

Encouragement to a Sick Person



I HAVE heard that you are suffering from illness. Is this true? The impermanence of this world is such that even the healthy cannot remain forever, let alone those who are ill. Thoughtful persons should therefore prepare their minds for the life to come. Yet one cannot prepare one's mind for the next life by one's own efforts alone. Only on the basis of the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, the original teacher of all living beings, can one do so.

The Buddha's teachings, however, are various, perhaps because people's minds also differ greatly. In any event, Shakyamuni Buddha taught for no more than fifty years. Among the teachings he expounded during the first forty and more years, we find the Flower Garland Sutra, which says, "The mind, the Buddha, and all living beings—these three things are without distinction"; the Agama sutras, which set forth the principles of suffering, emptiness, impermanence, and non-self; the Great Collection Sutra, which asserts the interpenetration of the defiled aspect and the pure aspect;¹ the Larger Wisdom Sutra, which teaches mutual identification and nonduality; and the Two-Volumed, Meditation, and Amida sutras, which emphasize rebirth in the Land of Perfect Bliss. All of these teachings were expounded specifically for the purpose of saving all living

beings in the Former, Middle, and Latter Days of the Law.

Nevertheless, for some reason of his own, the Buddha declared in the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra, "[Preaching the Law in various different ways], I made use of the power of expedient means. But in these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth." Like a parent who has second thoughts about the transfer deed he wrote out earlier, Shakyamuni looked back with regret upon all the sutras he had expounded during the previous forty and more years, including those that taught rebirth in the Land of Perfect Bliss, and declared that "though immeasurable, boundless, inconceivable asamkhya kalpas may pass, they will in the end fail to gain unsurpassed enlightenment [through these sutras]."² He reiterated this in the "Expedient Means" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, saying, "Honestly discarding expedient means, I will preach only the unsurpassed way." By "discarding expedient means," he meant that one should discard the Nembutsu and other teachings preached during those more than forty years.

Having thus undoubtedly regretted and reversed his previous teachings, he made clear his true intention, saying, "The World-Honored One has long expounded his doctrines and now must reveal the truth,"³ and "For long he

remained silent regarding the essential, in no hurry to speak of it at once.”⁴ Thereupon Many Treasures Buddha sprang forth from beneath the earth and added his testimony that what Shakyamuni had said is true, and the Buddhas of the ten directions assembled in the eight directions⁵ and reached with their long broad tongues to the palace of the great heavenly king Brahma in testament. All the beings of the two worlds and the eight groups, who were gathered at the two places and the three assemblies, without a single exception witnessed this.

In light of the above sutra passages, setting aside evil people and non-Buddhists who do not believe in Buddhism, with regard to those who, though Buddhist believers, have devout faith in provisional teachings preached before the Lotus Sutra such as the Nembutsu, and devote themselves to reciting it ten, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, or as many as sixty thousand times a day without chanting Nam-myohorenge-kyo even once in the course of ten or twenty years, are they not like a person who, clinging to the transfer deed already nullified by his parent, refuses to accept its revised version? They may appear to others as well as to themselves to have faith in the Buddha’s teachings, but if we go by what the Buddha actually taught, they are unfilial people.

This is why the second volume of the Lotus Sutra states: “But now this threefold world is all my domain, and the living beings in it are all my children. Now this place is beset by many pains and trials. I am the only person who can rescue and protect others, but though I teach and instruct them, they do not believe or accept my teachings.”⁶

This passage means that to us living beings the Thus Come One Shakyamuni is our parent, our teacher, and our sovereign. Although Amida, Medicine Master, and other Buddhas are

sovereigns to us living beings, they are neither parents nor teachers. Shakyamuni is the only Buddha endowed with all three virtues and to whom we owe a profound debt of gratitude. There are parents and parents, yet none of them can equal Shakyamuni Buddha. There are all manner of teachers and sovereigns, but none as admirable as he is. Could those who disobey the teaching of this parent, teacher, and sovereign possibly not be abandoned by the heavenly gods and the earthly deities? They are the most unfilial of all children. It is for this reason that the Buddha said, “Though I teach and instruct them, they do not believe or accept my teachings.” Even if they follow the sutras preached before the Lotus and practice them for a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, or a million kalpas, if they do not believe in the Lotus Sutra and chant Nam-myohorenge-kyo even once, they will be unfilial. They will therefore be abandoned by the sacred ones⁷ of the three existences and the ten directions, and hated by both the heavenly gods and the earthly deities. (This is the first of the five guides for propagation.)

Even those people who commit the five cardinal sins, the ten evil acts, or innumerable other wrongdoings may attain the way if only their faculties are keen. Devadatta and Angulimala represent such people. And even those of dull faculties may attain the way, provided they are free of misdeeds. Chudapanthaka is an example. The faculties of ordinary people like ourselves are even duller than those of Chudapanthaka. We are unable to discern the colors and shapes of things, as if we had a sheep’s eyes. In the vast depths of our greed, anger, and foolishness, we commit the ten evil acts every day, and though we may not commit the five cardinal sins, we also perpetrate offenses similar to these daily.

Moreover, every single person is

guilty of slander of the Law, an offense exceeding even the ten evil acts or the five cardinal sins. Although few people slander the Lotus Sutra with actual words of abuse, there are none who accept it. Some appear to accept the sutra, but their faith in it is not as deep as their faith in the Nembutsu or other teachings. And even those with profound faith do not reproach the enemies of the Lotus Sutra. However great the good causes one may make, or even if one reads and copies the entirety of the Lotus Sutra a thousand or ten thousand times, or attains the way of perceiving three thousand realms in a single moment of life, if one fails to denounce the enemies of the Lotus Sutra, it will be impossible to attain the way. To illustrate, it is like the case of someone in the service of the imperial court. Even though he may have served for a decade or two, if he knows someone to be an enemy of the emperor but neither reports him to the throne nor shows personal animosity toward him, all the merit of his past services will be thereby negated, and he will instead be charged with an offense. You must understand that the people of this age are slanderers of the Law. (This is the second.)

The thousand years beginning from the day after the Buddha's passing are called the Former Day of the Law, a period when there were many who upheld the precepts, and people attained the way. The thousand years of the Former Day were followed by the Middle Day of the Law, which also lasted a thousand years. During this period, many people broke the precepts, and few attained the way. The thousand-year Middle Day is followed by the ten thousand years of the Latter Day of the Law. During this period, people neither uphold the precepts nor break them; only those without precepts fill the country. Moreover, it is called a defiled age, an age rife with

disorder. In an uncorrupted age, called a pure age, wrong is discarded while right is observed, just as crooked timber is planed according to the mark left by a thread stretched straight. During the Former and Middle Days of the Law, the five impurities began to appear, and in the Latter Day, they are rampant. They give rise to the great waves of a gale, which not only beat against the shore, but strike each other. The impurity of thought has been such that, as the Former and Middle Days of the Law gradually passed, people transmitted insignificant erroneous teachings while destroying the unfathomable correct teaching. It therefore appears that more people have fallen into the evil paths because of errors with respect to Buddhism than because of secular misdeeds.

Now the two thousand years of the Former and Middle Days of the Law have passed, and it has been more than two hundred years since the Latter Day began. Now is the time when, because the impurity of thought prevails, more people fall into the evil paths with the intention of creating good causes than they do by committing evil. As for evil acts, even ignorant people, if they recognize them for what they are, may refrain from committing them. This is like extinguishing a fire with water. But people think that good deeds are all equal in their goodness; thus they adhere to lesser good and do not realize that, in doing so, they bring about major evil. Therefore, even when they see sacred structures related to Dengyo, Jikaku, and others that are neglected and in disrepair, they leave them as they are for the simple reason that they are not halls dedicated to the Nembutsu. Instead, they build Nembutsu halls beside those sacred structures, confiscate the lands that have been donated to them, and offer them to the halls they have erected. According to a passage of the Sutra on Resolving Doubts

about the Middle Day of the Law, such deeds will bring few benefits. You should understand from the above that even if one performs a good deed, should it be an act of lesser good that destroys great good, it will cause one to fall into the evil paths.

The present age coincides with the beginning of the Latter Day of the Law. Gone completely are those people with the capacity to attain enlightenment through either the Hinayana or the provisional Mahayana sutras. There now remain only those whose capacity is suited solely to the true Mahayana sutra. A small boat cannot carry a large rock. Those who are evil or ignorant are like a large rock, while the Hinayana and provisional Mahayana sutras as well as the Nembutsu are like a small boat. If one tries to cure virulent sores with hot-spring baths, because the ailment is so serious, such mild treatment will be of no avail. For us in this defiled world of the latter age, embracing the Nembutsu and other teachings is like working rice paddies in winter; it does not suit the time. (This is the third.)

One should also have a correct understanding of the country. People's minds differ according to their land. For example, a mandarin orange tree south of the Yangtze River becomes a triple-leaved orange tree when it is transplanted to the north of the Huai River.⁸ Even plants and trees, which have no mind, change with their location. How much more, then, must beings with minds differ according to the place!

A work by the Tripitaka Master Hsüan-tsang called *The Record of the Western Regions* describes many countries in India. In accordance with the customs of the country, there are ones whose inhabitants are undutiful to their parents, and ones where people observe filial piety. In some countries, anger and resentment prevail, while in others,

ignorance and foolishness are rampant. There are countries devoted solely to Hinayana, others devoted solely to Mahayana, and still others where both Mahayana and Hinayana are pursued. There are countries wholly given over to the killing of living creatures, countries wholly given over to thieving, countries where rice abounds, and countries that produce much millet. The variety of countries is great.

Then what teaching should the country of Japan learn if its people are to free themselves from the sufferings of birth and death? As for this question, the Lotus Sutra states, "After the Thus Come One has entered extinction, I will cause it [the Lotus Sutra] to be widely propagated throughout Jambudvipa and will see that it never comes to an end."⁹ This passage means that the Lotus is the sutra related to the people of Jambudvipa, the continent of the south. Bodhisattva Maitreya said, "There is a small country in the eastern quarter whose people are related solely to the Mahayana."¹⁰ According to this passage from his treatise, within Jambudvipa there is a small country in the eastern quarter where the capacity of the people is especially suited to the Mahayana sutra. Seng-chao wrote, "This text is destined for a small country in the northeast."¹¹ This indicates that the Lotus Sutra has a connection with a country in the northeast. The Reverend Annen stated, "All in my country of Japan believe in the Mahayana."¹² Eshin said in his *Essentials of the One Vehicle Teaching*, "Throughout Japan, all people share the same capacity to attain Buddhahood through the perfect teaching."

Thus according to the opinions of the Thus Come One Shakyamuni, Bodhisattva Maitreya, the Tripitaka Master Shuryasoma, the Tripitaka Master Kumarajiva, the Dharma Teacher Seng-chao, the Reverend Annen, and the sage of former times Eshin, people

in the country of Japan have a capacity suited solely to the Lotus Sutra. Those who put into practice even a phrase or a verse of this sutra are certain to attain the way, for it is the teaching related to them. This may be likened to iron particles drawn to a magnet or dewdrops collecting on a mirror.¹³ Other good practices such as the Nembutsu are unrelated to our country. They are like a magnet that cannot attract iron, or a mirror that is unable to gather dew. For this reason, Annen stated in his commentary, "If it is not the true vehicle, one is doubtless deceiving both oneself and others."¹⁴ This passage means that one who instructs the people of Japan in a teaching other than the Lotus Sutra is deceiving not only oneself but others, too. One therefore must always consider the country when propagating the Buddhist teachings. One should not assume that a teaching suited to one country must inevitably be suited to another as well. (This is the fourth.)

Furthermore, in a country where Buddhism has already spread, one must also take into account the sequence of propagation. It is the rule in propagating Buddhism that one must always learn the nature of the teachings that have already spread. To illustrate, when giving medicine to a sick person, one should know what kind of medicine was administered before. Otherwise, different kinds of medicine may conflict and work against one another, killing the patient. Likewise, different teachings of Buddhism may conflict and interfere with one another, destroying the practitioner. In a country where non-Buddhist teachings have already spread, one should use Buddhism to refute them. For example, the Buddha appeared in India and defeated the non-Buddhists; Kashyapa Matanga and Chu Fa-lan went to China and called the Taoists to task; Prince Jōgu was born in the country of Japan and put Moriya to the sword.¹⁵

The same principle applies in the realm of Buddhism itself. In a country where the Hinayana has spread, one must refute it by means of the Mahayana sutras, just as Bodhisattva Asanga refuted the Hinayana teachings upheld by Vasubandhu. In a country where provisional Mahayana has been propagated, one must refute it with the true Mahayana, just as the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai Chih-che defeated the three schools of the south and the seven schools of the north in China. As for the country of Japan, it has now been more than four hundred years since the two schools of Tendai and True Word were propagated. During this period, it has been determined that all four categories of Buddhists—priests, nuns, laymen, and laywomen—have capacities suited to the Lotus Sutra. All people, whether good or evil, wise or ignorant, are endowed with the benefit of the fiftieth hearer. They are like the K'un-lun Mountains, where no worthless stone is to be found, or the mountain island of P'eng-lai, where no harmful potion is known.

Within the past fifty or so years, however, a man of flagrant slander named Honen has appeared. He deceived all the people by showing them a stone that resembled a gem and persuading them to discard the gem they already possessed in favor of it. This is what the fifth volume of *Great Concentration and Insight* means when it says, "They revere shards and rubble, looking on them as bright gems." All the people are clutching ordinary rocks in their hands, convinced that they are precious gems. That is to say, they have discarded the Lotus Sutra to chant the name of Amida Buddha. But when I point this out, they become furious and revile the votary of the Lotus Sutra, thereby increasing all the more their karma to fall into the hell of incessant suffering. (This is the fifth.)

But you, heeding my assertion, dis-

carded the Nembutsu and embraced the Lotus Sutra. Nevertheless, no doubt you may have reverted to being a follower of the Nembutsu. Remember that to discard the Lotus Sutra and become a believer in the Nembutsu is to be like a rock hurtling down from a mountain peak into the valley below, or like rain falling from the sky to the ground. There is no doubt that such a person will fall into the great Avichi hell. Those related to the sons of the Buddha Great Universal Wisdom Excellence had to spend major world system dust particle kalpas there, and those who received the seeds of Buddhahood in the even more remote past had to spend numberless major world system dust particle kalpas there. This was because they met with companions of great evil and discarded the Lotus Sutra, falling back to provisional teachings such as the Nembutsu. As the members of your family seem to be Nembutsu adherents, they certainly must be urging it upon you. That is understandable, since they themselves believe in it. You should regard them, however, as people deluded by the followers of the diabolical Hōnen. Arouse strong faith, and do not heed what they say. It is the way of the great devil to assume the form of a venerable monk or to take possession of one's father, mother, or brother in order to obstruct happiness in one's next life. Whatever they may say, however cleverly they may try to deceive you into discarding the Lotus Sutra, do not assent to it.

Stop and consider. If the passages of proof offered to support the claim that the Nembutsu does in truth lead to rebirth in the Pure Land were reliable, then in the past twelve years during which I have been asserting that Nembutsu believers will fall into the hell of incessant suffering, would they have consistently failed to reproach me, though I spoke out everywhere possible? They are indeed feeble! Teach-

ings such as those left behind by Hōnen and Shan-tao have been known to me since I was seventeen or eighteen. And the arguments that people put forth these days are no improvement.

Consequently, since their teachings are no match for mine, they resort to sheer force of numbers in trying to fight against me. Nembutsu believers number in the thousands or ten thousands, and their supporters are many. I, Nichiren, am alone, without a single ally. It is amazing that I should have survived until now. This year, too, on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, between the hours of the monkey and the cock (around 5:00 P.M.) on the highway called Matsubara in Tojo in the province of Awa, I was ambushed by several hundred Nembutsu believers and others.¹⁶ I was alone except for about ten men accompanying me, only three or four of whom were capable of offering any resistance at all. Arrows fell on us like rain, and swords descended like lightning. One of my disciples was slain in a matter of a moment, and two others were gravely wounded. I myself sustained cuts and blows, and it seemed that I was doomed. Yet, for some reason, my attackers failed to kill me; thus I have survived until now.

This has only strengthened my faith in the Lotus Sutra. The fourth volume of the sutra says, "Since hatred and jealousy toward this sutra abound even when the Thus Come One is in the world, how much more will this be so after his passing?"¹⁷ The fifth volume states, "It [the Lotus Sutra] will face much hostility in the world and be difficult to believe."¹⁸ In Japan there are many who read and study the Lotus Sutra. There are also many who are beaten in punishment for attempting to seduce other men's wives or for theft or other offenses. Yet not one person has ever suffered injury on account of the Lotus Sutra. Therefore, the up-

holders of the sutra in Japan are not yet worthy of these sutra passages. I alone have read the sutra with my entire being. This is the meaning of the passage that says, "We care nothing for our bodies or lives but are anxious only for the unsurpassed way."¹⁹ I am therefore the foremost votary of the Lotus Sutra in Japan.

Should you depart from this life before I do, you must report to Brahma, Shakra, the four heavenly kings, and King Yama. Declare yourself to be a disciple of the priest Nichiren, the foremost votary of the Lotus Sutra in Japan. Then they cannot possibly treat you discourteously. But if you should be of two minds, alternately chanting the Nembutsu and reciting the Lotus Sutra, and fear what others may say about you, then even though you iden-

tify yourself as Nichiren's disciple, they will never accept your word. Do not resent me later. Yet since the Lotus Sutra answers one's prayers regarding matters of this life as well, you may still survive your illness. In that case, I will by all means meet with you as soon as possible and talk with you directly. Words cannot all be set down in a letter, and a letter never adequately conveys one's thoughts, so I will stop for now.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The thirteenth day of the twelfth month in the first year of Bun'ei (1264)

To Nanjo Shichiro



Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter in the twelfth month of 1264, when he was forty-three. Its recipient was Nanjo Hyoe Shichiro, who was the steward of Ueno Village in Fuji District of Suruga Province. He was also called Ueno and was the father of Nanjo Tokimitsu. Sometime between 1260 and 1261, or between 1263 and 1264, while on an official tour of duty in Kamakura, he met the Daishonin and was converted to his teaching. However, it appears from this letter that he still retained a lingering attachment to his earlier belief in the Nembutsu and hesitated to commit himself exclusively to the Lotus Sutra.

About one month had passed since Tojo Kagenobu, the steward of Tojo Village in Awa Province, had attempted to kill the Daishonin at Komatsubara. The Daishonin had first incurred the enmity of the steward, a confirmed

Nembutsu believer, when he proclaimed his teaching in 1253. Enraged, Tojo had ordered him arrested. The Daishonin had barely managed to escape, and since then he had not been able to return to Awa, his native province. In 1264, however, the year after he had been pardoned from his sentence of exile to Izu and had returned to Kamakura, the Daishonin learned that his mother was seriously ill and went to Awa despite the danger to himself. After praying successfully for her recovery, he remained there and resumed his propagation efforts. On his way to visit a believer named Kudo Yoshitaka, he and his group were attacked by Tojo Kagenobu and his men at Komatsubara. This incident is known as the Komatsubara Persecution.

Shortly after this incident, the Daishonin learned that Nanjo Hyoe Shichiro was suffering from a severe illness

and wrote this letter to strengthen his faith.

In his letter, the Daishonin sets forth the criteria known as the five guides for propagation—the teaching, the people’s capacity, the time, the country, and the sequence of propagation—factors that one must correctly understand and consider in propagating Buddhism. The Daishonin may have formulated the concept of the five guides while in exile on Izu, for they are explained in detail in *The Teaching, Capacity, Time, and Country*, which he wrote during that period. Elaborating on these five criteria in the present letter, he empha-

sizes the supremacy of the Lotus Sutra over all other teachings and encourages Nanjo Shichiro to completely discard his lingering attachment to his former belief in the Nembutsu and to arouse single-minded faith in the Mystic Law.

Then the Daishonin briefly describes the Komatsubara Persecution, which had taken place a month earlier, pointing out that he alone has suffered persecution for the sake of the Lotus Sutra exactly as the sutra itself predicts. He therefore declares himself to be the foremost votary of the Lotus Sutra in Japan.

Notes

1. In his *Diamond Scalpel*, Miao-lo defines the essence of the Great Collection Sutra as “the interpenetration of the defiled aspect and the pure aspect” and the essence of the Wisdom sutras as “mutual identification and nonduality.” Both statements can be interpreted to mean that because all phenomena have emptiness, or non-substantiality, as their true nature, they are without fixed substance, and thus there is no fundamental separation between delusion and enlightenment, or between ordinary people and the Buddha.

2. In the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra these words are spoken by Bodhisattva Great Adornment.

3. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

4. *Ibid.*, chap. 5.

5. North, south, east, west, northwest, northeast, southeast, and southwest. This means that all the Buddhas assembled at the ceremony of the Lotus Sutra were on the same horizontal plane.

6. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3. This passage shows the Buddha’s three virtues of sovereign, teacher, and parent. “Now this three-fold world is all my domain” shows the virtue of sovereign; “The living beings in it are all my children,” the virtue of parent; and “Now this place is beset by many pains and trials. I am the only person who can rescue and protect others,” the virtue of teacher.

7. The sacred ones refer to Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

8. This phenomenon is referred to in such Chinese classics as *The Records of Yen Tzu*. It means that a person changes according to his or her circumstances. The Huai River flows eastward from the southern part of Honan Province north of the Yellow River into Lake Hungtse.

9. Lotus Sutra, chap. 28. These words are spoken by Bodhisattva Universal Worthy in a vow he makes before Shakyamuni Buddha.

10. This passage is quoted in Annen’s *Extensive Commentary on the Universally Bestowed Bodhisattva Precepts* as a citation from *The Treatise on the Stages of Yoga Practice*. No such passage is found in the extant version of that text, but a different version may have been in circulation at that time, or the passage may have been omitted for some reason in the course of transcription.

11. *The Afterword to the Lotus Sutra Translation*. This passage quotes the words of Shuryasoma when he bequeathed the Lotus Sutra to Kumarajiva.

12. *On the Universally Bestowed Bodhisattva Precepts*.

13. Vapor condenses on a mirror placed outdoors at night. It was believed that the mirror drew this water from the moon.

14. *On the Universally Bestowed Bodhisattva Precepts*.

15. Mononobe no Moriya (d. 587), a high official of the Yamato court, is said to have ordered that all the temples and monasteries built by the Soga clan be burned.

He and his family were defeated and killed by an army led by Soga no Umako, not by Prince Jōgū, better known as Prince Shōtoku. But Nichiren Daishōnin mentions his name here because Jōgū supported the pro-Buddhist Soga.

16. This refers to the Komatsubara Persecution, which occurred about a month before this letter was written.

17. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10.

18. *Ibid.*, chap. 14.

19. *Ibid.*, chap. 13.