

The Dragon Gate



A WATERFALL called the Dragon Gate exists in China. Its waters plunge a hundred feet, swifter than an arrow shot by a strong warrior. It is said that a great many carp gather in the basin below, hoping to climb the falls, and that any that succeeds will turn into a dragon. Not a single carp, however, out of a hundred, a thousand, or even ten thousand, can climb the falls, not even after ten or twenty years. Some are swept away by the strong currents, some fall prey to eagles, hawks, kites, and owls, and others are netted, scooped up, or even shot with arrows by fishermen who line both banks of the falls ten *cho* wide. Such is the difficulty a carp faces in becoming a dragon.

There were once two major warrior clans in Japan, the Minamoto and the Taira. They were like two faithful watchdogs at the gates of the imperial palace. They were as eager to guard the emperor as humble mountain folk are to admire the full moon on the fifteenth night of the eighth month as it rises from behind the mountains. They marveled at the elegant parties of the court nobles and their ladies, just as monkeys in the trees are enraptured by the sight of the moon and the stars glittering in the sky. Though of low rank, they longed to find some way to mingle in court circles. But even

though Sadamori of the Taira clan¹ crushed the rebellion of Masakado, he was still not admitted to court. Nor were any of his descendants, including Masamori. Not until the time of Masamori's son, Tadamori, were any of the Taira clan granted permission to enter the court. The next in line, Kiyomori, and his son Shigemori, not only enjoyed life among court nobles, but saw the moon rise when Kiyomori's daughter became the emperor's consort, and the sun appear when his grandson became emperor.

Attaining Buddhahood is no easier than for men of low status to enter court circles, or for carp to climb the Dragon Gate. Shariputra, for example, practiced bodhisattva austerities for sixty kalpas in order to attain Buddhahood, but finally could persevere no longer and slipped back into the paths of the two vehicles.² Even some of those who formed ties with the Lotus Sutra in the days of the Buddha Great Universal Wisdom Excellence sank into the sufferings of birth and death for the duration of major world system dust particle kalpas. Some others who received the seeds of Buddhahood in the even more remote past suffered for the length of numberless major world system dust particle kalpas. All these people practiced the Lotus Sutra, but when harassed in one way or another

by the devil king of the sixth heaven, who had taken possession of their rulers and other authorities, they backslid and forsook their faith, and thus wandered among the six paths for countless kalpas.

Until recently these events seemed to have had no bearing on us, but now we find ourselves facing the same kind of ordeal. My wish is that all my disciples make a great vow.³ We are very fortunate to be alive after the widespread epidemics that occurred last year and the year before. But now with the impending Mongol invasion it appears that few will survive. In the end, no one can escape death. The sufferings at that time will be exactly like what we are experiencing now. Since death is the same in either case, you should be

willing to offer your life for the Lotus Sutra. Think of this offering as a drop of dew rejoining the ocean, or a speck of dust returning to the earth. A passage from the third volume of the Lotus Sutra reads, “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.”⁴

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The sixth day of the eleventh month

Reply to Ueno the Worthy

I write this letter in deep gratitude for your dedication throughout the events at Atsuhara.



Background

This letter was written at Minobu in the eleventh month of the second year of Koan (1279) to young Nanjo Tokimitsu, the steward of Ueno Village in Suruga Province. Tokimitsu embraced the Daishonin’s teaching quite early in life and revered Nikko Shonin as his personal teacher.

It is a reply to a report by Tokimitsu about his role in protecting the Daishonin’s followers in the Atsuhara area, who were being persecuted by authorities associated with the Kamakura government. Tokimitsu used his influence to protect other believers, sheltering some in his own home and negotiating for the release of others who had been imprisoned. The Daishonin honored him for his courage by calling him “Ueno the Worthy.” In the ninth

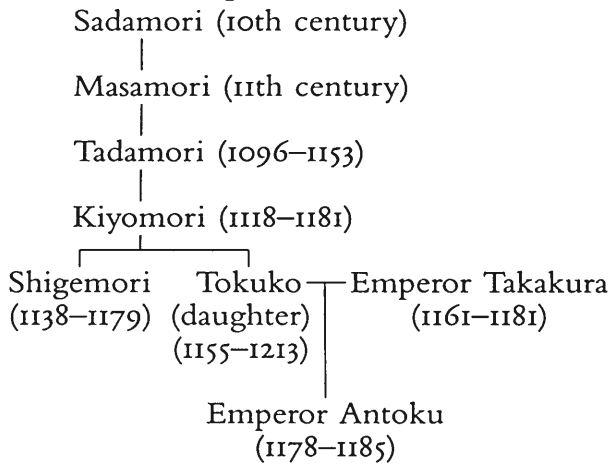
month of 1279, the government arrested on false charges twenty farmer believers, who all refused to recant their allegiance to the Daishonin, and on the fifteenth of the tenth month three of these farmers were beheaded.

The last paragraph of this letter hints at the anxiety gripping Japan in the wake of epidemics and rumors of war. The Daishonin emphasizes that, since death is inevitable, life should be devoted only to the loftiest ambition—enlightenment.

The Dragon Gate mentioned in this letter appears in Chinese folklore and, though it has not been conclusively identified, is thought to refer to a waterfall or rapids on the middle reaches of the Yellow River.

Notes

1. The lineage of the Taira clan:



2. This story is found in *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*. Once when Shariputra was practicing the bodhisattva way, a Brahman begged him for his eye. Shariputra gave it to him, but the Brahman was so revolted by its smell that he dropped and crushed it. Seeing this, Shariputra discontinued his bodhisattva practice, fell back to the Hinayana practice, and therefore was unable to attain Buddhahood.

3. This means the vow to attain Buddhahood oneself and at the same time to lead others to Buddhahood.

4. Lotus Sutra, chap. 7.