

A Sage Perceives the Three Existences of Life



A SAGE is one who fully understands the three existences of life—past, present, and future. The Three Sovereigns, Five Emperors, and Three Sages referred to in Confucianism understood only the present; they knew neither the past nor the future. Brahmanists, however, were able to see eighty thousand kalpas into the past and future, thus in a small way resembling sages. People of the two vehicles of the Hinayana teachings were aware of the causes and effects in the past and future. Hence they were superior to the Brahmanists.

The Hinayana bodhisattvas spent three asamkhya kalpas in the past in their practice, and the bodhisattvas of the connecting teaching spent as many kalpas as there are dust particles in the past in their practice. The bodhisattvas of the specific teaching knew myriad kotis of kalpas in the past in each of the stages of their practice.

In the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni Buddha spoke about a time major world system dust particle kalpas in the past. This teaching surpassed all the previous ones of his preaching life. Moreover, in the essential teaching of the sutra, the Buddha spoke about numberless major world system dust particle kalpas ago and about all the kalpas that have ever passed, and he made proclamations

concerning matters countless kalpas in the future.

From the above it is clear that a thorough understanding of both the past and the future is intrinsic to the nature of a sage. Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, accurately predicted the near future, saying that he would enter nirvana in three months' time. Can there then be any doubt about his prediction for the distant future, that in the last five-hundred-year period after his passing, the Lotus Sutra would spread abroad widely? With such perception one can see the distant future by looking at what is close at hand. One can infer what will be from what exists in the present. This is the meaning of [the passage from the Lotus Sutra that says, "This reality consists of] the appearance . . . and their consistency from beginning to end."¹

Who should be acknowledged as the votary of the Lotus Sutra in the last five-hundred-year period? I do not yet trust my own wisdom, but because the rebellion and invasion that I predicted have occurred, I must trust it.² I do not say this just to impress others.

My disciples, know this! I am the votary of the Lotus Sutra. Since I follow in the footsteps of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, those who despise and slander me will have their heads broken into seven pieces,³ while those

who believe in me will amass good fortune as high as Mount Calm and Bright.

Question: Why is it that those who slander you have not yet had their heads broken into seven pieces?

Answer: Since ancient times, of all those who slandered sages other than the Buddha, only one or two have suffered punishment by having their heads broken. The offense of defaming Nichiren is not by any means limited to only one or two persons. The entire populace of Japan has in fact [slandered Nichiren and] had their heads broken. What else do you think caused the great earthquake of the Shoka era and the huge comet of the Bun'ei era?⁴

I, Nichiren, am the foremost sage in all Jambudvipa. Nevertheless, from the ruler on down to the common people, all have despised and slandered me, attacked me with swords and staves,⁵ and even exiled me.⁶ That is why Brahma, Shakra, the gods of the sun and moon,

and the four heavenly kings have incited a neighboring country to punish our land. This is clearly described in the Great Collection and Benevolent Kings sutras, the Nirvana Sutra, and the Lotus Sutra. Even if ten thousand prayers were to be offered, if the people fail to heed me, it is certain that this country will experience what happened on Iki and Tsushima.⁷

My disciples, you should believe what I say and watch what happens. These things do not occur because I myself am respectable, but because the power of the Lotus Sutra is supreme. If I praise myself, people will think that I am boastful, but if I humble myself, they will despise the sutra. The taller the pine tree, the longer the wisteria vine hanging from it. The deeper the source, the longer the stream. How fortunate, how joyful! In this impure land, I alone enjoy happiness and delight.



Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter at Minobu in the first year of Kenji (1275) and sent it to Toki Jonin, a leading retainer of Lord Chiba, the constable of Shimosa Province, and Toki, one of the Daishonin's staunchest disciples, was a lay priest who lived in Shimosa, to the northeast of Kamakura. He received dozens of letters from the Daishonin, many of which contain significant revelations about teachings. Among these, *The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind* is perhaps best known.

In the present letter, the Daishonin defines a sage as one who fully under-

stands the three existences of life—past, present, and future—and uses the term to indicate a Buddha. A Buddha's prophecy is based on the strict law of causality, which governs life throughout eternity. By observing the present with an understanding of causality, the past and the future may be known. Nichiren Daishonin declares himself to be the foremost sage in the entire world on the basis of the fulfillment of the prediction of rebellion at home and foreign invasion he made in *On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land*.

Notes

1. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2. “Their consistency from beginning to end” is the last of the ten factors. It implies that, by observing the beginning, or the first factor, that is, “appearance,” one with the Buddha wisdom can discern the ultimate outcome, that is, the end, or “manifest effect.”

2. This refers to the prophecies of internal strife and foreign invasion that were fulfilled in 1272 when Hojo Tokisuke revolted against his younger half brother, Regent Hojo Tokimune, and in 1274 when the Mongols attacked Japan.

3. Reference is to a verse in the “Dharani” chapter of the Lotus Sutra that reads, “If there are those who . . . trouble and disrupt the preachers of the Law, their heads will split into seven pieces like the

branches of the arjaka tree.”

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

5. References are to the Komatsubara Persecution in 1264, when the Daishonin and his followers were attacked by the steward Tojo Kagenobu, and to the Tatsunokuchi Persecution in 1271, when the Daishonin was struck in the face with the scroll of the fifth volume of the Lotus Sutra and shortly afterward was almost beheaded.

6. The exiles to the Izu Peninsula and Sado Island.

7. Iki and Tsushima are islands off the coast of Kyushu that were overrun by the Mongol invaders.