

Letter to Konichi-bo



IN the ninth month of the eighth year of Bun'ei (1271), with the cyclical sign *kanoto-hitsuji*, I incurred the wrath of the ruler and was exiled to Sado Island in the northern sea. While I was living in Kamakura in Sagami Province, I somehow longed for Awa Province since it was my birthplace. Yet though it was my homeland, something about how the people there felt toward me made it difficult for me to be on close terms with them, so I rarely went to visit. I then incurred the ruler's wrath and was to have been put to death, but instead I was banished from Sagami Province. It seemed that, unless some extraordinary circumstance arose, I could never return to Kamakura, and therefore I would never again be able to visit my parents' grave. As I continued to think this way, I was consumed by remorse, feeling that I wanted to go there immediately. Why, I lamented, before finding myself in this predicament, had I not crossed seas and traversed mountains every day, or even once a month, to visit my parents' grave and to inquire after my teacher?¹

Su Wu² was a prisoner in the land of the northern barbarians for nineteen years. He envied the wild geese as they migrated southward. Nakamaro³ went to T'ang China as an emissary of the Japanese imperial court. Years passed, but he was not permitted to return

home. Whenever he saw the moon rise in the east, he would console himself by thinking that the same moon must be shining above Mount Mikasa in his native province, and that the people there must even at that moment be gazing at it. Just when I was overwhelmed by similar longings for home, I received from my native province the robe you had entrusted to someone journeying to Sado Island. Su Wu's life was sustained by a mere letter tied to a wild goose's leg, while I actually received such clothing! His joy could not possibly have compared to mine.

The people of this country are continually deceived by the Nembutsu priests, or by the Zen, Precepts, or True Word schools. Thus they act outwardly as though they revere the Lotus Sutra, but in their hearts they do not believe in it. Therefore, although I, Nichiren, do not think that I have done anything particularly wrong, when I assert the supremacy of the Lotus Sutra, they all resent me, just as the people in the Latter Day of the Law of Awesome Sound King Buddha detested Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. From the ruler on down to the common people, they hate even to hear my name, let alone see me. Therefore, although I was innocent of any wrongdoing, once exiled, I could not possibly be pardoned. To compound matters, I had

denounced the Nembutsu—which the people of Japan revere more deeply than their own parents and more highly than the sun and moon—as the karmic cause that leads to the hell of incessant suffering. I attacked the Zen school as the invention of the heavenly devil, and the True Word school as an evil doctrine that will ruin the nation, and insisted that the temples of the Nembutsu, Zen, and Precepts priests be burned down and the Nembutsu priests and the others beheaded.⁴ I even went so far as to assert that the two deceased lay priests of Saimyo-ji and Gokuraku-ji⁵ had fallen into the Avichi hell. Such was the gravity of my offense. Having voiced such serious charges to all people both high and low, whether or not I had spoken in error, I could never again rise in the world. Even worse, I repeated such things morning and evening and discussed them day and night. I also sternly informed Hei no Saemon and several hundred officers that, no matter what punishment I might incur, I would not stop declaring these matters. Therefore, even if a boulder at the bottom of the sea that requires a thousand men to move it were to surface by itself, or if rain falling from the sky should fail to reach the ground, I, Nichiren, still could not possibly have returned to Kamakura.

Nevertheless, I encouraged myself by thinking that, if the teaching of the Lotus Sutra was indeed true and the gods of the sun and moon did not abandon me, I might yet have an opportunity to return to Kamakura and also visit my parents' grave. Climbing a high mountain, I would shout these words aloud: "What has happened to Brahma and Shakra, the gods of the sun and moon, and the four heavenly kings? Are the Sun Goddess and Great Bodhisattva Hachiman no longer in this country? Do you intend to break the vow you made in the Buddha's

presence and forsake the votary of the Lotus Sutra? Even if you fail to protect me, Nichiren, I will have no regrets, no matter what may happen to me. Remember, however, what you each solemnly pledged in the presence of Shakyamuni Buddha, the Thus Come One Many Treasures, and the Buddhas of the ten directions. If you abandon me instead of protecting me now, will you not be making a great lie out of the Lotus Sutra, in which the Buddha declared that he was 'honestly discarding expedient means'?⁶ You will have deceived all the Buddhas throughout the ten directions and the three existences, an offense even graver than Devadatta's outrageous falsehoods and surpassing the Venerable Kokalika's deceptions. Now you may be respected as the great heavenly king Brahma and live atop the world of form, or be revered as the Thousand-Eyed God⁷ and dwell on the summit of Mount Sumeru. But if you discard me, Nichiren, you will become firewood to feed the flames of the Avichi hell and be forever confined to the great citadel of the hell of incessant suffering. If you dread committing this offense, make haste to manifest some sign to the country, so that I may be permitted to return home!"

Then in the eleventh month, shortly after my arrest on the twelfth day of the ninth month, a rebellion broke out,⁸ and on the eleventh day of the second month in the following year, several generals, mighty protectors of Japan, were killed in vain. It was clear that heaven had meted out its punishment. Apparently shaken by this incident, the authorities released my imprisoned disciples.

However, I myself had not yet been pardoned, so I continued to berate the heavenly gods all the more vehemently. Then one day, a white-headed crow flew overhead. I remembered that Prince Tan of Yen had been released

when a horned horse and a white-headed crow appeared,⁹ and recalled the Honorable Nichizo's poem:¹⁰ "Even the mountain crow's head / Has turned white. / The time for my return home / Must have come at last." I was now convinced that I would be released before long. As I had expected, the government issued a letter of pardon on the fourteenth day of the second month in the eleventh year of Bun'ei (1274), which arrived in the province of Sado on the eighth day of the third month.

I left my dwelling on Sado on the thirteenth day of that month and reached a harbor called Maura, where I spent the night of the fourteenth. I should have arrived at the harbor of Teradomari in Echigo Province on the fifteenth, but a gale blew us off course. Fortunately, however, we reached Kashiwazaki after two days at sea, and on the following day I arrived at the provincial seat of Echigo. Thus, after traveling for twelve days,¹¹ I finally returned to Kamakura on the twenty-sixth day of the third month. On the eighth day of the fourth month, I had a meeting with Hei no Saemon. As I had expected all along, my warnings went unheeded. I now had remonstrated with the authorities three times¹² for the sole purpose of saving Japan from ruin. Mindful that one whose warnings are thrice ignored should retire to a mountain forest, I left Kamakura on the twelfth day of the fifth month.

I had thought at the time of going to my birthplace to visit my parents' grave once again. However, it is the tradition of both Buddhism and the secular world that one should return home in glory. Had I returned without any honor worthy of mention, would I not have proven myself an unfilial son? Since I had already overcome such hardships and returned to Kamakura, I thought that I might still have some

opportunity to return home in triumph, and that I would wait until such time to visit my parents' grave. Because I feel deeply about this, I have yet to travel to my birthplace. But I am so homesick that, whenever someone says that the wind is blowing from the east, I rush out from my dwelling to feel it, and if told that clouds are gathering in the eastern sky, I stand in the garden to watch them. With such emotions, my heart warms even toward those with whom I would not otherwise be friendly if they are from my native province. Imagine, then, how beside myself I was with joy at receiving your letter! I opened and read it in great haste, only to learn that you had lost your son Yashiro the year before last, on the eighth day of the sixth month. I had been delighted before I opened your letter, but then, upon reading the sad news, I wished I had not opened it in such a hurry. I felt regret such as Urashima Taro¹³ must have experienced upon opening his casket.

I never think lightly of the people from my native province, nor do I cease to care about what happens to them, even if they have caused me sorrow or treated me cruelly. Your son especially impressed me. His handsome appearance made him stand out among the others, and in his thoughtful air there seemed no trace of obstinacy. I first saw him during one of my lectures on the Lotus Sutra. Since there were many strangers present, I did not venture to address him. When my lecture ended, my listeners left, as did your son. But later he sent a messenger to convey the following.

"I am from a place called Amatsu in the province of Awa. Since my childhood, I have always greatly admired your commitment. My mother also thinks highly of you. I may be speaking with undue familiarity, but there is something about which I would like to seek your counsel in confidence. I

know that I should wait until after we have met several times and are better acquainted. However, as I am in the service of a certain warrior, I have little time to spare, and the matter is quite urgent. Therefore, while fully aware that I am being rude, I ask that you grant me an interview.”

In this way he courteously asked to consult with me. Moreover, since he was from my native province, I told him he need not stand on ceremony and invited him to my residence. He talked in great detail about the past and future. Then he said, “Impermanence is the way of the world. No one knows when one may die. Moreover, I am committed to a warrior’s service, and I cannot avoid a challenge to combat that I have lately received. I dread what may await me in my next life. I beg you to help me.”

I gave him instruction, quoting sutra passages. Then he lamented, saying, “I can do nothing for my deceased father. But should I die before my widowed mother, I would be an unfilial son. Should anything happen to me, please ask your disciples to look after her.”

In this respectful way, he made his request. Am I right in assuming that nothing untoward happened on that occasion, but that some later incident brought about his death?

No one born human, whether high or low, is free from sorrow and distress. Yet troubles vary according to the time and differ according to the person. In this respect, sorrow is like illness: no matter what malady one may suffer from, as it worsens, one will think that no illness could be more dreadful. There is the sorrow of parting from one’s lord, of parting from one’s parent, and of parting from one’s spouse, none of which can be lightly dismissed. However, one may serve another lord or find comfort in remarrying. But the sorrow of having lost one’s parent or child seems only to deepen as the days

and months pass. Yet although death is sorrowful in any case, for parents to die and their children to live on is the natural course of things. It is pitiful indeed for an aged mother to be preceded by her child in death! You may well feel resentment toward both the gods and Buddhas. Why did they not take you instead of your son? Why did they let you survive only to be tormented by such grief? It must be truly hard to bear.

Even animals of little intelligence cannot endure parting from their young. The golden pheasant at Bamboo Grove Monastery plunged into flames and died to save her eggs.¹⁴ The stag at Deer Park offered himself to the king to save a female deer’s unborn fawn.¹⁵ How much greater, then, must be the love of human beings toward their children! Thus, Wang Ling’s mother smashed her own skull [and died to prevent her son from becoming a traitor],¹⁶ and the consort of Emperor Shen Yao had her abdomen cut open for the sake of an unborn prince.¹⁷ When you consider these examples, I am certain you must feel that you would not hesitate to plunge into fire yourself, or to smash your own skull if, by so doing, you could see your son again. In imagining your grief, my tears do not cease.

You say in your letter, “Because my son killed others, I would like you to tell me into what kind of place he may be reborn.” A needle sinks in water, and rain will not remain in the sky. Those who kill even an ant are destined for hell, and those who merely cut up dead bodies cannot avoid the evil paths. All the more must those who kill human beings suffer. However, even a large rock can float on the sea when carried aboard a boat. Does not water extinguish even a great fire? Even a small error will destine one to the evil paths if one does not repent of it. Yet even a grave offense can be

eradicated if one repents of it sincerely.

The monk who stole millet was reborn as an ox for five hundred consecutive lifetimes.¹⁸ The person who plucked water oats fell into the three evil paths.¹⁹ The more than eighty thousand kings, including Rama, Bhadrīka, Viruchin, Nahusha, Karttika, Vishakha, Moonlight, Light Bright, Sunlight, Craving, and Holder of Many People, all ascended the throne by killing their fathers. As they did not encounter good teachers, their offenses could not be eradicated, and in the end they fell into the Avichi hell.

There was a wicked man named Ajita in the city of Varanasi. Falling in love with his own mother, he killed his father and made her his wife. When the arhat who had been his father's teacher admonished him, he killed that arhat, and when his mother took another man for a husband, he killed her as well. Thus he committed three of the five cardinal sins. Shunned by his neighbors, he had no place to turn. He went to Jetavana Monastery and sought admittance to the Buddhist Order, but the monks refused. The evil in his heart grew more rampant than ever, and he burned down many of the monks' quarters. Finally, however, he met Shakyamuni Buddha and was permitted to become a monk.

There was a kingdom called Small Stones in northern India that was ruled by a king named Dragon Seal.²⁰ Dragon Seal killed his father, but later, horrified by his own act, he abandoned his country, presented himself before the Buddha, and repented of his wrongdoing; thereupon the Buddha forgave him.

King Ajatashatru was by nature given to the three poisons of greed, anger, and foolishness, and was forever committing one or another of the ten evil acts. Moreover, he killed his father, attempted to take his mother's life, and, accepting Devadatta as his teacher,

massacred countless disciples of the Buddha. Due to his accumulated misdeeds, on the fifteenth day of the second month, the very day on which the Buddha was to pass away, virulent boils broke out in seven areas of his royal body, a sign that he would fall into the hell of incessant suffering. The king writhed in agony; he felt as if he were being burned by a great fire or doused with boiling water. His six ministers presented themselves before him and insisted that he should summon the six non-Buddhist teachers in order to have them cure his foul sores. This was just like the people of Japan today relying on leaders of the Zen and Precepts schools or priests of the Nembutsu and True Word schools as good teachers in the belief that the prayers of these men can subdue the Mongols and help them in their next life. Moreover, Devadatta, whom Ajatashatru regarded as his primary teacher, had memorized the sixty thousand non-Buddhist and eighty thousand Buddhist teachings. His understanding of both secular and religious matters was as clear as the sun, the moon, or a burnished mirror. He was like the learned priests of the Tendai school in the world today who are well versed in both the exoteric and esoteric teachings and know all the Buddhist scriptures by heart. Because Ajatashatru was guided by such teachers and ministers, he had refused to become the Buddha's follower. And for this reason, his country, Magadha, had suffered repeated disturbances in the heavens and frequent strange occurrences on earth, being ravaged incessantly by violent winds, severe droughts, famines, and epidemics. Moreover, it had been attacked by another country. Now, in addition to all this, he was suffering from virulent boils, and his kingdom appeared to be on the verge of ruin. It was at this time that he suddenly presented himself before the Buddha and repented of his

evildoings, and his offenses were eradicated.

In any event, even though the parents may be evildoers, if the child is good, the parents' offenses will be forgiven. On the other hand, although the child may be an evildoer, if the parents are good persons, their child's faults will be pardoned. Hence, even though your late son, Yashiro, committed evil, if you, the mother who gave birth to him, grieve for him and offer prayers for him day and night in the presence of Shakyamuni Buddha, how could he not be saved? Moreover, because he believed in the Lotus Sutra, he may have become the one who will lead his parents to Buddhahood.

Those who believe in the Lotus Sutra should beware of and guard themselves against the sutra's enemies. You should know that the Nembutsu priests, the observers of the precepts, and the teachers of the True Word school—in fact, all those who refuse to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo—are

the enemies of the Lotus Sutra, no matter how earnestly they may read it. If you do not know your enemies, you will be deceived by them. How I wish I could see you personally and talk to you about these matters in detail! Whenever you see Sammi-bo or Sado-ko,²¹ who will visit your area from Minobu, have them read this letter to you. Place it in the custody of Myoe-bo.²² Those lacking in wisdom would no doubt mock me or criticize this letter as mere clever words on my part. Or they would compare me with others, saying, "This priest could never match the Great Teacher Kobo, or surpass the Great Teacher Jikaku!" Consider those who say such things ignorant.

Nichiren

Written in the third month in the second year of Kenji (1276), cyclical sign *hinoe-ne*, in the mountains of Hakiri Village in the Nambu area of Kai Province.



Background

This letter was written at Minobu in the third month, 1276, to Konichi-bo, a widow who lived in Amatsu in Awa Province. Her son, Yashiro, had converted earlier to Nichiren Daishonin's teachings, and through him she became a believer herself. While the Daishonin was in exile on Sado Island, she sent him robes and other articles, and continued to make offerings to him after he took up residence at Mount Minobu. She enjoyed the Daishonin's trust and received several works from him, including *The Actions of the Votary of the Lotus Sutra*.

Some time after Konichi-bo's conversion, Yashiro died. This letter is the Daishonin's reply to a letter from

Konichi-bo expressing anxiety about the fact that her son, as a samurai, had killed others and asking what would happen to him in his next life. The Daishonin encouraged her by saying that Yashiro had converted her to faith in the Lotus Sutra and could be saved from the evil paths by her strong faith. Konichi-bo overcame her deep sorrow and remained a sincere believer in the Daishonin's Buddhism throughout her life.

The former part of this letter chronicles some of the events that took place from the ninth month of 1271, when Nichiren Daishonin incurred the wrath of the government and was exiled to Sado Island, to 1274, when he was

pardoned and retired to Mount Mino-bu. In the next part, the Daishonin who received the news of the death of Yashiro recounts his impressions of Yashiro and expresses his deep sympathy for Konichi-bo's sorrow. In reply to her question, the Daishonin explains the Buddhist principle of repentance, or acknowledging and striving to correct one's past misdeeds, by saying, "Even a small error will destine one to the evil paths if one does not repent of it. Yet even a grave offense can be

eradicated if one repents of it sincerely." Citing the examples of Ajita and King Ajatashatru, he assures Konichi-bo that even though her late son, Yashiro, committed evil, if she offers prayers for him day and night in the presence of Shakyamuni Buddha, he can be saved, and that he will surely lead his parents to Buddhahood. Finally, the Daishonin cautions her against being influenced by any enemy of the Lotus Sutra.

Notes

1. "My teacher" refers to Dozen-bo, a priest of Seicho-ji temple in Tojo Village of Awa Province, where Nichiren Daishonin entered the priesthood.

2. Su Wu (140–60 B.C.E.) was a minister of Emperor Wu of the Former Han dynasty. Su Wu was imprisoned, and Wu's successor, Emperor Chao, demanded Su Wu's release, but his captors falsely reported that he had already died. Then one of Su Wu's retainers instructed the emperor's envoy to tell the barbarians that the emperor had shot down a wild goose near the capital and that tied to its leg was a letter reporting that Su Wu was still alive. Finally, the chief of the northern barbarians was compelled to return Su Wu nineteen years after his imprisonment.

3. Nakamaro is Abe no Nakamaro (698–770), who went to T'ang China as a student envoy in 717 and later served Emperor Hsüan-tsung as an official of the Chinese government. In 733 he attempted to return to Japan, but the T'ang authorities would not permit it. Later, he obtained permission to return, but his ship was wrecked and he was forced to go back to China, where he died.

4. This radical statement was made intentionally as a strict warning of the negative results arising from devotion to the provisional teachings. Nichiren Daishonin did not mean it literally, but challengingly urged the authorities to hold an open debate between him and the leading priests of the four major schools mentioned here. He insisted it was irrational for the authorities to reject his teachings and punish him without listening to both parties. Accord-

ing to his *On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land*, beheading the priests of the provisional teachings actually means to cease making offerings to them.

5. The two deceased lay priests refer to Hojo Tokiyori, the fifth regent of the Kamakura shogunate, and Hojo Shigetoki, the cosigner to the regent Tokiyori.

6. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

7. The Thousand-Eyed God is another name for Shakra. He is called the "Thousand-Eyed God" because, according to the Miscellaneous Agama Sutra, in a previous life as a human being, his vast wisdom had enabled him to discern and fathom a thousand meanings in a single moment.

8. Exactly what incident this refers to is uncertain. "The eleventh day of the second month in the following year" mentioned subsequently refers to a conspiracy to seize power on the part of Hojo Tokisuke, an elder half brother of the regent Hojo Tokimune. His plot was uncovered, and two of his conspirators, Nagoe Tokiaki and Nagoe Noritoki, were put to death on that day. Tokisuke himself was beheaded on the fifteenth. In the wake of the attempted coup, five generals were beheaded for having executed as a conspirator someone who proved to have been innocent. This rift in the ruling clan bore out the Daishonin's earlier prophecy of internal strife.

9. This story appears in *Records of the Historian* and its commentaries. When Prince Tan was taken hostage in Ch'in, he begged the king there to release him. But the king said to him, "When a crow's head becomes white and a horse grows horns, I will permit you to return home." When

Tan looked up toward heaven, grieving over his misfortune, a white-headed crow appeared, and when he flung himself to the ground lamenting, a horse grew horns. As a result, the king had no choice but to let him go home as he had promised.

10. Nichizo (n.d.) was a priest of the Dharma Characteristics school who lived at Ryumon-ji temple in the province of Yamato. This poem is not actually Nichizo's but appears in the fourth imperial anthology *The Later Collection of Gleanings* as the work of the priest Zoki. It seems possible, therefore, that the Daishonin simply wrote the abbreviated form, "the Honorable Zo," in the original manuscript, which no longer exists, and this was mistakenly transcribed as "the Honorable Nichizo."

11. That is, twelve days between the day of the Daishonin's departure from Sado and the day of his arrival in Kamakura.

12. The first time was when the Daishonin submitted *On Establishing the Correct Teaching* to Hojo Tokiyori in 1260. The second was when he admonished Hei no Saemon shortly before the Tatsunokuchi Persecution in 1271, and the third was the meeting mentioned here.

13. A figure from Japanese legend. After spending three pleasure-filled years in the sea god's palace at the bottom of the sea, Urashima returned home to find that he could not recognize anyone in his native village. In his bewilderment and distress, he opened a casket he had been given in the sea god's palace but instructed never to open. A cloud of white smoke rushed out, his hair turned completely white, and in an instant he became a withered old man. In reality, several hundred years had passed while he was away.

14. Source unknown. A similar story appears in *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*. According to this version, when a fire broke out near Kushinagara in India, a pheasant immersed its wing feathers in a stream and used them to extinguish the flames, sacrificing its life in order to save its relatives. Bamboo Grove Monastery was built by King Bimbisara as an offering to Shakyamuni Buddha, which was one of the major centers of Shakyamuni's preaching. It

was located in Rajagriha, India.

15. This story appears in *The Record of the Western Regions* and elsewhere. The lord of Varanasi once hunted and killed many deer on a certain tract of land. The deer king implored him to stop the unnecessary killing and promised that each day he himself would give the lord the number of deer he required. One day, he was faced with the necessity of sending a pregnant deer. Rather than sacrifice her and her unborn fawn, the deer king went to the lord to offer his own flesh instead. The lord was so moved by the deer king's compassion that he gave him the land; therefore, it came to be called Deer Park.

16. Wang Ling (d. 177 B.C.E.) was a high official of the Former Han dynasty. When Hsiang Yü of Ch'u fought with Liu Pang of Han for the rulership of China, he captured Wang Ling's mother in order to force Wang Ling to become his ally. However, the mother secretly sent a messenger to her son urging him to maintain his loyalty to Liu Pang. Then she killed herself.

17. Consort of Emperor Shen Yao was a wife of Li Yüan (565-635), the founder of the T'ang dynasty, who was later called Shen Yao. She is said to have been skilled in writing and painting and endowed with both wit and beauty.

18. This story appears in *The Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra."* Gavampati, one of Shakyamuni's disciples, stole millet in a past existence and, because of this, was reborn as an ox for five hundred consecutive lifetimes. It is said that, even after he became the Buddha's disciple, he behaved in an ox-like manner.

19. Source unknown.

20. This story appears in the Nirvana Sutra, but little is known about the country Small Stones or its king Dragon Seal.

21. Sado-ko was another name for Niko (1253-1314), one of the Daishonin's six senior priest-disciples.

22. Myoe-bo was one of the Daishonin's followers who had some connection with Seicho-ji temple. Little else is known about him.

