

Letter to Jakunichi-bo



I DEEPLY appreciate your sending a letter to this distant place. It is extremely rare to be born as a human being. Not only are you endowed with human form, but you have had the rare fortune to encounter Buddhism. Moreover, out of the Buddha's many teachings you have encountered the daimoku, or the title, of the Lotus Sutra and become its votary. Truly you are a person who has offered alms to a hundred thousand million Buddhas in his past existences!

Nichiren is the supreme votary of the Lotus Sutra in Japan. In this land only he has lived the twenty-line verse of the "Encouraging Devotion" chapter.¹ The eight hundred thousand million nayutas of bodhisattvas pledged with this verse to propagate the Lotus Sutra, but not one of them fulfilled the pledge. The parents who gave life to this extraordinary person, Nichiren, are the most blessed of all people in Japan. It is no doubt because of karmic forces that they became my parents, and I, their child. If Nichiren is the envoy of the Lotus Sutra and the Thus Come One Shakyamuni, then his parents must also share this relationship. They are like King Wonderful Adornment and Lady Pure Virtue with their sons, Pure Storehouse and Pure Eye. Could the two Buddhas Shakyamuni and Many Treasures have been reborn as

Nichiren's parents? Or if not, could his parents have been among the eight hundred thousand million nayutas of bodhisattvas or the four bodhisattvas led by Bodhisattva Superior Practices? It is beyond comprehension.

Names are important for all things. That is why the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai placed "name" first among the five major principles. My giving myself the name Nichiren (Sun Lotus) derives from my own enlightenment regarding the Buddha vehicle. This may sound as though I think I am wise, but there are specific reasons for what I say. The sutra reads, "As the light of the sun and moon can banish all obscurity and gloom, so this person as he advances through the world can wipe out the darkness of living beings."² Consider carefully what this passage signifies. "This person as he advances through the world" means that the first five hundred years of the Latter Day of the Law will witness the advent of Bodhisattva Superior Practices, who will illuminate the darkness of ignorance and earthly desires with the light of the five characters of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. In accordance with this passage, Nichiren, as this bodhisattva's envoy, has urged the people of Japan to accept and uphold the Lotus Sutra. His unremitting efforts never slacken, even here on this mountain.

The sutra then goes on to say, “After I have passed into extinction, [one] should accept and uphold this sutra. Such a person assuredly and without doubt will attain the Buddha way.”³ Therefore, those who become Nichiren’s disciples and lay believers should realize the profound karmic relationship they share with him and spread the Lotus Sutra as he does. Being known as a votary of the Lotus Sutra is a bitter, yet unavoidable, destiny.

Fan K’uai, Chang Liang, Masakado, and Sumitomo never acted cowardly because they cared so deeply about their honor and abhorred disgrace. But disgrace in this life is nothing. Of far greater concern is the disgrace that appears in the next life. Proceed to the place of practice of the Lotus Sutra, bearing in mind the time when you must face the wardens of hell, and the garment-snatching demoness and the garment-suspending demon will strip off your clothes on the bank of the river of three crossings. The Lotus Sutra is the robe that will keep you from dis-

grace after this life. The sutra reads, “It is like a robe to one who is naked.”⁴

Believe in the Gohonzon with all your heart, for it is the robe to protect you in the world after death. No wife would ever leave her husband unclothed, nor could any parents fail to feel pity for their child shivering in the cold. Shakyamuni Buddha and the Lotus Sutra are like one’s wife and parents. You have helped me and thereby saved me from disgrace in this life; in return, I will protect you from disgrace in the next. What one has done for another yesterday will be done for oneself today. Blossoms turn into fruit, and brides become mothers-in-law. Chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, and be always diligent in your faith.

I cannot thank you enough for your frequent letters. Jakunichi-bo, please convey all these teachings in detail to that believer.

Nichiren

The sixteenth day of the ninth month



Background

This letter was written to a young disciple named Jakunichi-bo Nikke, the son of the lord of Okitsu, Kazusa Province. It is dated the sixteenth day of the ninth month, with no year indicated, though it is believed to be 1279. Early in the Bun’ei era (1264–1275) Jakunichi-bo and his family had become followers of the Daishonin, who was then propagating his teachings in their area. Jakunichi-bo became a priest and later founded Tanjo-ji temple in Kominato to commemorate the place of the Daishonin’s birth. It is also thought that this letter may have been addressed, through Jakunichi-bo, to a woman believer who lived in Kazusa Province.

In this letter, the Daishonin discloses the meaning of his name, Nichiren, implying that it signifies the Buddha who will bring enlightenment to all people in the Latter Day of the Law. He declares that his disciples must also exert themselves to convey the supreme teaching of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to all humankind. Then the Daishonin explains that the demons who, according to legend, strip one of one’s garments at the time of death symbolize death’s stripping one of all pretensions and superficial attainments, whether wealth, power, or knowledge.

In conclusion, the Daishonin encourages Jakunichi-bo, pledging to protect

him in the next life since the latter protected the Daishonin in this life. Thus the Daishonin suggests the profound

and timeless nature of the teacher-disciple relationship.

Notes

1. The twenty-line verse of the “Encouraging Devotion” chapter of the Lotus Sutra enumerates the types of persecutions that will be met when the Lotus Sutra is propagated in the fearful latter age after Shakyamuni’s death. These persecutors were

later defined by Miao-lo of China as the three powerful enemies (*see* Glossary).

2. Lotus Sutra, chap. 21.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, chap. 23.