

The Story of Ohashi no Taro



I HAVE received from you one unlined robe,¹ one horseload of salt, and five *sho* of oil.

A robe serves to protect one from the cold and the heat, to hide one's nakedness, and to adorn one's body. The "Medicine King" chapter in the seventh volume of the Lotus Sutra says, "... like a robe to one who is naked," meaning that one [who obtains the Lotus Sutra] will be as delighted as a naked person who obtains a robe. Among the Buddha's successors was a man named Shanavasa who was born wearing a robe.² This came about because, in a previous existence, he had donated a robe for the sake of Buddhism. And so it says in the Lotus Sutra, "Gentleness and patience are the robe."³

In the K'un-lun Mountains, there are no stones, and in the Mount Minobu area, no salt. In a place where there are no stones, stones are more valuable than gems, and in a place where there is no salt, salt is more precious than rice. The gems for the ruler of a nation are his ministers of the left and right,⁴ and these ministers of the left and right are called the "salt and vinegar"⁵ of his rule. If we have no miso or salt, it is hard for us to get along from day to day, and if the nation is without ministers of the left and right, it will be poorly governed.

As for oil, the Nirvana Sutra states,

"In the wind, there is no oil, and in oil, there is no wind."⁶ Oil is the best medicine for curing illnesses caused by the wind.

I do not know how to thank you for the sincerity you have shown in sending these articles. In the end, it must be an indication of the depth of the late Nanjo's faith⁷ in the Lotus Sutra. This is what is meant by the statement that a minister proclaims his ruler's sincerity, while a son proclaims his father's sincerity. The late Nanjo is probably delighted.

In Tsukushi there was a daimyo called Ohashi no Taro.⁸ Having incurred the wrath of the shogun, he was imprisoned in a cell dug into the hillside at Yui Beach in Kamakura for a period of twelve years.

When he met with the humiliation of being arrested and was leaving his domain in Tsukushi, he said to his wife: "Having taken up bow and arrow to serve my lord, I do not lament the fact that I have incurred his wrath. It is unbearably hard for me to part from you, since we have been so close to each other from the time of our childhood, but I will say no more of that either. I regret, however, that we have had no children, neither a boy nor a girl. Now you tell me that you are pregnant, and I feel very sorry that I cannot be here to see whether the

child is a girl or a boy. It also distresses me to think that when the child grows up it will have no one to call father. I wish there were something I could do about this, but I am powerless." So saying, he took his leave.

The days and months passed, and in time his wife was safely delivered of a male child. When the boy was seven years old, she entrusted him to a temple in the mountains, but the other boys who were his companions in the temple made fun of him because he had no father. He returned to his home and asked his mother to tell him about his father, but she was unable to speak and could do nothing but weep.

The boy pressed her, saying: "Without the sky, the rain does not fall, and without the earth, plants do not grow. Even if I have a mother, without a father, I cannot become an adult. Why do you hide my father's whereabouts from me?"

Confronted in this manner, his mother replied, "I did not speak of the matter because you were too young. But this is what happened."

Weeping copiously, the boy said, "Did my father leave no mementos behind when he went away?"

"There are these," said his mother, producing a written record of the Ohashi family ancestors and a letter that the father himself had written for the child who was still in his mother's womb. Seeing these, the boy longed more than ever for his father, and, unable to do anything but weep, said, "What am I to do now?"

"When your father set out from here," his mother replied, "he was accompanied by many retainers, but because he had incurred his lord's wrath, they all deserted him and went away. Now there is not even anyone to send me word whether or not he is still alive."

At this the boy flung himself face down and wept harder than ever, and would not stop even when chided.

The mother said, "The reason I sent you to the mountain temple was so that you could repay your filial obligation to your father. You must offer flowers before the Buddha, read a scroll of the sutra, and in this way fulfill your duty!"

The boy accordingly hurried back to the temple and abandoned all thought of returning home. Day and night he read the Lotus Sutra, so that in time he not only became able to read it with ease, but even committed it to memory.

When the boy turned twelve, he did not enter the priesthood, but, binding up his hair, somehow managed to run away from Tsukushi and journey to the city of Kamakura. There he went to pay his respects at Hachiman Shrine.⁹ After bowing low in reverence, he said: "Great Bodhisattva Hachiman was the sixteenth ruler of Japan, and his true identity is Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, who preached the Lotus Sutra in the pure land of Eagle Peak.¹⁰ In order to grant the wishes of the people, he has manifested himself as the deity Hachiman, and I pray that he will now grant my wish as well. I wish to know whether my father is alive or dead."

At the hour of the dog (7:00-9:00 P.M.), he began reciting the Lotus Sutra, and continued reciting through the hour of the tiger (3:00-5:00 A.M.). His beautiful childlike voice echoed through the sacred hall of the shrine and struck the hearts of all those who heard it, so that those who had come to pay their respects all forgot to take their leave, but instead gathered around like a crowd at a marketplace. When they looked to see who was reciting, they discovered it was neither a priest nor a woman, but a young boy.

Just then, Lady Kyo-no-nii¹¹ arrived to visit the shrine. She had come in secret to avoid the eyes of others, but because the recitation of the sacred scripture was even more beautiful than

usual, she remained listening until the end. Then she returned home, but she was so reluctant to depart that she left an attendant behind. When she reported to the shogun what had happened, he had the boy summoned, and set him to reciting the Lotus Sutra in the image hall attached to his residence.

The following day the boy was once more ordered to recite the sutra for the shogun. Just then, some people began making a commotion at the western gate of the shogun's palace. When it was asked what was the cause, a harsh voice shouted, "Today the prisoner is to be beheaded!"

The boy, hearing this, thought to himself, "Alas, I do not suppose that my father is still alive, but when I hear this talk of cutting off someone's head, I cannot help feeling as though it were some personal sorrow of my own!" And tears sprang to his eyes.

The shogun, observing this and thinking it strange, said, "Come, boy, tell me the truth—who are you?" The boy thereupon revealed all the events of the past just as they had happened. The greater and lesser lords who were in attendance, and the ladies hidden behind their curtains of bamboo, all wet their sleeves with tears.

The shogun then summoned Kajiwara¹² and said, "Have the prisoner Ohashi no Taro brought here!" But Kajiwara replied, "He has just now been led away to Yui Beach to have his head cut off. The execution is probably taking place right now." At this the boy, though in the presence of the shogun, could not help collapsing in tears.

"Kajiwara!" said the shogun. "Go in person as fast as you can, and if the execution has not yet taken place, bring the prisoner back with you!"

Kajiwara raced off as fast as he could to Yui Beach. Even before he reached the spot, he began shouting for the execution to be stayed. He arrived just

as the executioner had drawn his sword in preparation to strike.

Kajiwara brought Ohashi no Taro, still bound with ropes, to the palace and seated him in the courtyard. The shogun ordered the prisoner to be handed over to the boy. The boy rushed down into the courtyard and untied the ropes. Ohashi no Taro, not realizing that this was his own son, could not understand why he had been spared.

The shogun summoned the boy to his side again and presented him with various gifts. He not only released Ohashi no Taro into the boy's custody, but also restored the family domains.

The shogun said: "From times past I have heard various reports regarding the power of the Lotus Sutra, and on two instances I myself have received proof of that power. The first was when my father was beheaded by the grand minister of state and lay priest.¹³ My misery was beyond expression. I did not know what god or Buddha to appeal to, but the nun Myoho¹⁴ of Mount Izu taught me to read the Lotus Sutra. When I had read it a thousand times, the priest Mongaku¹⁵ of Takao brought me the head of my late father and showed it to me. After that I was able not only to revenge myself on my father's enemies, but to become the military commander of all the warriors in Japan. All of this was due solely to the power of the Lotus Sutra.

"The second instance is this strange event today in which this boy saved his father. I personally looked upon this Ohashi no Taro as a thoroughly despicable fellow. I would have had him beheaded even if it had meant violating an imperial decree. So great was my hatred for him that I kept him shut up in a cell dug into the side of a hill for no less than twelve years. And yet this strange event has occurred. The power of the Lotus Sutra is marvelous indeed! As a commander of warriors I have

piled up a great many sins, yet I put my faith in the Lotus Sutra, and so I believe I will be spared punishment.” He spoke these words with tears in his eyes.

Now when I consider the sincere offerings that you have sent, I think that, though the late Nanjo undoubtedly loved you dearly as his son, he probably never imagined that you would in this way, through the Lotus Sutra, discharge your filial duty to him. Even if he was perhaps guilty of some offense, no matter where he may be now, your filial devotion will surely be recognized even by King Yama and the heavenly kings Brahma and Shakra. And how could Shakyamuni Buddha and the Lotus Sutra ever abandon him? Your devotion is no less than that of that young boy who untied his father’s bonds. I am writing this through my tears.

As to an impending Mongol attack, I have not received any word. When I mention this subject, people say that the priest Nichiren rejoices whenever he hears that the Mongols will attack our country, but this is unwarranted. Because I suggested that such a thing would happen, I have been attacked as a foe or an enemy by people everywhere. But since it is expounded in the sutras, the Mongols are sure to come.

No matter what I may say, it is beyond my power to prevent it.

I was guilty of no fault and wanted simply to save my country. And yet not only was my advice ignored, but I was struck in the face with the fifth scroll of the Lotus Sutra.¹⁶ Brahma and Shakra witnessed what happened, and Great Bodhisattva Hachiman of Kamakura likewise looked on. But now we live in an age when advice is never heeded, and so I have retired to live here among the mountains.

Under the circumstances, I feel great pity for you and the others, but there is little I can do to help. Nevertheless, I pray day and night to the Lotus Sutra. Spare no effort in offering up prayers with firm faith. It is not that my resolve [to save you] is weak. Rather, it depends on the strength of each person’s faith.

And yet in the end I fear that all the persons of high rank in Japan will surely be taken prisoner. How pitiful, how wretched!

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The twenty-fourth day of the intercalary third month

Reply to Nanjo



Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter at Minobu in the intercalary third month of the second year of Kenji (1276) to Nanjo Tokimitsu, who lived in Ueno Village, in Suruga Province. Tokimitsu’s father, Nanjo Hyoe Shichiro, had died in 1265, when he was seven years old and his mother was pregnant with his younger brother Shichiro Goro. The death of his father and, later, of his elder

brother forced Tokimitsu to assume the duties of steward of Ueno while still in his teens. He was about eighteen years old when he received this letter from the Daishonin.

In the seventh month of 1274, immediately after the Daishonin moved to Minobu, Tokimitsu went to visit him there. Inspired by that reunion—Tokimitsu had met the Daishonin with his

parents when he was a child—Tokimitsu devoted himself to faith with renewed earnestness. In the first month of 1275, Nikko Shonin visited the grave of the late Nanjo Hyoe Shichiro on the Daishonin's behalf; from that time on, Tokimitsu looked up to Nikko Shonin and aided him in propagating the Daishonin's teachings.

About thirty letters addressed to Nanjo Tokimitsu are extant, no less than eleven written during the two-year period between the Daishonin's retirement to Minobu and the date of the present letter.

At the beginning of this letter, the Daishonin praises the sincerity of Tokimitsu's faith, expressed in his offerings of an unlined robe, salt, and oil. Such earnestness, the Daishonin says, ultimately reflects Tokimitsu's father's deep faith in the Lotus Sutra and surely must please the late Nanjo.

Next, the Daishonin recounts the tale of Ohashi no Taro and his son. According to this story, Ohashi no

Taro, a general in Kyushu and a descendant of the Taira clan, for some reason incurred the wrath of the shogun Minamoto no Yoritomo and was imprisoned in a cell in Kamakura for twelve years. When his son recited the Lotus Sutra out of his ardent desire to save his father, the power of his recitation moved Yoritomo to stay the execution of and pardon his father. With this story, the Daishonin points out that Tokimitsu's sincere attitude in faith is the highest expression of filial devotion and will surely save his late father.

In conclusion, the Daishonin addresses the rumor of an impending attack by the Mongols. He emphasizes that only firm faith in the Lotus Sutra will serve as protection against this threat, and points out that, although he himself earnestly wishes to safeguard his followers, the crucial thing is whether or not they develop their own faith.

Notes

1. An unlined robe for summer use, made of hemp cloth or crinkled silk.

2. Shanavasa was a wealthy man in Rajagriha, Magadha, who was the fourth of the twenty-four successors of Shakyamuni Buddha. This story is mentioned in *A History of the Buddha's Successors*.

3. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10. This chapter says that those who wish to expound the Lotus Sutra after the Thus Come One's extinction should "enter the Thus Come One's room, put on the Thus Come One's robe, sit in the Thus Come One's seat . . ." The "Thus Come One's robe," says the sutra, "is the mind that is gentle and forbearing." A gentle and forbearing mind enables one to uphold the Law while bearing insult with grace and equanimity. The sutra also says, "Gentleness and patience are the robe."

4. Officials of the imperial court, responsible for protecting the imperial family and helping the emperor administer the affairs of state.

5. The two essential ingredients whose proper balance makes a delicious soup. In China and Japan the correct balance of salt and vinegar was compared to the proper functioning of ministers in aiding the ruler to govern well.

6. The Nirvana Sutra recommends the consumption of oil for treatment of illnesses caused by "the wind's poison," that is, by foul air. Headaches, pain in the limbs, and difficulty in moving were regarded as representative of such illnesses.

7. Nanjo is Nanjo Hyoe Shichiro (d. 1265), a lay follower of Nichiren Daishonin and the father of Nanjo Tokimitsu.

8. Ohashi no Taro is not mentioned in any documents or records of the Kamakura period (1185–1333). A tradition dating from the Edo period (1600–1867) identifies him with Taira no Michisada, a general who lived toward the end of the Heian period (794–1185). Michisada was the son of Taira no Sadayoshi, governor of Higo of Kyushu and a close associate of Grand Minister of

State Taira no Kiyomori. With the ruin of the Taira clan, however, his family gradually lost its influence in the Kyushu area. Tradition has it that in 1186 Michisada incurred the wrath of Minamoto no Yoritomo, the founder and first shogun of the Kamakura shogunate, and was imprisoned; he was rescued, however, as a result of his son's strong faith in the Lotus Sutra. Tsukushi is an ancient name for the southern island of Kyushu.

9. A shrine to the god Hachiman built by Minamoto no Yoritomo in Kamakura in the latter part of the twelfth century.

10. Around the beginning of the Heian period (794–1185), Hachiman was given the title Great Bodhisattva by the imperial court, an early instance of the fusion of Buddhist and Shinto elements. Also during the Heian period, Hachiman became identified with the legendary Emperor Ojin, the sixteenth ruler of Japan. "His true identity is Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings" refers to the widespread belief that indigenous Japanese deities were local manifestations of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. The Daishonin here associates Hachiman with Shakyamuni Buddha.

11. Kyo-no-nii was a title of Fujiwara no Kenshi (1155–1229), who had served as nurse to Emperor Gotoba and later exercised influence in political affairs. Judging from the context, however, Kyo-no-nii refers not to Fujiwara no Kenshi but to Hojo Masako (1157–1225), the wife of the shogun, Minamoto no Yoritomo.

12. Kajiwaru Kagetoki (d. 1200), a general of the Minamoto clan who had gained the confidence of the shogun, Yoritomo.

13. The grand minister of state and lay priest refers to Taira no Kiyomori, the leader of the Taira clan. By winning two brief campaigns in 1156 and 1160, he gained absolute military power; Minamoto no Yoritomo's father, Yoshitomo, was killed fighting against Kiyomori in the first of these campaigns.

14. Myoho (n.d.) was a nun who lived at the shrine of the deity of Mount Izu in Izu Province and practiced the Lotus Sutra. *The Mirror of Eastern Japan*, a historical account of the Kamakura shogunate, mentions a nun of Mount Izu who gave religious instruction to the shogun's wife, Hojo Masako.

15. Mongaku (n.d.) was a priest of the True Word school who initiated the rebuilding of Jingo-ji temple on Mount Takao in Kyoto. In an attempt to raise funds for this purpose, he insisted that the Retired Emperor Goshirakawa provide financial assistance. His unruly requests caused him to be exiled to Izu, where he met and won the respect of Minamoto no Yoritomo. The account of Mongaku urging Yoritomo to raise an army against the Taira by showing him his deceased father's head appears in *The Tale of the Heike*.

16. On the twelfth day of the ninth month of 1271, Hei no Saemon went with his men to arrest the Daishonin at Matsubagayatsu. There Hei no Saemon's retainer Sho-bo struck the Daishonin in the face with the fifth scroll of the Lotus Sutra. The "Encouraging Devotion" chapter that is included in this scroll speaks of ignorant people who will attack the votaries of the Lotus Sutra "with swords and staves."

