

Awakening People From Delusion: The Purpose and Background of “The Opening of the Eyes”

NICHIREN Daishonin wrote “The Opening of the Eyes” —one of his five most important writings¹—in February 1272 while he was in exile on Sado Island. It was addressed to Shijo Kingo, one of the Daishonin’s leading disciples in Kamakura, who received it on behalf of all believers.

On September 12, 1271, the Daishonin was nearly beheaded due to trumped-up charges by prominent priests of Kamakura—such as Priest Ryokan of Gokuraku-ji temple—and the shogunate government officials led by Hei no Saemon, deputy chief of the Office of Military and Police Affairs. After the failed execution attempt, the Daishonin was exiled to Sado Island in the northern Sea of Japan where convicted criminals were often sent. They rarely survived because of the harsh living conditions. Those responsible for the illegal execution attempt hoped that the Daishonin would also perish.

Due to intense government persecution during that time, many of the Daishonin’s followers renounced their faith. His religious movement centered in Kamakura was nearly destroyed, as he states, “When I incurred the displeasure of the government, even in Kamakura 999 out of 1,000 discarded their faith” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 3, p. 69). Many of those who still remained harbored doubts about the Daishonin’s teaching. Some even criticized him. They expressed their doubts, wondering why their teacher was suffering from one persecution after another after being told that the practitioner of the Lotus Sutra would be protected.

Reports of his disciples discarding their faith pained the Daishonin. So, although lacking adequate food, clothing, shelter and writing materials, and despite the fact that some Nembutsu zealots of Sado were trying to assassinate him, the Daishonin penned this treatise in order to resolve his followers’ doubts about their teacher while encouraging them to maintain their faith despite their hardships.

The title “The Opening of the Eyes” means to open the eyes of the people, that is, awaken them from their delusion about Buddhism and its true practitioner so that they may free themselves from suffering and misery. In “On the Buddha’s Behavior,” the Daishonin later described his motive for writing the treatise: “I wanted to record the wonder I had experienced, in case I should be beheaded. The essential message in this work, which I entrusted to Shijo Kingo’s messenger, is that the destiny of Japan depends solely upon me. A house without pillars collapses and a person without a soul is dead. I am the soul of the people of Japan” (MW-1, 189).

In the treatise, the Daishonin reveals that he is the Buddha to establish the object of devotion for all people to reveal their innate Buddhahood. The Daishonin states at the beginning of the treatise: “There are three categories of people that all human beings should respect. They are the sovereign, the teacher and the parent” (MW-2, 59). These three virtues are the virtues of a Buddha. The virtue of sovereign is the power to protect people; the virtue of teacher is the wisdom to lead all to

enlightenment, and the virtue of parent means compassion to nurture and support them. These three virtues are the underlying theme of the entire work, and, at the conclusion of the second volume of the treatise, the Daishonin declares: "I, Nichiren, am sovereign, teacher, father and mother to all the people of Japan" (MW-2, 187).

In this work, the Daishonin establishes himself as a true practitioner of Buddhism not through status or authority, but through his own virtues and action as a sovereign, teacher and parent to all people despite the slander and persecution befalling him. □

1. Five major writings—The five most important of all Nichiren Daishonin's writings as selected by Nikko Shonin. They are: "The True Object of Worship," "The Opening of the Eyes," "On Securing the Peace of the Land through the Propagation of True Buddhism," "The Selection of the Time" and "Repaying Debts of Gratitude."