

On Offerings for Deceased Ancestors



I HAVE placed your offerings of one sack of rice, parched rice, melons, eggplants, and other items before the Buddha.

As to the origin of the service for deceased ancestors,¹ among the disciples of the Buddha was one called the Venerable Maudgalyayana. As the foremost in transcendental powers among the disciples, he ranked alongside Shariputra, the foremost in wisdom. These two were like the sun and moon ranged side by side around Mount Sumeru, or like the ministers of the left and right who assist a great king.

Maudgalyayana's father was called Kissen Shishi, and his mother was called Shodai-nyo.² His mother, because she was guilty of greed and stinginess, after her death was reborn in the realm of hungry spirits, but the Venerable Maudgalyayana rescued her from there, and this began the tradition of the service.

It came about as follows. Though Maudgalyayana's mother had fallen into the realm of hungry spirits and was suffering there, Maudgalyayana, being only a common mortal, had no way of knowing this. When he was a young boy, he entered the house of a teacher of Brahmanism and there made an exhaustive study of the four Vedas and the eighteen major scriptures, which constitute the complete sacred writings of Brahmanism. At this time, however, he

still did not know where his mother had been reborn.

Later, at the age of thirteen, he and Shariputra together visited Shakyamuni Buddha and became his disciples. Thereafter, Maudgalyayana was able to free himself from the illusions of thought and to advance to the first stage of sagehood³ and then to cut off the illusions of desire and become an arhat, thereupon gaining the three insights and the six transcendental powers. Having opened the heavenly eye, he could see throughout the entire major world system as though it were reflected in a clear mirror. His vision penetrated the earth, and he could see into the three evil paths just as we, looking down through a layer of ice, see fish beneath the ice when the morning sun shines on it. And as he looked down, he saw that his mother was in the realm of hungry spirits.

She had nothing to drink, nothing to eat. Her skin was like that of a golden pheasant when its feathers have been plucked; her bones were like round stones placed one beside the other. Her head was big as a ball, her neck thin as a thread, and her stomach swelled like the sea. Her mouth open, her palms pressed together begging for something to eat, she resembled a starving leech that has caught the scent of a human. The sight of her famished

form as she gazed at the son she had had in her previous existence and began to weep was beyond the power of analogy to describe. One can imagine how heartrending a scene this must have been for Maudgalyayana.

The priest Shunkan, temple administrator of Hossho-ji, was exiled to the island of Iogashima. Naked, his hair hanging down unbound, his body wasted and thin, he wandered along the seashore where he picked up bits of seaweed and wrapped them about his loins or, spotting a fish, seized it with his right hand and gnawed it with his teeth. At that time a youth who had once been in the priest's service came to the island to visit him.⁴ I wonder which was the more miserable sight, this priest or Maudgalyayana's mother? I venture to think that Maudgalyayana's mother was even more pitiful to look at than this priest.

The Venerable Maudgalyayana was so overwhelmed with pity at the sight of his mother that he immediately employed his great transcendental powers and offered her some rice. His mother was delighted, and, seizing some of the rice in her right hand while concealing the remainder with her left, she stuffed the rice into her mouth. What should happen then but the rice changed into fire and began to burn! It burst into flame as though a bundle of torches had been lit, and his mother's body crackled and burned.

When Maudgalyayana saw this, he panicked and became utterly confused and, employing his transcendental powers, summoned forth a great flood of water. But the water turned into firewood, and his mother's body only burned more fiercely, the sight of which filled him with even greater pity.

Maudgalyayana, realizing that his own transcendental powers were altogether inadequate to remedy the situation, raced away and in an instant appeared in the presence of the Buddha,

where he presented his tearful appeal.

"I was born into a family of believers of Brahmanism," he said, "but later I became a disciple of the Buddha. I have gained the rank of arhat, freed myself from rebirth in the threefold world, and acquired the three insights and the six transcendental powers that go with the status of arhat. But now when I try to rescue my own mother from the great sufferings that beset her, I seem only to make her anguish worse than before, which fills my heart with grief!"

The Buddha replied: "Your mother has committed grave misdeeds. You alone do not have the power to remedy this situation. And indeed no one, neither the gods of heaven, the gods of earth, the devils, the Brahmanists, the Taoist priests, the four heavenly kings, nor the gods Shakra and Brahma have the power to do so. Therefore, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, you should bring together all the sage monks of the ten directions, prepare offerings of food and drink representing a hundred different flavors, and present them for the purpose of rescuing your mother from her sufferings."

Maudgalyayana did just as the Buddha had instructed him, and as a result his mother was freed from the realm of hungry spirits, where she had been destined to suffer for the period of a kalpa. So we are told in the scripture known as the Service for the Deceased Sutra. That is the reason why even now, in this latter age after the passing of the Buddha, people perform this ceremony on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. It is common practice for them to do so.

I, Nichiren, would like to note the following. The Venerable Maudgalyayana was, among the Ten Worlds, one who belonged to that of the voice-hearer. His observance of the two hundred and fifty precepts was as firm as a rock, and his attention to the three

thousand rules of conduct, without a single exception, was as perfect as the full moon on the night of the fifteenth. His wisdom was like the sun, and his transcendental powers enabled him to encircle Mount Sumeru fourteen times⁵ and thereby move the huge mountain.

And yet, even though he was a sage of this order, he found it very difficult to repay the great debt of kindness he owed his mother. Moreover, when he attempted to repay it, he actually increased her already great suffering.

In comparison, the priests of today observe the two hundred and fifty precepts in name only and, in fact, use their so-called observance of the precepts as a means to dupe others. They have not a trace of transcendental power—a huge stone could sooner ascend to heaven than they could exercise such powers. Their wisdom is in a class with that of oxen, no different from that of sheep. Though they might gather together by the thousands or ten thousands, they could never relieve one iota of the sufferings of departed parents.

All things considered, the reason the Venerable Maudgalyayana could not rescue his own mother from suffering was that he put his faith in the Hinayana version of Buddhism and devoted himself to the observance of the two hundred and fifty precepts. According to the Vimalakirti Sutra, the layman called Vimalakirti criticized Maudgalyayana, saying, “Those who give alms to you will fall into the three evil paths.” The meaning of this passage is that those who make offerings to the Venerable Maudgalyayana, a worthy man who observes the two hundred and fifty precepts, will be reborn in one of the three evil paths. And this does not apply to Maudgalyayana alone, but to all the voice-hearers and to those in this latter age who place great emphasis upon the observance of the precepts.

In comparison to the Lotus Sutra, this Vimalakirti Sutra I have just mentioned is no more than a lowly servant far down in the ranks of retainers. The point is that the Venerable Maudgalyayana had not yet attained Buddhahood himself. Since he himself had not yet attained Buddhahood, it was very difficult for him to relieve the sufferings of his parents. And how much more difficult would it have been for him to do so for anyone else!

Later, however, following the teaching of the Lotus Sutra to honestly discard expedient means,⁶ the Venerable Maudgalyayana summarily rejected and cast aside the two hundred and fifty precepts of the Hinayana teaching and chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. In time Maudgalyayana attained Buddhahood and was called by the name Tamalapattra Sandalwood Fragrance Buddha. And at that time his father and mother, too, attained Buddhahood. Hence it is said in the Lotus Sutra, “Then our wishes will be fulfilled and the longings of the multitude will likewise be satisfied.”⁷

Maudgalyayana’s physical body was inherited by him from his parents. Therefore, when his own physical body attained Buddhahood, the bodies of his father and mother likewise attained Buddhahood.

By way of analogy, let us consider the case of the military leader Taira no Kiyomori, the governor of Aki, who lived at the time of the eighty-first sovereign of Japan, Emperor Antoku. Kiyomori, engaging in one battle after another, overthrew the enemies of the nation and in time advanced to the highest post in the government, that of grand minister of state. Emperor Antoku was his grandson. All the members of his clan were permitted to enter the palace and were assigned to positions of great eminence. Kiyomori held the entire country of Japan, with its sixty-six provinces and two outlying

islands,⁸ in the palm of his hand, and people bowed before him as plants and trees bow before a great wind.

But he became arrogant and puffed up with pride and, in the end, treated the gods and Buddhas with contempt and attempted to control the shrine keepers and the Buddhist priests. As a result, he aroused the enmity of the priests of Mount Hiei and of the seven major temples of Nara. Eventually, on the twenty-second day of the twelfth month in the fourth year of the Jisho era (1180), he went so far as to burn down two of those seven temples, Todai-ji and Kofuku-ji.

The retribution for this grave offense soon fell upon the person of the grand minister and lay priest himself. In the following year, the first year of the Yowa era, on the fourth day of the intercalary second month, [having contracted a fever] he began to burn like a piece of charcoal, his body the fuel, his face the flames. In the end, tongues of flame shot out from his body, and he perished from the heat.

The results of his grave offense then fell upon his second son, Munemori. Munemori was thought to have drowned in the western sea [at the battle of Dannoura], but he came floating up on the eastern horizon, where he was captured, bound, and forced to kneel in the presence of the general of the right, Minamoto no Yoritomo.

Meanwhile, Kiyomori's third son, Tomomori, threw himself into the sea and ended up as the excrement of fish. And his fourth son, Shigehira,⁹ was taken captive and bound and, after having been dragged first through Kyoto and then through Kamakura, was in the end handed over to the seven major temples of Nara. There a great multitude of a hundred thousand temple followers gathered and, declaring him to be an enemy of their Buddha, one by one slashed him with swords.

The greatest evil among evils pro-

duces consequences that not only affect the perpetrators personally but extend to their sons, their grandsons, and so on down to the seventh generation. And the same is true of the greatest good among good.

The Venerable Maudgalyayana put his faith in the Lotus Sutra, which is the greatest good there is, and thus not only did he himself attain Buddhahood, but his father and mother did so as well. And, amazing as it may seem, all the fathers and mothers of the preceding seven generations and the seven generations that followed, indeed, of countless lifetimes before and after, were able to become Buddhas. In addition, all their sons, their wives or husbands, their retainers, supporters, and countless other persons not only were enabled to escape from the three evil paths, but all attained the first stage of security and then Buddhahood, the stage of perfect enlightenment.

Therefore, it is said in the third volume of the Lotus Sutra, "We beg that the merit gained through these gifts may be spread far and wide to everyone, so that we and other living beings all together may attain the Buddha way."¹⁰

With all this in mind, I note that you have a grandson, Jibu-bo, who is a Buddhist priest. This priest does not uphold the precepts and is lacking in wisdom. He does not observe a single one of the two hundred and fifty precepts or a single one of the three thousand rules of conduct. In his lack of wisdom he is in a class with oxen or horses, and because of his failure to observe the rules of conduct he resembles a monkey. But he reveres Shakyamuni Buddha and puts his faith in the teaching of the Lotus Sutra. Hence he is like a snake that grips a jewel in its mouth, or a dragon that bears sacred relics on its head.¹¹ A wisteria vine, by twining around a pine, may climb a thousand fathoms into the air; and a

crane, because it has its wings to rely upon, can travel ten thousand *ri*. It is not their own strength that allows them to do these things.

This applies likewise in the case of the priest Jibu-bo. Though he himself is like the wisteria vine, because he clings to the pine that is the Lotus Sutra, he is able to ascend the mountain of perfect enlightenment. Because he has the wings of the single vehicle to rely upon, he can soar into the sky of Tranquil Light. With wings such as these, he is a priest who can bring comfort to not only his parents and his grandfather and grandmother, but also all his relatives down to the seventh generation.

How fortunate a woman you are to possess this fine jewel of a grandson. The dragon king's daughter offered her jewel and thereby obtained Buddhahood.¹² You have given your grandson to be a votary of the Lotus Sutra, and this will lead you to enlightenment.

I am so pressed by various matters that I cannot write in detail just now. I will write again another time.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The thirteenth day of the seventh month

Reply to the grandmother of
Jibu-bo



Background

This letter was written for the grandmother of Jibu-bo Nichii, one of the Daishonin's disciples, in response to the offerings she had made just before the yearly service for deceased ancestors.

Though traditionally thought to have been written in the third year of Kenji (1277), recent studies suggest that this letter was written in the second year of Koan (1279).

In this letter, the Daishonin offers a detailed explanation of the origin of the service that was the established custom of his day. The Daishonin attributes the roots of this tradition to the story of Maudgalyayana's efforts to save his deceased mother. He explains that Maudgalyayana, one of Shakyamuni's foremost disciples, failed initially to relieve his mother's torment because he had put his faith in the Hinayana version of Buddhism and devoted him-

self to observing precepts and thus had not attained Buddhahood. When Maudgalyayana rejected the precepts, chanted Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, and attained Buddhahood, his deceased parents attained Buddhahood as well, the Daishonin says.

It is thought that Jibu-bo's grandmother lived in Ihara District of Suruga Province. According to Nikko Shonin's *List of Disciples upon Whom Nikko Bestowed the Gohonzon*, Jibu-bo, originally a Tendai priest at Shijuku-in temple in Suruga, took faith in the Daishonin's teaching and studied under Nichiji, who later became one of the six senior disciples of the Daishonin. Although details are unclear, it is believed that it was Jibu-bo who urged his grandmother to take faith in the Daishonin's teachings.

Notes

1. A Buddhist service held for the repose of the dead. Such ceremonies were conducted annually, usually on the fifteenth day of the seventh month.

2. Kissen Shishi and Shodai-nyo are the Japanese names for this couple. Their Sanskrit names are unknown.

3. The first of the four stages of Hinayana enlightenment that voice-hearers aim to attain.

4. Shunkan (d. 1179) was a priest of the Tendai school. In 1177, he helped formulate a plot to overthrow Taira no Kiyomori, who held military control of the capital. The plot was discovered, however, and Shunkan was banished to Iogashima, an island located south of Kyushu, where he died. According to *The Tale of the Heike*, during the third year of Shunkan's exile, a youth called Ario who had served him since childhood traveled to the island to visit his teacher.

5. T'ien-t'ai quotes a similar statement from the Increasing by One Agama Sutra in his *Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*.

6. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

7. *Ibid.*, chap. 9.

8. The two outlying islands refer to Iki

and Tsushima, islands off the coast of Kyushu.

9. Taira no Shigehira (1156–1185). In 1180, by command of his father, Taira no Kiyomori, he attacked the priests of Nara and burned down Todai-ji and Kofuku-ji temples. In 1184, however, at the Battle of Ichinotani, Shigehira was captured by the Minamoto forces and eventually handed over to the priests of Nara, who had him beheaded.

10. Lotus Sutra, chap. 7.

11. The Marquis of Sui in China once came upon a large snake that had been wounded. He applied medicine to the wound, and the snake later appeared holding a jewel in its mouth to reward him. The story is referred to in the letter addressed to Yang Te-tsu by Ts'ao Chih (192–232), which is included in *Literary Anthology*. The source of the dragon reference is unknown.

12. This is described in the "Devadatta" chapter of the Lotus Sutra. The dragon girl possessed an extremely precious jewel, which she presented to the Buddha.

