousand years.

What other happiness can you experience in life that could compare to this? Setting aside for the moment the question of outcome, should you not, above all, take this as an opportunity to dispel your worry and gloom?

I know you are well aware of these matters, but sometimes there is a need to apply the whip even to a fine horse. Today, once you have presented yourself and made your appearance in court, you must avoid using rough language with your colleagues, even if you are friendly with them. When both sides in the case have been summoned before the court, and while the magistrate is reading out the petition of complaint, whatever happens, unless you are questioned by the magistrate, you must not allow a word to pass your lips. Even if your opponents in the case should happen to utter abuse, and even if it is something that concerns yourselves, the first and second time this happens I believe you should act as if you have heard nothing. If they continue yet a third time, without either changing your expression or using rude language, you must answer with gentle words. You must make sure to say something like “All of us are colleagues at the same place. We bear you absolutely no personal grudges.” And I think you should carefully warn those in your retinue and your servants to avoid provoking fights. It is difficult to explain things such as these adequately in a letter, so I hope that you will give the matter the utmost consideration.

Though I was hesitant to speak out about such things, I offer these humble words in order that the three elements of the Buddha’s sutra, its votary, and the lay supporters may work together to attain one thing.

With my deep respect,

N. Nichiren

The ninth day of the fifth month

For all three of you
ON A DISCIPLE’S ATTITUDE IN COURT

Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter to Toki Jōnin and two other followers whose identity has not been determined. And because the Daishonin wrote only “the ninth day of the fifth month” at the end of the letter, the year of writing is unclear. The three followers had been summoned by the Kamakura shogunate’s judicial body for questioning. The Daishonin advises them to take this as “an opportunity to dispel your worry and gloom,” and presents several points for them to keep in mind when they appear in court. He makes specific suggestions, such as that they refrain from using rude language even if they are verbally abused by their opponents, and that they caution the men accompanying them not to provoke fights. Finally, he explains that he offers such advice in order that “the three elements of the Buddha’s sutra, its votary, and the lay supporters may work together to attain one thing.”

Note

1. Tung-fang Shuo (154–93 B.C.E.) was an official in the government of Emperor Wu of the Former Han dynasty in China and an eminent literary figure. The Queen Mother of the West is a legendary goddess. The peach trees in her garden were said to bear fruit every three thousand years, and this fruit was believed to ensure long life.