

Letter to the Mother of Oto



To the mother of Oto

NOW here is a woman who, longing for the Lotus Sutra, will surely become a Buddha. As I have explained many times, I am, alas, very lax in writing. And you have been most kind to the priests in my following. I do not know how to thank you. What impresses me most is that, though you are a woman, you made the journey all the way here. There are reasons why I have been exiled to this distant place. But in view of the great devotion you have shown in journeying here, I can only express my gratitude.

The Thus Come One Shakyamuni had many disciples, and among them were ten men known as the ten major disciples. Among these, the Venerable Maudgalyāyana was known as being foremost in transcendental powers. In less time than it takes to snap a single hair in two, he could journey throughout the four quarters of the world, wherever the sun and moon may shine. And if you ask why he could do this, it was because in a previous existence he had journeyed a distance of a thousand miles in order to hear the preaching of the Buddhist teachings.

Likewise, the man named Chang-an,

a disciple of the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai, traveled ten thousand miles in order to listen to the Lotus Sutra, the Great Teacher Dengyō went three thousand miles so he could learn the practice of concentration and insight, and the Tripitaka Master Hsüan-tsang journeyed two hundred thousand miles to find the Wisdom sutras.

The great distances these persons traveled are indicative of their devotion. But these were all men, and those are the deeds of ones who were manifestations of Buddhas or bodhisattvas. You, however, are a woman, though it is hard to tell whether you are such a manifestation or an ordinary mortal. How great must be the good karma you accumulated in past lives! There are, to be sure, tales of women in past times who, pursuing a man they loved, journeyed a thousand miles, or changed into a stone, a tree, a bird, or a serpent.¹

Nichiren

The third day of the eleventh month

To the mother of Oto

How is your daughter, Oto, these days? I am certain that her devoted service to the Lotus Sutra will bring her long life and good fortune.

Background

The recipient of this letter lived in Kamakura with her daughter, Oto, and had lost her husband some years before. She is regarded as the same woman known by her Buddhist name, Sage Nichimyō. The letter is thought to have been written in Sado, though the year is uncertain. In *The Supremacy of the Law*, written in 1275, Nichiren Daishonin says, "Though no one else came to visit me, you, a woman, not only sent me various offerings, but personally made the journey to see me [in

Sado]. It was almost too amazing to be true. In addition, you have now called on me here in Minobu" (I, p. 614). In the present letter, he cites examples of Buddhist figures who traveled great distances to seek Buddhism. He regards these men as "manifestations of Buddhas or bodhisattvas," and praises the mother of Oto, who, though an ordinary woman, made the difficult and perilous journey to Sado Island to see him. He suggests that she herself may be one such manifestation.

Note

1. The serpent suggests the Japanese legend of Anchin and Kiyohime, set at Dōjō-ji temple in what is now Wakayama Prefecture. Anchin, a monk on pilgrimage, found lodging at the home of a village steward. The steward's daughter, Kiyohime, fell in love with him and begged him to stay. He left, however, promising to see her on his return journey. When she found out that Anchin had returned, but avoided her, she ran after him, her rage transforming her

into a serpent. Finding him hiding under a heavy bell in the temple, she piled wood around it and set it afire, burning Anchin to death, and then drowned herself in the sea. The priest of the temple later said he had dreamed that the two visited him and he copied the Lotus Sutra for them. The sources of the other references to women traveling or transforming themselves are unknown.