

The Drum at the Gate of Thunder



I HAVE received one thousand blue-duck coins, one *to* of dried rice, and other articles. The boy Virtue Victorious who offered a mud pie to the Buddha was reborn as King Ashoka, and an old woman who offered the Buddha rice gruel was reborn as a *pratyekabuddha*.¹

The Lotus Sutra is the teacher of all the Buddhas of the ten directions and the three existences. The Buddhas of the ten directions are the Buddha Good Virtue in the east, the Buddha Sorrow-Dispelling Virtue in the southeast, the Buddha Sandalwood Virtue in the south, the Buddha Giver of Treasure in the southwest, the Buddha Infinite Brightness in the west, the Buddha Flower Virtue in the northwest, the Buddha Banner-like Virtue in the north, the Buddha Three Vehicle Practice in the northeast, the Buddha Vast Myriad Virtue of the zenith, and the Buddha Brilliant Virtue of the nadir.²

The Buddhas of the three existences are the thousand Buddhas of the past Glorious Kalpa,³ the thousand Buddhas of the present Wise Kalpa,⁴ and the thousand Buddhas of the future Constellation Kalpa,⁵ as well as all the other Buddhas depicted in the Mahayana and Hinayana, provisional and true, and exoteric and esoteric sutras, including the Flower Garland, Lotus, and Nirvana sutras. These Buddhas, as well as

the bodhisattvas in the worlds of the ten directions who are as numerous as particles of dust, all originate from the single character *myo*, or wonderful, of the Lotus Sutra [Myoho-*renge-kyo*].

Therefore, the Universal Worthy Sutra, the epilogue to the Lotus Sutra, says, "A Buddha's three types of bodies are born from this correct and equal sutra." The term "correct and equal" derives from an Indian word⁶ and was translated in China as "great vehicle." Great vehicle, or Mahayana, is another name for the Lotus Sutra. The Agama sutras, when compared with non-Buddhist scriptures, are regarded as Mahayana sutras, or sutras of the great vehicle. Similarly, the Flower Garland, Wisdom, Mahavairochana, and other sutras, when compared with the Agama sutras, are defined as Mahayana sutras; but they in turn fall within the category of Hinayana sutras, or sutras of the lesser vehicle, when compared with the Lotus Sutra. As no sutra surpasses the Lotus, it is the one and only Mahayana sutra.

To illustrate, each ruler of the eighty-four thousand countries in the southern continent of Jambudvīpa is called a great king within his country. But when compared with a wheel-turning king, he is called a minor king. In like manner, each of the kings of the six heavens of the world of desire and of the four meditation heavens may be

called either a great king or a minor king, [depending on whom he is compared with]; but the great heavenly king Brahma, who resides at the top of the world of form, is the one great ruler who can never be called a minor king.

A Buddha is a child, and the Lotus Sutra, its parents. If the parents of a thousand children are praised, those thousand children will rejoice. If one makes offerings to the parents, one makes offerings to their thousand children as well. Those who make offerings to the Lotus Sutra will receive the same benefit as they would by making offerings to all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas in the ten directions, because all the Buddhas of the ten directions originate from the single character *myo*. Suppose a lion has a hundred cubs. When the lion king sees its cubs attacked by other beasts or birds of prey, he roars; the hundred cubs will then feel emboldened, and the heads of those other beasts and birds of prey will be split into seven pieces. The Lotus Sutra is like the lion king, who rules over all other animals.

A woman who embraces the lion king of the Lotus Sutra never fears any of the beasts of hell or of the realms of hungry spirits and animals. All the offenses committed by a woman in her lifetime are like dry grass, and the single character *myo* of the Lotus Sutra is like a small spark. When a small spark is set to a large expanse of grass, not only the grass but also the big trees and large stones will all be consumed. Such is the power of the fire of wisdom in the single character *myo*. Not only will all offenses vanish, but they will become sources of benefit. This is what changing poison into amrita means. For example, black lacquer will turn white when white powder is added. A woman's offenses are like the lacquer, and the words Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, like the white powder.

When one dies, if one is destined to fall into hell, one's appearance will darken, and one's body will become as heavy as a stone that requires the strength of a thousand men to move. But in the case of a good person, even if she should be a woman seven or eight feet tall and of dark complexion, at the hour of death, her countenance will become pure and white, and her body will be as light as a goose feather and as soft and pliable as cotton.

It is a thousand *ri*⁷ across the sea and mountains from Sado Province to this province. You, as a woman, have held fast to your faith in the Lotus Sutra; and over the years you have repeatedly sent your husband here to visit me in your place. Surely the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the Buddhas of the ten directions know of your devotion. For example, though the moon is forty thousand yojanas high in the heavens, its reflection appears instantly in a pond on earth; and the sound of the drum at the Gate of Thunder⁸ is immediately heard a thousand, ten thousand *ri* in the distance. Though you remain in Sado, your heart has come to this province.

The way of attaining Buddhahood is just like this. Though we live in the impure land, our hearts reside in the pure land of Eagle Peak. Merely seeing each other's face would in itself be insignificant. It is the heart that is important. Someday let us meet at Eagle Peak, where Shakyamuni Buddha dwells. Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, Nam-myoho-enge-kyo.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The nineteenth day of the intercalary tenth month in the first year of Koan (1278)

Reply to the lay nun Sennichi

Background

This letter was written at Minobu to the lay nun Sennichi, the wife of Abutsu-bo, who lived on Sado Island. After Nichiren Daishonin left Kamakura for Mount Minobu, the lay nun's husband traveled all the way from Sado three times at least to visit him on her behalf.

In this letter, the Daishonin praises Sennichi for her sincerity in sending him offerings from so far away, and explains the benefits resulting from sincere offerings. Then he declares the Lotus Sutra to be the supreme teaching by revealing that all the Buddhas derive their enlightenment from it. Because the Lotus Sutra is the source of all Buddhas, he explains, the act of making offerings to the Lotus Sutra brings the same benefit as making offerings to all the Buddhas throughout the universe. He also says that the Lotus Sutra, ultimately the Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, possesses the power to change poi-

son into medicine and is capable of transforming past offenses into sources of benefit and good fortune. The Daishonin goes on to discuss the moment of death, and encourages Sennichi, a woman advanced in years, to strengthen her faith in the Lotus Sutra even further.

In the last section, the Daishonin expresses admiration for Sennichi's faith and seeking mind that helped enable her husband to travel all the way from Sado to Minobu. Although the lay nun herself was unable to visit the Daishonin, he says to her, "Your heart has come to this province." Adding that "it is the heart that is important," he goes on to explain that believers in the Lotus Sutra, or Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, although dwelling in the mundane world, can enjoy supreme happiness without having to go elsewhere to find it.

Notes

1. This incident is said to have occurred when Shakyamuni Buddha, accompanied by his disciple Ananda, was begging in a Brahman city. An old woman offered rice gruel to the Buddha. Though the gruel had spoiled and smelled bad, because her intent was genuine, she was reborn a pratyekabuddha as a result of her sincerity.

2. These Buddhas of the ten directions are enumerated in *The Commentary on the Ten Stages Sutra*. However, since the expression "the Buddhas of the ten directions" is used here to indicate all Buddhas throughout the universe, these ten should be regarded as representing all the Buddhas in their respective directions.

3. One of the three kalpas, the Glorious Kalpa is the name of the past major kalpa. The present major kalpa is called the Wise Kalpa, and the next major kalpa, the Constellation Kalpa. Each major kalpa consists of four smaller kalpas—the kalpa of formation, the kalpa of continuance, the kalpa of decline, and the kalpa of disintegration. *The*

Record of the Three Thousand Buddhas of the Three Kalpas mentions the advent of a thousand Buddhas in succession, from the first, Flower Glow Buddha, to the last, Vishvabhu Buddha, in the Glorious Kalpa.

4. *Three Thousand Buddhas* says that in the Wise Kalpa a thousand Buddhas, from the first, Krakucchanda Buddha, to the last, Ruchika Buddha, will appear in succession.

5. *Three Thousand Buddhas* also refers to the advent in the Constellation Kalpa of a thousand Buddhas, beginning with Sunlight Buddha and ending with Sumeru Appearance Buddha.

6. The Indian or Sanskrit word is vaipulya. The vaipulya sutra literally means a sutra of great extension. In China it was translated as the "correct and equal" sutra or the "great vehicle" sutra. It is generally used to refer to Mahayana sutras but, in the quotation from the Universal Worthy Sutra here, indicates the Lotus Sutra. In this paragraph, the Daishonin gives the terms Mahayana (great vehicle) and Hinayana

(lesser vehicle) a flexible interpretation to indicate successive levels of comparison.

7. "A thousand *ri*" here simply indicates a very long distance.

8. A gate located at Hui-chi in Shao-

hsing of Chekiang Province in China. The sound of the drum from this place was said to reach all the way to the distant capital of Lo-yang.