

The Fourteen Slanders



I HAVE received the string of coins, the horseload of polished rice, and the white quilted robe that you sent.

Rolling fields and hills stretch out more than a hundred *ri* to the south of this mountain. To the north stands lofty Mount Minobu, which joins the peaks of Shirane farther off. Jutting sharply up to the west is a mountain called Shichimen. Snow remains on these peaks throughout the year. There is not a single dwelling other than mine in the area. My only visitors, infrequent as they are, are the monkeys that come swinging through the treetops. And to my regret, even they do not stay for long, but scurry back to where they came from. To the east run the surging waters of the Fuji River, which resemble the flowing sands of the desert. It is extraordinary indeed that you send letters from time to time to this place whose inaccessibility makes visitors rare.

I learned that the scholar Nichigen of Jisso-ji temple, upon becoming my disciple, was driven out by his own disciples and lay supporters, and had to give up his lands, so that he now has no place of his own.¹ Nonetheless, he still visits me and takes care of my disciples. What devotion to the way! Nichigen is a sage. He is already unrivaled as a scholar of Buddhism. Yet he has discarded all desire for fame and fortune and become my disciple. He

has lived the words in the sutra, “We care nothing for our bodies or lives.”² To repay his debts of gratitude to the Buddha, he has taught you and your fellow believers and inspired you, Matsuno, to make these sincere offerings. All this is truly amazing.

The Buddha stated that, in the latter age, monks and nuns with the hearts of dogs would be as numerous as the sands of the Ganges.³ By this he meant that the priests and nuns of that day would be attached to fame and fortune. Because they wear robes and surplices, they look like ordinary priests and nuns. But in their hearts they wield a sword of distorted views, hastening here and there among their patrons and filling them with countless lies so as to keep them away from other priests or nuns. Thus they strive to keep their patrons to themselves and prevent other priests or nuns from coming near them, like a dog who goes to a house to be fed, but growls and springs to attack the moment another dog approaches. Each and every one of these priests and nuns is certain to fall into the evil paths. Being the scholar that he is, Nichigen must have read this passage in the sutra. His unusual consideration and frequent visits to me and my disciples are deeply appreciated.

In your letter you write: “Since I took faith in this sutra [the Lotus],

I have continued to recite the ten factors of life⁴ and the verse section of the 'Life Span' chapter and chant the daimoku without the slightest neglect. But how great is the difference between the blessings received when a sage chants the daimoku and the blessings received when we chant it?" To reply, one is in no way superior to the other. The gold that a fool possesses is no different from the gold that a wise man possesses; a fire made by a fool is the same as a fire made by a wise man.

However, there is a difference if one chants the daimoku while acting against the intent of this sutra. There are various stages in the practice of this sutra [and various forms of slander exist accordingly]. Let me sum them up by quoting from volume five of *The Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra"*: "In defining the types of evil, *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra* states briefly, 'Expound among the wise but not among the foolish.'⁵ One scholar⁶ enumerates the types of evil as follows: 'I will first list the evil causes and then their effects. There are fourteen evil causes: (1) arrogance, (2) negligence, (3) wrong views of the self, (4) shallow understanding, (5) attachment to earthly desires, (6) not understanding, (7) not believing, (8) scowling with knitted brows, (9) harboring doubts, (10) slandering, (11) despising, (12) hating, (13) envying, and (14) bearing grudges.' Since these fourteen slanders apply equally to priesthood and laity, you must be on guard against them.

Bodhisattva Never Disparaging of old said that all people have the Buddha nature and that, if they embrace the Lotus Sutra, they will never fail to attain Buddhahood. He further stated that to slight a person is to slight the Buddha himself. Thus, his practice was to revere all people. He revered even those who did not embrace the Lotus Sutra because they too had the Buddha

nature and might someday believe in the sutra. Therefore, it is all the more natural to revere those priests and lay people who do embrace the sutra.

The fourth volume of the Lotus Sutra states, "If there were a person who spoke only one word to curse the lay persons or monks or nuns who uphold and preach the Lotus Sutra, then his offense would be even graver than that of cursing Shakyamuni Buddha to his face for the space of a kalpa."⁷ The Lotus Sutra also states, "[If anyone sees a person who accepts and upholds this sutra and tries to expose the faults or evils of that person], whether what he speaks is true or not, [he will in his present existence be afflicted with white leprosy]."⁸ Take these teachings to heart, and always remember that believers in the Lotus Sutra should absolutely be the last to abuse one another. All those who keep faith in the Lotus Sutra are most certainly Buddhas, and one who slanders a Buddha commits a grave offense.

When one chants the daimoku bearing in mind that there are no distinctions among those who embrace the Lotus Sutra, then the blessings one gains will be equal to those of Shakyamuni Buddha. A commentary states, "Both the beings and the environment of the Avichi hell exist entirely within the life of the highest sage [Buddha], and what is more, the life and the environment of Vairochana [Buddha] never transcend the lives of common mortals."⁹ You can surmise the significance of the fourteen slanders in the light of the above quotations.

That you have asked me about Buddhism shows that you are sincerely concerned about your next life. The Lotus Sutra states, "... a person capable of listening to this Law, such a person is likewise rare."¹⁰ Unless the Buddha's true envoy appears in this world, who is there that can expound this sutra in exact accord with the

Buddha's intent? Moreover, it would appear that there are very few who ask about the meaning of the sutra in an effort to resolve their doubts and thus believe in it wholeheartedly. No matter how humble a person may be, if his wisdom is the least bit greater than yours, you should ask him about the meaning of the sutra. But the people in this evil age are so arrogant, prejudiced, and attached to fame and profit that they are afraid that, should they become the disciple of a humble person or try to learn something from him, they will be looked down upon by others. They never rid themselves of this wrong attitude, so they seem to be destined for the evil paths.

The "Teacher of the Law" chapter says: "If you make offerings to the priest who preaches the Lotus Sutra and hear its teachings for even a moment, then you will experience joy because you can gain even greater benefits than one who offers immeasurable treasures to the Buddha for the space of eighty million kalpas."¹¹

Even an ignorant person can obtain blessings by serving someone who expounds the Lotus Sutra. No matter if he is a demon or an animal, if someone proclaims even a single verse or phrase of the Lotus Sutra, you must respect him as you would the Buddha. This is what the sutra means when it says, "You should rise and greet him from afar, showing him the same respect you would a Buddha."¹² You should respect one another as Shakyamuni and Many Treasures did at the ceremony¹³ in the "Treasure Tower" chapter.

The priest Sammi-bo may be lowly, but since he can explain even a little about the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, you should respect him as you would the Buddha and ask him about the teachings. "Rely on the Law and not upon persons"¹⁴ should be your guideline.

Long, long ago there was a young

man who lived in the Snow Mountains and was called the boy Snow Mountains. He gathered ferns and nuts to keep himself alive, made garments of deerskin to clothe his body, and quietly practiced the way. As he observed the world with care and attention, the boy came to understand that nothing is permanent and everything changes, and that all that is born is destined to die. This weary world is as fleeting as a flash of lightning, as the morning dew that vanishes in the sun, as a lamp easily blown out by the wind, or as the fragile leaves of the plantain that are so easily broken.

No one can escape this transience. In the end, all must take the journey to the Yellow Springs, the land of darkness. When we imagine the trip to the other world, we sense utter darkness. There is no light from the sun, the moon, or the stars; not even so much as fire to light a torch. And along that dark road, there is no one to keep you company. When one is in the saha world, one is surrounded by parents and relatives, brothers and sisters, wife and children, and retainers. Fathers may show lofty compassion, and mothers, profound loving sympathy. Husband and wife may be as faithful as two shrimps of the sea who vow to share the same hole and never to part throughout life. Yet, though they push their pillows side by side and sport together under quilts embroidered with mandarin ducks,¹⁵ they can never be together on that journey to the land of darkness. As you travel alone in complete darkness, who will come to encourage you?

Though old and young alike dwell in the realm of uncertainty, it is part of the natural order for the elderly to die first and the young to remain awhile. Thus, even as we grieve, we can find some cause for consolation. Sometimes, however, it is the old who remain and the young who die first.

No one feels more bitter resentment than a young child who dies before its parents. No one despairs more deeply than parents who see their child precede them in death. People live in this fleeting world where all is uncertainty and impermanence, yet day and night they think only of how much wealth they can amass in this life. From dawn to dusk they concentrate on worldly affairs, and neither revere the Buddha nor take faith in the Law. They ignore Buddhist practice and lack wisdom, idling their days away. And when they die and are brought before the court of Yama, the lord of hell, what can they carry as provisions on the long journey through the threefold world? What can they use as a boat or raft to ferry themselves across the sea of the sufferings of birth and death to the Land of Actual Reward or the Buddha Land of Tranquil Light? When one is deluded, it is as if one were dreaming. And when one is enlightened, it is as if one had awakened. Thinking in this way, the boy Snow Mountains resolved to awake from the dream of the transient world and to seek the reality of enlightenment. So he secluded himself in the mountains and devoted himself to deep meditation, sweeping away the dust of delusion and befuddlement in his single-minded pursuit of the Buddhist teaching.

The god Shakra looked down from heaven and observed the boy Snow Mountains in the distance. He thought to himself: "Though the baby fish are many, there are few that grow up to be big fish. Though the flowers of the mango tree are many, there are few that turn into fruit. In like manner, there are many people who set their hearts on enlightenment, but only a few who continue their practice and in fact attain the true way. The aspiration for enlightenment in common mortals is often hindered by evil influences and easily swayed by circumstances; though many

warriors don armor, few go without fear into battle. Let me go test this young man's resolve." So saying, Shakra disguised himself as a demon and appeared at the boy's side.

At that time the Buddha had not yet made his appearance in the world, and although the boy Snow Mountains had sought everywhere for the scriptures of the great vehicle, he had been unable to learn anything of them. Just then he heard a faint voice saying, "All is changeable, nothing is constant. This is the law of birth and death." The young man looked all around in amazement, but there was no one in sight except a demon standing nearby. In appearance it was fierce and horrible; the hairs on its head were like flames and the teeth in its mouth like swords, and its eyes were fixed on the boy in a furious glare. When the boy saw this, he was not frightened in the least. He was so overjoyed at the opportunity to hear something of the Buddhist teaching that he did not even question it. He was like a calf separated from its mother that hears the faint sound of her lowing. "Who spoke that verse? There must be more!" he thought, and once more he searched all around, but still there was no one to be seen. He wondered if it could have been the demon who recited the verse. But on second thought that seemed impossible, since the demon must have been born a demon in retribution for some past evil act. The verse was certainly a teaching of the Buddha, and he was sure it could never have come from the mouth of a lowly demon. But as there was no one else about, he asked, "Was it you who preached that verse?" "Don't speak to me!" replied the demon. "I've had nothing to eat for days. I'm starved, exhausted, and almost out of my mind. I may have uttered some sort of nonsense, but in my dazed condition I don't even know what it was."

"For me to hear only the first half of

that verse," said the boy, "is like seeing only half the moon, or obtaining half a jewel. It must have been you who spoke, so I beg you to teach me the remaining half." The demon replied sarcastically, "You are already enlightened, so you should feel no resentment even if you don't hear the rest of the verse. I'm dying of starvation, and I haven't the strength to speak—say no more to me!"

"Could you teach me if you had something to eat?" asked the boy. "If I had something to eat, I might be able to," said the demon. Elated, the boy said, "Well, then, what kind of food would you like?" But the demon replied, "Ask no more. You will certainly be horrified when you hear what I eat. Besides, you would never be able to provide it."

Yet the boy Snow Mountains was insistent. "If you will just tell me what you want, I will try to find it for you." The demon answered, "I eat only the tender flesh of humans and drink only their warm blood. I fly through the air far and wide in search of food, but people are protected by the Buddhas and gods so that, even though I want to kill them, I cannot. I can only kill and eat those whom the Buddhas and gods have forsaken."

Hearing this, the boy decided to give his own body for the sake of the Law, so that he could hear the entire verse.

"Your food is right here," he said. "You need look no further. Since I am still alive, my flesh is warm, and since my flesh is warm, so is my blood. Therefore, I ask you to teach me the rest of the verse, and in exchange, I will offer you my body." Then the demon grew furious and demanded, "Who could believe your words? After I've taught you the rest of the verse, who can I call on as a witness to make you keep your promise?"

The boy replied: "This body of

mine is mortal. But if I give my life for the Law, casting away this vile body that would otherwise die in vain, in the next life I will certainly attain enlightenment and become a Buddha. I will receive a pure and wonderful body. It will be like throwing away a piece of crockery and receiving a precious vessel in exchange. I call upon Brahma and Shakra, the four heavenly kings, and the Buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions to be my witnesses. I could not possibly deceive you in their presence."

The demon, somewhat mollified, said, "If what you say is true, I will teach you the rest of the verse." The boy Snow Mountains was overjoyed and, removing his deerskin garment, spread it out for the demon to sit upon while he preached. Then the boy knelt, bowed his head to the ground, and placed his palms together in reverence, saying, "All I ask is that you teach me the rest of the verse." Thus he offered his heartfelt respect to the demon. The demon, seating himself on the deerskin, then recited these words: "Extinguishing the cycle of birth and death, one enters the joy of nirvana." The moment he heard this, the boy was filled with joy, and his reverence for the verse was boundless. Resolving to remember it in his next life, he repeated it over and over again, and etched it deep in his heart.

He pondered, thinking to himself, "I rejoice that this verse [though it came from a demon] is no different from the teaching of the Buddha, but at the same time I lament that I alone have heard it and that I am unable to transmit it to others." Thereupon he inscribed the stanza on stones, cliff faces, and the trees along the road, and he prayed that those who might later pass by would see it, understand its meaning, and finally enter the true way. This done, he climbed a tall tree and threw himself down before the

demon. But before he had reached the ground, the demon quickly resumed his original form as Shakra, caught the boy, and gently placed him on a level spot. Bowing before him reverently, the god said, "In order to test you, I held back the Thus Come One's sacred teaching for a time, causing anguish in the heart of a bodhisattva. I hope you will forgive my fault and save me without fail in my next life."

Then all of the heavenly beings gathered around to praise the boy Snow Mountains, saying, "Excellent, excellent! He is truly a bodhisattva." By casting away his body to listen to half a verse, the bodhisattva was able to eradicate offenses calling for twelve kalpas of the sufferings of birth and death [and attain enlightenment]. His story is referred to in the Nirvana Sutra.

In the past the boy Snow Mountains was willing to give his life to hear but half a verse. How much more thankful should we be to hear a chapter or even a volume of the Lotus Sutra! How can we ever repay such a blessing? Indeed, if you care about your next life, you should make this bodhisattva your example. Even though you may be too poor to offer anything of value, if the opportunity should arise to give up your life to acquire the Law of the Buddha, you should offer your life in order to pursue the Law.

This body of ours in the end will become nothing more than the soil of the hills and fields. Therefore, it is useless to begrudge your life, for though you may wish to, you cannot cling to it forever. Even people who live a long time rarely live beyond the age of one hundred. And all the events of a lifetime are like the dream one dreams in a brief nap. Though a person may have been fortunate enough to be born as a human being and may have even entered the priesthood, if he fails to study the Buddha's teaching and to refute its slanderers but simply spends his time in

idleness and chatter, then he is no better than an animal dressed in priestly robes. He may call himself a priest and earn his livelihood as such, but in no way does he deserve to be regarded as a true priest. He is nothing but a thief who has stolen the title of priest. How shameful and frightening!

In the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra there is a passage that reads, "We care nothing for our bodies or lives but are anxious only for the unsurpassed way."¹⁶ Another passage from the essential teaching reads, "Not hesitating even if it costs them their lives."¹⁷ The Nirvana Sutra states, "One's body is insignificant while the Law is supreme. One should give one's life in order to propagate the Law."¹⁸ Thus both the theoretical and essential teachings of the Lotus Sutra, as well as the Nirvana Sutra, all indicate that one should give one's life to spread the Law. It is a grave offense to go against these admonitions, and though invisible to the eye, the error piles up until it sends one plummeting to hell. It is like heat or cold, which has no shape or form that the eye can see. Yet in winter the cold comes to attack the trees and grasses, humans and beasts, and in summer the heat comes to torment people and animals.

As a lay believer, the important thing for you is to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo single-mindedly and to provide support for the priests. And if we go by the words of the Lotus Sutra, you should also teach the sutra to the best of your ability. When the world makes you feel downcast, you should chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, remembering that, although the sufferings of this life are painful, those in the next life could be much worse. And when you are happy, you should remember that your happiness in this life is nothing but a dream within a dream, and that the only true happiness is that found in the pure land of Eagle Peak, and with that thought in mind, chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

Continue your practice without backsliding until the final moment of your life, and when that time comes, behold! When you climb the mountain of perfect enlightenment and gaze around you in all directions, then to your amazement you will see that the entire realm of phenomena is the Land of Tranquil Light. The ground will be of lapis lazuli, and the eight paths¹⁹ will be set apart by golden ropes. Four kinds of flowers²⁰ will fall from the heavens, and music will resound in the air. All Buddhas and bodhisattvas will be present in complete joy, caressed by the breezes of eternity,

happiness, true self, and purity. The time is fast approaching when we too will count ourselves among their number. But if we are weak in faith, we will never reach that wonderful place. If you still have questions, I am waiting to hear them.

Respectfully,
Nichiren

The ninth day of the twelfth month
in the second year of Kenji (1276),
cyclical sign *hinoe-ne*

Reply to Matsuno



Background

Written near the end of 1276, this letter was a reply to the lay priest Matsuno Rokuro Saemon. Four in his family received letters from Nichiren Daishonin—he, his wife, son, and daughter-in-law. One of his daughters married Nanjo Hyoe Shichiro and gave birth to Nanjo Tokimitsu, a staunch supporter of the Daishonin and his disciple Nikko Shonin. It is thought that Matsuno was converted to the Daishonin's teachings through this connection with the Nanjo family.

This letter explains the fourteen slanders, citing Miao-lo's *Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra."* These slanders are referred to originally in the "Simile and Parable" chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Asked if there is a difference in benefits derived when a sage chants the daimoku and when an ordinary person chants it, the Daishonin answers in the negative. "However, there is a difference," he continues, "if one chants the daimoku while acting against the intent of this sutra." He explains "the intent" of the sutra by referring to the fourteen slanders.

The first ten of the fourteen slanders

concern one's attitude and action toward the Law, that is, the Buddha's teachings; the last four concern those toward people who believe in and practice that Law.

Emphasizing the importance of unity among believers, the Daishonin says, "Always remember that believers in the Lotus Sutra should absolutely be the last to abuse one another." The reason he gives is that "all those who keep faith in the Lotus Sutra are most certainly Buddhas, and one who slanders a Buddha commits a grave offense." In other words, he warns against the last four of the fourteen slanders: "despising, hating, envying, and bearing grudges against" fellow believers.

The Daishonin next recounts in detail the story of the boy Snow Mountains, who offers his body to a fierce demon in order to learn a Buddhist teaching. He encourages Matsuno to make this bodhisattva's spirit a model for his own faith and practice. He further clarifies that a priest who lacks the spirit to study and practice Buddhism diligently, and to strive to refute its slanderers, is "no better than an

animal dressed in priestly robes,” a thief who has stolen the title of priest.

The Daishonin concludes by instructing Matsuno how to practice his teaching as a lay believer. He encourages the lay priest to chant Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, provide support for the priests, and, in accord with the

Lotus Sutra, put effort into spreading the Law. Clearly, in light of the preceding paragraphs, “priests” here indicates not any priest, but the Daishonin’s disciples—those who are practicing in accord with the spirit elucidated in this letter.

Notes

1. Nichigen (d. 1315) was a priest of Jisso-ji temple, which belonged to the Tendai school. He became a disciple of Nichiren Daishonin after the Daishonin’s move to Mount Minobu. Later, he returned to Jisso-ji and converted other priests. He also built temples in Musashi and Suruga provinces.

2. Lotus Sutra, chap. 13.

3. The source of this statement is not known, but “monks and nuns with the hearts of dogs” is described in the Accumulated Treasures Sutra.

4. Presumably this indicates the first section of the “Expedient Means” chapter, which ends with “The true aspect of all phenomena can only be understood and shared between Buddhas. This reality consists of the appearance . . . and their consistency from beginning to end.”

5. Chapter 3 of the Lotus Sutra says that one should not expound this sutra among the foolish in order to protect them from committing the evil of slandering the sutra.

6. This “one scholar” has been identified as the Dharma Characteristics scholar, Tz’u-en, by Ts’ung-i in his *Supplement to T’ien-t’ai’s Three Major Works*. The attribution, however, is dubious. Tz’u-en in his *Praising the Profundity of the Lotus Sutra* mentions slanders, but does not enumerate or enlarge upon them.

7. Paraphrase of a passage in chapter 10 of the Lotus Sutra.

8. Lotus Sutra, chap. 28.

9. *The Diamond Scalpel*.

10. This is mentioned in chapter 2 of the Lotus Sutra.

11. Paraphrase of a passage in chapter 10 of the Lotus Sutra.

12. Lotus Sutra, chap. 28.

13. In the “Treasure Tower” chapter of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni Buddha assembles all the Buddhas from throughout the universe and then opens the treasure tower. Many Treasures Buddha invites him to share his seat, and the Ceremony in the Air begins.

14. Nirvana Sutra.

15. Mandarin ducks: A symbol of conjugal happiness. The male and female are said to remain faithful to each other throughout their lives.

16. Lotus Sutra, chap. 13.

17. *Ibid.*, chap. 16.

18. *The Annotations on the Nirvana Sutra*.

19. The eight paths lead in eight directions, that is, toward the eight points of the compass.

20. Mandarava, great mandarava, manjushaka, and great manjushaka flowers. Fragrant red and white flowers that, according to Indian tradition, bloom in heaven.

