

## The Sutra of True Requitall



IN the first year of the Koan era (1278), with the cyclical sign *tsuchi-noe-tora*, on the sixth day of the seventh month, the lay nun Sennichi sent a letter via her husband, Abutsu-bo, from Sado Province to a mountain recess called Mount Minobu, in Hakiri Village, in Kai Province, in the same country of Japan.

In the letter she says that, though she had been concerned about the faults and impediments that prevent women from gaining enlightenment, since according to my teaching the Lotus Sutra puts the attainment of Buddhahood by women first, she relies upon this sutra in all matters.

One might ask, Who was the Buddha who preached the sutra known as the Lotus? To the west of this land of Japan, west again from China, far, far west beyond the deserts and the Pamirs, in a land called India, there was a crown prince, the son of a great king named Shuddhodana. When the prince reached the age of nineteen, he cast aside his rank, withdrew to Mount Dandaka, and took up the religious life. At the age of thirty he became a Buddha. His body took on a golden color, and his spirit reflected the three existences. The Buddha, who illuminated as though in a mirror all that had happened in the past and would happen in the future, taught all the various sutras of his

teaching life over a period of fifty years.

Even though all these sutras were gradually spread throughout the land of India during the first thousand years after the Buddha's passing, they had still not been introduced in China or Japan. Even though it is said that Buddhism was first brought to China 1,015 years after the demise of the Buddha, the Lotus Sutra had still not been introduced.

Some two hundred or more years after Buddhism was brought to China, a man known as the Tripitaka Master Kumarayana lived in a country called Kucha, located between India and China. His son, Kumarajiva, journeyed from Kucha to India, where he received instruction on the Lotus Sutra from the Tripitaka Master Shuryasoma. On entrusting Kumarajiva with the sutra, Shuryasoma said to him, "This Lotus Sutra has a deep connection with a country to the northeast."<sup>1</sup>

With these words in mind, Kumarajiva set out to carry the sutra to the region east of India, to the land of China. Thus it was more than two hundred years after Buddhism had been introduced to China, during the reign of a ruler of the Later Ch'in dynasty, that the Lotus Sutra was first brought to that country.

Buddhism was introduced to Japan during the reign of the thirtieth sovereign, Emperor Kimmei, on the thir-

teenth day, a day with the cyclical sign *kanoto-iori*, of the tenth month in the thirteenth year of his reign, a year with the cyclical sign *mizunoe-saru* (552), by King Syōngmyōng of the kingdom of Paekche to the west of Japan. This occurred four hundred years after the introduction of Buddhism to China, and more than fourteen hundred years after the Buddha's passing.

Although the Lotus Sutra was among the texts introduced then, Prince Shōtoku, a son of the thirty-second sovereign, Emperor Yomei, sent an envoy to China for a copy of the Lotus and propagated it throughout Japan. Since then, more than seven hundred years have passed.

Already, over 2,230 years have passed since the demise of the Buddha. Moreover, the lands of India, China, and Japan are separated from each other by mountain after mountain, river after river, and sea after sea. Their inhabitants, their ways of thinking, and the character of their lands all differ from each other, and their languages and customs vary. How, then, can ordinary human beings like ourselves possibly understand the true meaning of the Buddhist teachings?

The only way to do so is to examine and compare the words of the various sutras. These sutras all differ from each other, but the one known as the Lotus is in eight volumes. In addition to these, there are the Universal Worthy Sutra, which urges the propagation of the Lotus, and the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra, which serves as an introduction to the Lotus, each consisting of one volume. When we open the Lotus Sutra and look into it, it is as though we were seeing our own face in a bright mirror, or as though the sun had come out and we were able to discern the colors of the plants and trees.

In reading the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra, which serves as an introduc-

tion, we find a passage that says, "In these more than forty years, I [Shakya-muni Buddha] have not yet revealed the truth." In the first volume of the Lotus Sutra, at the beginning of the "Expedient Means" chapter, we read, "The World-Honored One has long expounded his doctrines and now must reveal the truth." In the fourth volume, in the "Treasure Tower" chapter, there is a passage that clearly states, "The Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law . . . all that you [Shakya-muni] have expounded is the truth!" And the seventh volume contains the splendid passage that reads, "Their tongues reach to the Brahma heaven."<sup>2</sup>

In addition to these passages, we should note that the other sutras that precede or follow the Lotus have been compared to the stars, to streams and rivers, to petty kings, and to small mountains, and that the Lotus has been compared to the moon, to the sun, and to such things as the great ocean, a great mountain, and a great king.<sup>3</sup>

These statements are not my words. They are all the golden words of the Thus Come One, and they are the words that express the judgment of all the Buddhas in the ten directions. All of the bodhisattvas and persons of the two vehicles, Brahma, Shakra, and the gods of the sun and moon, which hang in the sky now like bright mirrors, watched and heard these statements being made. The words of the deities of the sun and moon also are recorded in this sutra. All the ancient gods of India, China, and Japan were also present in the assembly. The gods of Japan, such as the Sun Goddess, Great Bodhisattva Hachiman, and the deities of Kumano and Suzuka,<sup>4</sup> are unable to dispute these statements.

This sutra is superior to all other sutras. It is like the lion king, the monarch of all the creatures that run on the ground, and like the eagle, the king of all the creatures that fly in

the sky. Sutras such as the Devotion to Amida Buddha Sutra<sup>5</sup> are like pheasants or rabbits. Seized by the eagle, their tears flow; pursued by the lion, fear grips their bowels. And the same is true of people like the Nembutsu adherents, the Precepts priests, the Zen priests, and the True Word teachers. When they come face to face with the votary of the Lotus Sutra, their color drains away and their spirits fail.

As for what sort of doctrines are taught in this wonderful Lotus Sutra, beginning with the "Expedient Means" chapter in the first volume, it teaches that bodhisattvas, persons of the two vehicles, and ordinary people are all capable of attaining Buddhahood. But as of yet no examples exist to prove this assertion. It is like a guest whom we meet for the first time. His appearance is attractive, his heart is brave, and on hearing him speak, we have no reason to doubt him. Yet because we have never seen him before and have no proof of the things he says, we find it difficult to believe him on the basis of his words alone. But if we repeatedly see evidence to support the major points he makes at this time, we will be able to trust what he says from now on as well.

For all those who wished to believe the Lotus Sutra and yet could not do so with complete certainty, the fifth volume presents what is the heart and core of the entire sutra, the doctrine of attaining Buddhahood in one's present form. It is as though, for instance, a black object were to become white, black lacquer to become like snow, an unclean thing to become clean and pure, or a wish-granting jewel to be placed into muddy water [to make it transparent]. Here it is told how the dragon girl became a Buddha in her reptilian form. And at that moment there was no longer anyone who doubted that all men can attain Buddhahood. This is why I say that the

enlightenment of women is expounded as a model.

For this reason, the Great Teacher Dengyo, the founder of Enryaku-ji temple on Mount Hiei, who was the first to spread the true teachings of the Lotus Sutra in Japan, commented on this point as follows: "Neither teacher nor disciples need undergo countless kalpas of austere practice in order to attain Buddhahood. Through the power of the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law they can do so in their present form."<sup>6</sup> And the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai Chih-che of China, who expounded the true meaning of the Lotus Sutra first in that country, stated, "The other sutras only predict Buddhahood . . . for men, but not for women; . . . This sutra predicts Buddhahood for all."<sup>7</sup>

Do not these interpretations make clear that, among all the teachings of the Buddha's lifetime, the Lotus Sutra is first, and that, among the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, that of women attaining Buddhahood is first? For this reason, though the women of Japan may be condemned in all sutras other than the Lotus as incapable of attaining Buddhahood, as long as the Lotus guarantees their enlightenment, what reason have they to be downcast?

Now I, Nichiren, was born as a human being, something difficult to achieve, and I have encountered the Buddha's teachings, which are but rarely to be met with. Moreover, among all the teachings of the Buddha, I was able to meet the Lotus Sutra. When I stop to consider my good fortune, I realize that I am indebted to my parents, indebted to the ruler, and indebted to all living beings.

With regard to the debt of gratitude owed to our parents, our father may be likened to heaven and our mother to the earth, and it would be difficult to say to which parent we are the more indebted. But it is particularly difficult to repay the great kindness of our mother.

If, in desiring to repay it, we seek to do so by following the non-Buddhist scriptures, such as the *Three Records*, the *Five Canons*, or *The Classic of Filial Piety*, we can provide for our mother in this life, but we cannot hope to do anything for her next life. Although we can provide for her physically, we will be unable to save her spiritually.

Turning to the Buddhist scriptures, we find that, because the more than five thousand or seven thousand volumes of Hinayana and Mahayana sutras teach that it is impossible for women to attain Buddhahood, it is impossible to repay the debt owed to our mother. The Hinayana teachings flatly deny that a woman can attain Buddhahood. The Mahayana sutras in some cases seem to say that a woman may attain Buddhahood or may be reborn in a pure land, but this is simply a possibility mentioned by the Buddha, and no examples of such a thing actually having happened are given.

Since I have realized that only the Lotus Sutra teaches the attainment of Buddhahood by women, and that only the Lotus is the sutra of true requital for repaying the kindness of our mother, in order to repay my debt to my mother, I have vowed to enable all women to chant the daimoku of this sutra.

The women of Japan, however, have all been led astray by priests like Shantao of China, or Eshin, Yokan, and Honen of Japan, so that throughout the entire country not one of them chants Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, which should be their foundation. All they do is chant Namu Amida Butsu once a day, ten times, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, or a million times a day, or thirty thousand or a hundred thousand times. All their lives, every hour of the day and night, they do nothing else. Both those women who are steadfast in their pursuit of enlightenment and those who are evil make the invocation

of Amida's name their foundation. And the few women who seem to be devoting themselves to the Lotus Sutra do so only as though whiling away time waiting for the moon to rise, or as though reluctantly spending time with a man who does not please them until they can meet their lover.

Thus among all the women of Japan, not one is in accord with the spirit of the Lotus Sutra. They do not chant the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra, which is essential for their loving mothers, but instead devote their hearts to Amida. And because they do not base themselves on the Lotus Sutra, Amida extends no aid. Reciting the name of Amida Buddha is no way for a woman to gain salvation; rather it will invariably plunge her into hell.

In grieving over what is to be done if we wish to assist our mothers, [I have realized that] the recitation of the name of Amida Buddha creates karma that destines a person to the hell of incessant suffering. Such recitation is not included among the five cardinal sins, and yet it is worse than the five sins. A person who murders his father and mother destroys their physical bodies, but he does not condemn them to fall into the hell of incessant suffering in their next existence.

The women of Japan today, who could without fail attain Buddhahood through the Lotus Sutra, have been deceived into reciting exclusively the formula Namu Amida Butsu. Since it does not appear to be evil, they have been misled. Since it is not the seed of Buddhahood, they will never become Buddhas. By clinging to the minor good of reciting Amida Buddha's name, they deprive themselves of the major good of the Lotus Sutra. Thus this minor good of the Nembutsu is worse in its effect than the great evil of the five cardinal sins.

It is like the case of Masakado, who during the Shohei era (931-938) seized

control of eight provinces in the Kanto region, or like Sadato, who during the Tengi era (1053–1058) took possession of the region of Oshu. Because these men caused a division between the people of their region and the sovereign, they were declared enemies of the imperial court and in the end were destroyed. Their plots and rebellions were worse than the five cardinal sins.

Buddhism in Japan today is exactly like this. It is merely plots and rebellions in a different form. The Lotus Sutra represents the supreme ruler, while the True Word school, Pure Land school, Zen school, and the Precepts priests, by upholding such minor sutras as the Mahavairochana Sutra and the Meditation on the Buddha Infinite Life Sutra, have become the deadly enemies of the Lotus Sutra. And yet women throughout Japan, unaware of the ignorance of their own minds, think that Nichiren, who can save them, is their foe, and mistake the Nembutsu, Zen, Precepts, and True Word priests, who are in fact deadly enemies, for good friends and teachers. And because they look upon Nichiren, who is trying to save them, as a deadly enemy, these women all join together to slander him to the ruler of the country, so that, after having been exiled to the province of Izu, he was also exiled to the province of Sado.

Here I, Nichiren, made a vow and declared: “There is absolutely no fault on my part. And even if I should be mistaken, the fact remains that I have made a vow to save all the women in Japan, and that sincerity cannot be ignored—especially since what I am saying is in complete accord with the Lotus Sutra.

“If the women of Japan do not choose to put faith in me, then they should let the matter rest there. On the contrary, however, they set about having me attacked. But am I in error?

“How will Shakyamuni, Many Treas-

ures, the Buddhas of the ten directions, the bodhisattvas, the people of the two vehicles, Brahma, Shakra, and the four heavenly kings deal with this? If I am in error, show me how! In particular, the gods of the sun and moon are right before me. And since, in addition to listening to the words of Shakyamuni Buddha, you also vowed to punish those who persecute the votary of the Lotus Sutra, saying, ‘Their heads will split into seven pieces,’<sup>8</sup> what then do you intend to do?” Because Nichiren strongly called them to task in this manner, the heavenly gods have inflicted punishment on this land, and these epidemics have appeared.

By rights the heavenly gods should command another nation to punish our country, but too many people on both sides would perish. Thus, the design of the heavenly gods is to avoid a general conflict and instead to first destroy the people [in this epidemic]—which is in effect cutting off the ruler’s hands and feet—thereby compelling the ruler and high ministers of this nation [to honor the Lotus Sutra]. In this way they intend to wipe out the enemies of the Lotus Sutra and make way for the propagation of the correct teaching.

Nevertheless, when I was exiled to the province of Sado, the constable of the province and the other officials, following the design of the ruler of the nation, treated me with animosity. And the people went along with those orders. In addition, the Nembutsu, Zen, Precepts, and True Word priests in Kamakura sent word that by no means should I be allowed to return from the island of Sado, and Ryokan of Gokuraku-ji and others persuaded the former governor of the province of Musashi<sup>9</sup> to issue his own letters of instruction, which were carried to Sado by Ryokan’s disciples, ordering that I be persecuted. Thus it seemed that I could not possibly escape with my life. Whatever the design of the heavenly gods in the

matter may have been, every single steward and Nembutsu believer worthy of the name kept strict watch on my hut day and night, determined to prevent anyone from communicating with me. Never in any lifetime will I forget how in those circumstances you, with Abutsu-bo carrying a wooden container of food on his back, came in the night again and again to bring me aid. It was just as if my deceased mother had suddenly been reborn in the province of Sado!

Once in China there was a man known as the governor of P'ei.<sup>10</sup> Because there were signs indicating that he would become the ruler, the First Emperor of the Ch'in dynasty decreed that unparalleled rewards would be bestowed upon anyone who would kill him. The governor thought it would be too dangerous to try to conceal himself in the country villages, and so he entered the mountains, where he remained hidden for seven days, and then for another seven. At that time, he believed that his life was as good as lost. But the governor had a wife of the Lü family who went searching for him in the mountains and from time to time would bring him food to keep him alive.

Being the governor's wife, she could not help but feel compassion for him. But in your case, had you not been concerned about the life to come, would you have shown me such devotion? And that is also the reason why you have remained steadfast throughout, even when you were driven from your land, fined, and had your house taken from you. In the Lotus Sutra, it is said that one who in the past has made offerings to a hundred thousand million Buddhas will, when reborn in a later existence, be unshakable in faith.<sup>11</sup> You, then, must be a woman who has made offerings to a hundred thousand million Buddhas.

In addition, it is easy to sustain our

concern for someone who is before our very eyes, but quite a different thing when that person is far away, even though in our heart we may not forget him. Nevertheless, in the five years, from the eleventh year of the Bun'ei era (1274) to this year, the first year of the Koan era, that have already passed since I came to live here in the mountains, you have sent your husband from the province of Sado to visit me three times. How great is your sincerity! It is firmer than the great earth, deeper than the great sea!

When he was Prince Sattva in a previous existence, the Thus Come One Shakyamuni gained merit by feeding his body to a starving tigress, and when he was King Shibi, he gained merit by giving his flesh to a hawk in exchange for the life of a dove. And he declared in the presence of Many Treasures and the Buddhas of the ten directions that he would transfer this merit to those who believe in the Lotus Sutra as you do in the Latter Day of the Law.

You say in your letter that the eleventh day of the eighth month of this year marks the thirteenth anniversary of your father's passing. You also note that you are enclosing an offering of one thousand coins. It is extremely kind of you to do so. Fortunately, I happen to have a copy of the Lotus Sutra in ten volumes<sup>12</sup> that I would like to send you. When you think longingly of me, have Gakujo-bo<sup>13</sup> read it and please listen to it. And in a future existence, you may use this copy of the sutra as a token of proof with which to search me out.

In view of the epidemics that raged the year before last, last year, and this year, I was so concerned about how all of you were faring that I prayed earnestly to the Lotus Sutra, but still I felt uneasy. Then, on the twenty-seventh day of the seventh month, at the hour of the monkey (3:00–5:00 P.M.), Abutsu-bo appeared. I asked him first

how you were, and how the lay priest of Ko<sup>14</sup> was. He told me that neither of you had fallen ill, and that the lay priest of Ko had set out along with him, but because the early rice was nearly ripe, and because he had no sons to help him harvest it, he had had no choice but to turn back.

When I heard all this, I felt as if I were a blind man who had recovered his sight, or as if my deceased father and mother had come to me in a dream from the palace of King Yama, and in that dream I had felt great joy. It is a strange and wonderful thing, but both here and in Kamakura, very few of my followers have died from this plague. It is as if all of us were riding in the same boat and, though it would be too much to expect that we should all survive, still, just when disaster seemed to be upon us, another boat came out to rescue us. Or it is as if the dragon deities were watching over us and making it possible for us to reach the shore in safety. It is indeed wondrous!

Concerning the lay priest Ichinosawa,<sup>15</sup> please tell his wife, the lay nun, that I am grieved to hear of his death. But I have already told her quite clearly how matters stand with her husband,

and she will no doubt recall my words. Regardless of the fact that he had a hall in his house dedicated to Amida Buddha, Amida Buddha will never save an enemy of the Lotus Sutra. On the contrary, such a person renders himself a foe of Amida Buddha. After his death, he must have fallen into the evil paths of existence and been filled with deep regret. It is a great pity.

I am mindful, however, that the lay priest Ichinosawa on several occasions saved my life by hiding me in a corridor of his residence, and I have therefore tried to think of something that can be done for him. Will you please ask Gakujo-bo to read the Lotus Sutra regularly at his grave? Even so, I do not think that this will enable him to reach enlightenment. Please tell his wife, the lay nun, that I grieve at the thought of how desolate and lonely she must feel. I will write more at another time.

Nichiren

The twenty-eighth day of the seventh month

To the wife of Abutsu-bo, in the provincial capital of Sado



## Background

This letter was written at Minobu on the twenty-eighth day of the seventh month of the first year of Koan (1278), the day after Abutsu-bo, a lay follower, arrived on his third journey from Sado Island to visit Nichiren Daishonin. This letter is the Daishonin's answer to one that Abutsu-bo had delivered from his wife, the lay nun Sennichi.

Some scholars maintain that the lay nun Sennichi served as an attendant to a court lady accompanying the Retired Emperor Juntoku during his banish-

ment to Sado after the Jokyu Disturbance of 1221, but it is more likely that she was a native of the island. She and her husband were devoted followers of the Daishonin and supplied him with food, writing materials, and other necessities for more than two years, until his pardon in 1274. After the Daishonin's move to Minobu, the lay nun sent her husband with offerings to visit him there at least three times.

In the first portion of this letter, the Daishonin emphasizes the superiority

of the Lotus Sutra from the standpoint of its teaching that women can attain Buddhahood. The provisional teachings, he says, deny that women can become Buddhas; only the Lotus Sutra clearly reveals that they are able to do so. The Daishonin declares that the enlightenment of women as taught in the Lotus Sutra shows that all living beings can attain Buddhahood in their present form.

He then takes up the subject of repaying one's debt of gratitude to one's parents, especially to one's mother. Since the Lotus is the only sutra that guarantees the enlightenment of women, he says, it is also the only one

that truly enables one to requite one's mother's kindness. Nevertheless, the women of Japan reject both the Lotus Sutra and its votary, and chant only the name of Amida Buddha. But, says the Daishonin, Amida will never protect an enemy of the Lotus Sutra. Thus he shows that the one vehicle of the Lotus Sutra is the basis of all Buddhist teachings.

While in exile on Sado, the Daishonin was harshly treated by many of the islanders. The lay nun Sennichi and her husband, however, risked their personal safety to serve him and maintained their faith despite many hardships.

## Notes

1. *The Afterword to the Lotus Sutra Translation*, a work written by Seng-chao (384–414), one of Kumarajiva's disciples, attributes this statement to Shuryasoma.

2. Lotus Sutra, chap. 21.

3. These are among the ten comparisons set forth in the "Medicine King" chapter of the Lotus Sutra.

4. Kumano refers to the three Shinto shrines located in the Kumano district of Wakayama Prefecture. They are Kumano Nimesu Shrine, which enshrines the god Ketsumiko no Kami; Kumano Hayatama Shrine, which enshrines the god Kumano Hayatama no Kami; and Kumano Nachi Shrine, which enshrines the god Kumano Fusumi no Kami. Suzuka refers to a district in Ise Province (now northern Mie Prefecture), the location of an important barrier station on the route connecting Yamato and Ise provinces. It is the site of many old temples, shrines, and archaeological remains.

5. Devotion to Amida Buddha Sutra: The Amida Sutra. The Daishonin may have referred to it this way to indicate its association with the Nembutsu, the chanting of Amida Buddha's name in the formula Namu Amida Butsu (Devotion to Amida Buddha), a practice that was widespread in his day.

6. *The Outstanding Principles of the Lotus Sutra*.

7. *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*.

8. Lotus Sutra, chap. 26.

9. The former governor of the province of Musashi refers here to Hojo Nobutoki, the constable of Sado Province, who lived in Kamakura.

10. The governor of P'ei refers to Liu Pang (247–195 B.C.E.), the founder of the Former Han dynasty. He and another warlord, Hsiang Yü, contended for power, taking advantage of the confusion following the death of the First Emperor of the Ch'in to raise troops and attempt to overthrow the dynasty. A protracted struggle between the two ended in the victory of Liu Pang, who founded the Han dynasty in 202 B.C.E. The episode referred to in the text appears in *Records of the Historian*.

11. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10.

12. "The Lotus Sutra in ten volumes" refers to the entire Lotus Sutra, consisting of eight volumes together with the one-volume Immeasurable Meanings Sutra and the one-volume Universal Worthy Sutra, which serve respectively as prologue and epilogue to the Lotus Sutra.

13. Gakujo-bo (d. 1301), a disciple of the Daishonin, is said to have lived at Ichinosawa on Sado Island. Originally a True Word believer, he converted to the Daishonin's teaching and devoted himself to propagating it, founding a temple called Jisso-ji.

14. The lay priest of Ko was a follower of the Daishonin. Ko means a provincial



office or its location; the lay priest was so called because he lived in Ko, the provincial seat of Sado Island. He and his wife made offerings to the Daishonin and helped protect him.

15. The lay priest Ichinosawa (d. 1278)

was a follower of the Pure Land school. The Daishonin lived for a large part of his exile on Sado at his residence. Ichinosawa never abandoned his Pure Land beliefs, but made efforts to protect the Daishonin.