

The Historical Context of Nichiren's Teaching of "Chanting *Daimoku*"

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Abstract

Nichiren Shonin (1222–1282) interpreted the *Lotus Sūtra* that had come to Japan by way of India and China as a Buddhist scripture that amalgamated all sūtras preached by Śākyamuni, and, based on this, regarded himself as a “practitioner of the *Lotus Sūtra*,” spreading its teachings in Japan during what he saw as mappo or the Latter Day of the Law.

A key feature of the Hokke school of Buddhism to which Nichiren dedicated himself is based on the precept of accepting and honoring the title of the *Lotus Sūtra* (*daimoku juji*). It is said that it was as a result of a childhood and youth spent studying Buddhist scripture that Nichiren first declared his conversion to the *Lotus Sūtra* through means of “chanting *daimoku* [the title of the *Lotus Sūtra*]” at the age of thirty-two on April 28, 1253. Furthermore, the treatise *Shugo kokka ron* [On the Protection of the Nation] written by Nichiren at the age of thirty-eight clearly states the significance of “one moment of belief” (*ichinen shinju*) and “responding with joy” (*zuiki*) to the teaching of the Eternal Buddha as revealed in Chapter 17 of the *Lotus Sūtra* on “Distinctions in Benefits.”

From this, it is apparent that the essence of *daimoku juji* is already revealed in Nichiren's *Shugo kokka ron*. Leaving a detailed discussion to another paper, this paper limits itself to an account of the author's impressions about the background of Nichiren's embrace of the *daimoku*.

1. Buddhism with *Lotus Sūtra* and the Practice of Chanting *Daimoku* (or *Nam-Myo-Ho-Renge-Kyo*)

Nichiren Shonin (1222–1282), renowned as the founder of a revolutionary school of Buddhism in Japan’s Kamakura period, interpreted the *Lotus Sūtra* (Skt. *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*; Jp. *Hokke-kyo*; lit. “Sūtra on the White Lotus of the Sublime Dharma”) that had come to Japan by way of India and China as a Buddhist scripture that amalgamated all sūtras preached by the historical Gautama Buddha. He eventually came to regard himself as a “practitioner of the *Lotus Sūtra*” tasked with spreading its teachings in Japan during what he saw as *mappo* or the Latter Day of the Law. Furthermore, after undergoing many hardships in the course of his proselytizing (writing that “minor persecutions and annoyances are too numerous even to be counted, but the major persecutions number four”), Nichiren came to the realization that he was a reincarnation of Bodhisattva Superior Practices, leader of the four great bodhisattvas whose retinues were as numerous as grains of sand in sixty thousand Ganges River, as foretold in the *Lotus Sūtra*. Encompassing all of this, Nichiren’s life has been handed down to posterity and the present day as “The future chronicle of the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Hoke-kyo no mirai-ki*)”.¹

It hardly bears mentioning that a key feature of the Hokke school of Buddhism to which Nichiren dedicated himself arguably has basis in the precept of *daimoku juji* (the “accepting and honoring the title of the *Lotus Sūtra*”).² The reader will recall that it was based on the results of a childhood and youth spent studying Buddhist scripture that Nichiren first declared his conversion to the *Lotus Sūtra* when he “chanted *daimoku* or the title of the *Lotus Sūtra*” at the age of thirty-two on 4/28/1253. In fact, Nichiren’s subsequent writings are consistent with the essence of this claim. Even so, the world would have to wait another twenty years before Nichiren was to codify his theoretical explanation of chanting *daimoku*, which he issued on 4/25/1273 in his writing: *Nyorai metsugo go go-hyaku sai shi kanjin honzon sho* (“Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind Established in the Fifth Five-Hundred-Year Period after the Thus Come One’s Passing”).³

When we consider the factors behind this, several things come to mind.

- (1) Nichiren led a busy life, and had to limit himself to composing relatively short works.
- (2) The social environment of Nichiren’s lifetimes was marked by rapid

change, especially in the religious sphere.

- (3) Nichiren's successive encounter with religious persecution, especially after his presentation on 7/16/1260 of his treatise *Rissho ankoku ron* ("On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land") to Hojo Tokiyori, then the retired regent of the Kamakura Shogunate (who had taken the tonsure to become a priest at Saimyo-ji Temple under the name of Saimyo-ji Nyudo Tokiyori). The four historic "major persecutions" that befell Nichiren were namely a) the burning of his hermitage on 8/27, a month after his presentation to Tokiyori, b) Izu Exile: his banishment to Izu Province the following year, c) Tojo Persecution: his persecution by Tojo Kagenobu on 11/11/1264, and d) Sado Exile: his banishment to Sado Island followed by Tatsunokuchi Persecution on 9/12/1271.
- (4) It was through his personal experience of these religious persecutions that Nichiren arrived at his embodied reading (*shiki-doku*) of the *Lotus Sūtra* as a future chronicle. Nichiren frequently used the term "embodied reading" (*shiki-doku*) to refer to how it was through his own acceptance of the truth of the *Lotus Sūtra* that he came to dedicate his life to elucidating the "future chronicle of the *Lotus Sūtra*" handed down by the Buddha Śākyamuni for the salvation of all sentient beings during the latter day of the law.
- (5) Through his personal experience of such hardship, Nichiren, himself a manifestation of the "future chronicle of the *Lotus Sūtra*," came to link the acceptance of the truth of the *daimoku* with the salvation offered by the eternal Buddha Śākyamuni, and elaborated the theoretical framework of his teaching in "Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind Established in the Fifth Five-Hundred-Year Period after the Thus Come One's Passing".

Herein, while remaining grounded in an interpretation that is in line with the tradition of Nichiren's teachings, I want to attempt a review of Nichiren's writings from the perspective of desiring to understand the idea and practice of chanting *daimoku*" as he conceptualized it from his early period onwards.

2. The Initial Chanting of *Daimoku* in Nichiren Shonin's Early Period

As is well known, at the age of thirty-two, on the twenty-eighth day of the fourth month in the fifth year of Kencho (1253), Nichiren chanted *daimoku* for the first time and proclaimed his teaching. He proclaimed in his writing “since I declared this before a priest called Joen-bo and some of the people on the southern side of the image hall in Dozen-bo’s quarters at Seicho-ji temple in Tojo Village of Awa Province, I have been speaking out with unremitting zeal for more than twenty years...” (Seicho-ji taishuchu [Letter to the Priests of Seicho-ji] *Showa teihon Nichiren Shonin ibun*,⁴ p.1134; *Nichiren Shonin zenshu*,⁵ Vol. 5, p. 283). In this and many other examples in his extant writings, Nichiren recalls his founding of the sect “on the twenty-eighth day of the fourth month in the fifth year of Kencho.” Of course, rather than a personal recollection, such statements were all meant to emphasize the significance of Nichiren’s reading of the future chronicle of the *Lotus Sūtra* as a practitioner of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

Nichiren revealed the vows and practice of chanting *daimoku* in a letter entitled “Kangyo Hachiman sho [On Reprimanding Hachiman]”:

Now for the past twenty-eight years, since the fifth year of the Kencho era [1253], cyclical sign mizunoto-ushi, the twenty-eighth day of the fourth month, until the present, the twelfth month of the third year of the Koan era [1280], cyclical sign kanoe-tatsu, I, Nichiren, have done nothing else, but have labored solely to put the five or seven characters of *Myoho Renge Kyo* into the mouths of all the living beings of the country of Japan. In doing so, I have shown the kind of compassion that a mother does when she labors to put milk into the mouth of her infant child. (*STNSI*: 1844; *NSZ* 1: 408)

Related material can also be found in other instances of Nichiren’s extant writings, such as “Shonin Gonanji [On Persecutions Befalling the Sage]” (Original manuscript extant; *STNSI* 1672; *NSZ* 5: 194), and “Nakaoki nyudo goshosoku [Letter to the Lay Priest Nakaoki]” (Hiraga manuscript, p. 1714).

Also, in the “*Hōon-jō* okuri-bumi [Cover Letter to *On Repaying Debts of Gratitude*],” Nichiren writes that “I ask that just the two of you, you and Gijo-bo, have the work read aloud two or three times at the summit of

Kasagamori, with this priest to do the reading. Please have him read it once before the grave of the late Dozen-bo as well. After that, leave it in the possession of this priest, and have him read it to you repeatedly. ..." (STNSI 1251; NSZ 3: 106). From this, we know that, having received news of the death of his former teacher Dozen-bo, Nichiren sent his disciple Niko to Seicho-ji Temple to recite his treatise *Hōon-jō* [On Repaying Debts of Gratitude] two or three times at the summit of Kasagamori, and then once before Dozen-bo's grave. This reminds us of a close association between the first instance of Nichiren's daily chanting of *daimoku* on the twenty-eighth day of the fourth month in the fifth year of Kencho and the writing mentioned above.

It is also worth noting, incidentally, that after (13) "Musashi dono gosho-soku [Letter to Musashi]," (14) "*Juju bibasha ron jinshutsu gosho* [Finding a Copy of *The Commentary on the Ten Stages Sūtra*]" (*Teihon*, p. 87) includes a letter addressed "to the priest Musashi-ko," in which Nichiren writes that "Yesterday, I was summoned through a messenger from the former governor of Musashi to a meeting with Nembutsu priests. I wonder if the messenger could also have been from Juro. I need to consult a copy of *The Commentary on the Ten Stages Sūtra* in private. Whatever it may take to do so, please find me a copy." While Nichiren's original handwritten manuscript of this letter has been lost, a copy is included in the *Enzan rokuge*.

Moreover, the letter is appended by a response as follows. "I have sent you fourteen volumes of *The Commentary on the Ten Stages Sūtra*. I looked for the other volumes but was unable to find them. When you have finished, please return them to me as soon as possible. [...] The talk you gave yesterday, the fiftieth person who hears the *Lotus Sūtra* and responds with joy, was as truly admirable as the blessings..." (STNSI p. 88, "To Nichiren").

The authorship of the seventeen-volume *Commentary on the Ten Stages Sūtra* (Skt. **Daśabhūmika Vibhāṣā Śāstra*; Jp. *Juju bibasha ron*) is attributed to Nāgārjuna and translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva of Yao Qin, the same monk who translated the *Lotus Sūtra of the Wonderful Dharma* (Jp. *Myōho Renge Kyo*). *The Commentary* discusses the first two stages of the "Ten Stages" chapter of the *Flower Garland Sūtra* (Skt. **Daśabhūmika Sūtra*), and consists of thirty-five chapters. The first through twenty-seventh chapters expound the first of the Ten Stages, while the twenty-eighth and subsequent chapters expound the distinctions of practice in the second stage. A part of the ninth chapter of this commentary, entitled "Easy Practice," is singled out for emphasis by adherents to the Pure Land school of Buddhism (see Ui Hakuju, ed.,

Bukkyo jiten [Dictionary of Buddhism]). Since Nichiren Shonin is regarded as having accomplished a thorough reading of this treatise, he must have venerated the significance of the seventeenth chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* “Distinctions in Merits” to debate the theory of *shomyo nenbutsu*.

His treatise *Shugo kokka ron* [On the Protection of the Nation] includes the following passage:

One should note, however, that of the three Pure Land scholars, T’an-luan, Tao-ch’o, and Shan-tao, the former two, basing themselves on *Commentary on the Ten Stages Sūtra*, established the dual categories of difficult-to-practice and easy-to-practice teachings, the Sacred Way and the Pure Land doctrines. If in doing so they had gone against the intention of *Commentary on the Ten Stages Sūtra* and had included the *Lotus Sūtra* and True Word doctrines in the difficult-to-practice or easy-to-practice categories, then one could say that their assertions were not worth putting faith in. But if we examine T’an-luan’s *Commentary on “The Treatise on the Pure Land”* and Tao-ch’o’s *Collected Essays on the World of Peace and Delight*, we find that on the whole they do not go against the intention of *Commentary on the Ten Stages Sūtra*.

The Reverend Shan-tao based himself on the three Pure Land sūtras and advocated the practice of calling on the name of Amida, also Amitābha or Amitāyus Buddha, the one practice and one vow that he said would lead to rebirth in the Pure Land. At this time the scholars of the Summary of the Mahāyāna school of the Liang, Ch’en, Sui, and T’ang dynasties all insisted that the mention of rebirth in the Pure Land in the various sacred teachings put forth by the Buddha during his preaching life referred to rebirth at some other time in the future.

But this ran counter to the Reverend Shan-tao’s view on the matter, and therefore when he launched his attacks on these scholars of the Summary of the Mahāyāna school, he likened them to a band of robbers because they steal from believers the blessing of being reborn in the Pure Land in their very next existence. He also referred to the practices advocated by the Summary of the Mahāyāna scholars as a difficult-to-practice way because it appeared that one would invariably have to carry out ten thousand different practices before one could achieve one’s original goal of rebirth in the Pure Land.

Thus, when Shan-tao was berating these scholars, he complained that

"not even one person in a thousand" could ever gain rebirth through their doctrines. But it should be noted that, when the Reverend Shan-tao referred to these sundry practices of the other schools, he never ventured to include the *Lotus Sūtra* and True Word doctrines among them (*STNSI*: 104, *NSZI*: 40ff).

The commentary on this passage in the *Bukkyo jiten*, as well as in the "Diagram of the Five Periods of the Buddha's Lifetime Teachings" (*STNSI*: 2283 [No. 3 Zuroku Fig. 9 "Ichidai goji zu"], provides a clear illustration of the account given in Nichiren's *Shugo kokka ron*. Nichiren's intention is revealed in comparison of the difficult-to-practice and easy-to-practice ways attributed to the *Commentary on the Ten Stages Sūtra*, likening the former to "traveling an overland route, where the going is hard" and the latter to "going by boat over water, where the going is easy." In other words, he introduces the significance in difference between the difficult-to-practice way and the easy-to-practice way in the Pure Land School.

From the passage from the *Shugo kokka ron* cited above, we may infer that Nichiren Shonin's interest in the Summary of the Mahayana school (*Sho daijo ron*; Skt. **Mahāyānasamgraha*) also centered on the arguments raised by the monk Shan-tao.

3. The Background of Nichiren Shonin's Buddhist Beliefs

Discussions of Nichiren's Buddhist beliefs frequently take place under the misapprehension that his *daimoku-juji* is characterized by an extremely narrow perspective.

But when we actually look at Nichiren's writings and the memoranda he composed as preparation, we notice that the establishment of various Buddhist sects after Śākyamuni's death was regarded as significant based on his explanation of the life of Śākyamuni, which was itself based on his tremendous knowledge.⁶

Materials such as the "Five Periods Diagram" and the "Rooster Diagram of the Five Periods of Śākyamuni's Lifetime" (*ichidai goji keizu*; hereinafter "Rooster Diagram") are thought to have been employed in Nichiren's lectures to his disciples. Looking at these diagrams, we see that Nichiren laid out the major sūtras preached by Śākyamuni over the fifty years of his lifetime, and

then surveyed the development of various Buddhist sects on the basis of these scriptures. Yamanaka Kihachi's edition of the *Chu Hokke-kyo* [Annotated *Lotus Sūtra*] offers a transcription of Nichiren Shonin's own annotations to his personal copy of the *Lotus Sūtra* and a study of the provenance of its various quotations from sūtras, treatises, and commentaries, and other works. Yamanaka's edition is the basis for Sekido Gyokai's *Nichiren Shonin chu hokekyo no kenkyu* [A Study of Nichiren Shonin's Annotated *Lotus Sūtra*], which considers the composition of the *Chu Hoke-kyo*. A wealth of related studies exists, such as the series of studies of Nichiren Shonin that includes Miyazaki Eishu's *Nichiren to sono deshi* [Nichiren and His Disciples] (1971), Takagi Yutaka's *Nichiren to sono montei: shukyo shakai-shi-teki kenkyu* [Nichiren and His Disciples: A Religious Social and Historical Study] (1965) and *Nichiren: Sono kodo to shiso* [Nichiren: His Actions and Thoughts], as well as Asai Endo's *Joko Nihon Tendai honmon shisoshi* [A History of Honmon Thought in Early Japanese Tendai Buddhism] (1973).

In the *Senji-sho* [The Selection of the Time], a work composed toward the end of Nichiren's life, he recalls how his youthful period of study and activity had seen the rapid spread throughout Japan of the influence of the *Senchaku hongan nenbutsushu* [Passages on the Selection of the Nembutsu in the Original Vow] composed by the monk Honen (1133–1212; known as Honen-bo Genku), and describes how the influence of the Chinese doctrine of Pure Land teachings represented by the three Pure Land Buddhist patriarchs T'an-luan, Tao-ch'o, and Shan-tao gained a relatively early foothold in Japanese Buddhism. Nichiren felt that two thirds of Japan had been tainted by Pure Land teachings through the influence of the works *Ojo juin* [Ten Conditions for Birth in the Pure Land] by the Buddhist priest Yokan (1033–1111; sometimes known as Eikan) and *Ojoyoshu* [Essentials of Birth in the Pure Land] by Genshin (942–1017; also known as Eshin Sozu), and that Honen's *Senchaku hongan nenbutsushu* had completed the conversion of the entire nation of Japan to Nembutsu devotees.⁷ By pointing this out, Nichiren was likely criticizing the deepening influence of Nembutsu faith in the Tendai and Shingon schools of Buddhism, as well.

Of course, the critique of this state of affairs also fiercely came from Mt. Hiei. We can perhaps infer the zeitgeist of the age from the fact that the monk Myoe (1173–1232) of Toganosan Kosan-ji, although respectful of Honen's character while he was alive, after the latter's death, went on to compose *Zaijarin* [Tract for Destroying Heretical Views] a critique grounded in the

Kegon School that declared Honen's *Senchaku hongan nenbutsushu* to be a work brimming with heresy. The "Nenbutsu-sha tsuiho seshimuru senji, migyosho, go-hen ni shuretsu suru kanmonjo [Compilation of Five Imperial Orders and Decisions on the Proscription of Nenbutsu Practice]" collected in the third volume of STNSI (Document 7 in *STNSI*, No. 3 *Zuroku*) makes us think that Nichiren Shonin regarded the atmosphere of that age with some gravity.

Presumably, under these circumstances, Nichiren Shonin would have revisited his reading of the *Lotus Sūtra* to acquire a new understanding informed by his perspective on latter-day salvation. While he revealed the significance of this reading of the *Lotus Sūtra* as a future chronicle in *Kaimoku-sho* [The Opening of the Eyes], a work he wrote years later during his exile on Sado Island, we may say that this was on a level with his revelation of the tri-fold vow that he bore deep in his heart ("I will be the pillar of Japan. I will be the eyes of Japan. I will be the great ship of Japan") at the founding of his sect in 1253 at the age of thirty-two, in the closing passages of *Kaimoku-sho*, written in 1272, in the twentieth year since first chanting the *godaimoku* at Seicho-ji Temple.

Nichiren Shonin channeled his energies through the very act of propagating the future chronicle of the *Lotus Sūtra* to Japan in the latter-day age of *mappo*, thereby bringing the Buddha's enlightenment to the nation of Japan, whose people suffered in all things. Needless to say, Nichiren's very name derives in part from a verse in the twenty-first chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* on "Supernatural Powers of the Thus Come One":

As the light of the sun and moon
Can banish all obscurity and gloom,
This person as he advances through the world
Can wipe out the darkness of living beings,

The significance of the great vow of the eternal disciples of the Buddha (the Bodhisattvas of the Earth) concealed in this passage is confirmed in the Chinese character for "sun" (pronounced *nichi* in Japanese). Further, the vow of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth takes the character for "lotus" (pronounced *ren* in Japanese) from a verse in the fifteenth chapter on "Emerging from the Earth":

Unsoiled by worldly things
Like the lotus flower in the water.
Emerging from the earth...

Combining these, the name “Nichiren” is a self-evident declaration of its bearer’s vow to carry on Buddha Śākyamuni’s promise of salvation for the sentient beings of the Earth in the latter-day age of mappo following the death of the Buddha.

4. Elucidation of the Significance of the Concept of *daimoku juji* in the *Kanjin honzon sho*

As already mentioned, Nichiren declared the foundation of his own sect at the age of thirty-two in the fifth year of Kencho (1253). Even so, although an outline of the concept of embracing the *Lotus Sūtra* was later developed in the *Shugo kokka ron* [Protection of the Nation], written by Nichiren at the age of thirty-eight, this text is not regarded as offering a frank revelation of the concept’s inner mysteries.

The significance of *daimoku* was also referred to in the *Kaimoku-sho* [The Opening of the Eyes], a treatise written by Nichiren at the age of fifty-one, almost twenty years later. This text discusses the concept of *ichinen sanzen* (“three thousand realms in a single moment”), which Nichiren based on the religious awakening he had achieved through his personal experience of religious persecution and the path he had taken as a “practitioner of the *Lotus Sūtra*.” Nevertheless, a full explanation would have to wait until the following year, when Nichiren completed the *Kanjin honzon sho*, on 4/25/1273 at the age of fifty-two. This occasion marked almost exactly twenty years since the establishment of his new sect. Among many concepts in that writing, let us now look into the concept of *Daimoku*.

The key point of *daimoku juji* for Nichiren was what he called the *daimoku no sanju-san ji dan* (the “33-character section of the *daimoku*”) or else *jinen joyo dan* (the “Section on Spontaneous Yielding and Assigning”) whose traditional understanding is symbolically represented in the following passage.⁸

“Śākyamuni’s practices of cause and effect are all contained within the five characters of *Myoho-renge-kyo*. If we embrace these five characters,

we will naturally be granted the same benefits as he was" (*STNSI* 711; *NSZ* 2: 258)."

After citing the text of several *sūtras*, the essential meaning is shown as follows.

Śākyamuni's [multitudinous] practices (*shuin no gyoho*) and the [extensive] virtues he consequently attained (*kanka no tokuho*) are all contained within the five characters of *Myoho-renge-kyo*.

The two laws of *ingyo-katoku* (in which the practice of religious austerity is regarded as the cause of acquiring a meritorious effect) show that the whole represented by these causal practices (*shuin no gyoho*) and extensive resulting virtues are inherent in the five characters of *Myoho-renge-kyo*. In other words, the term *shuin no gyoho* refers to the entirety of austerities, the truly vast amount of training mastered by the Bodhisattva over the three thousand kalpas that have passed since taking his vow to attain Buddhahood and lead the people of the north-east to salvation. That is, the entirety of these austerities is revealed to be gathered within the five characters of *Myoho-renge-kyo*.

Conversely, the term *kanka no tokuho* signifies that the whole of the teaching that has been continuously preached without pause by the Eternal Buddha since his manifestation of the ultimate pinnacle of enlightenment at the distant and eternal present of kalpas, everywhere in the Ten Worlds, and until the end of the Three Ages from the eternal past to the eternal future (the worlds of the past, present, and future), is collected in these five characters of *Myoho-renge-kyo*.

Therefore, it tells us that if we (the common people of the Latter Day of the Law) embrace the five characters of *Myoho-renge-kyo*, then we will be granted the entirety of the religious austerities undergone by the Eternal Buddha (the whole of *shuin no gyoho*) and be granted the sum of the merits arising out of the teachings of the Eternal Buddha (the whole of *kanka no tokuho*).

In other words, if laypeople such as ourselves should embrace (become adherents of) the five characters of *Myoho-renge-kyo*, then the multitudinous causal practices (*ingyo*) of the Buddha Śākyamuni's repeated religious austerities and the entirety of the merits he earned by continuing to guide all sentient beings as the Eternal Buddha will be automatically transferred to us.

Precisely thus, it is emphasized that the religious austerities undergone by the Eternal Buddha since time without beginning and his missionary activities undertaken by the Historical Buddha after attaining Buddhahood — in other words the “two laws of *ingyo-katoku*” — are inherent in the five characters of *Myoho-rengo-kyo*, and that if we embrace these five characters, then we will be conferred with all the merits inherent therein.

5. Buddhist Belief Based on “an Emphasis on the Realm of the Environment”

The traditional interpretation seems to be that the emphasis of this message is the central point. However, what is important here is that whereas the teachings of the Pure Land school emphasize the union in one body of imperfect believers and the Buddha’s perfection (*kiho ittai*) and regard devotion to this teaching as vital in the realization that the contingencies (*ki*) of the lives of sentient beings are inferior to the dharma (*ho*) of the heavenly Amitabha Buddha, Nichiren emphasized that the Tendai school tenet of *shaba-soku-jakko* (“the *sahā* world is the land of ever-tranquil light”; i.e., the real world of suffering accords with the Pure Land of Tranquil Light) was more in keeping with reality. In association with this, the following points will come to mind.

1) The emphasis on the “realm of the environment” in the concept of *ichinen sanzen*

As a factor in the establishment of *ichinen sanzen*, Nichiren points to the Ten Worlds (*jikkai*) expounded in the *Flower Garland Sūtra* as a foundation for modalities of the workings of the Ten Factors of Life (*junyōze*) expounded in the *Lotus Sūtra*. Further, he refers to the principle of “mutual possession of the Ten Worlds” (*jikkai gōgu*) whereby each realm encompasses the potential inherent in all the others, thus rendering them into “a hundred realms,” and points to the fact that each is endowed with three realms of existence” (*seken*). While these three realms of existence consist of the “realm of living beings” (*shūjo seken*) “the realm of the five components” (*go-un seken*) and the “realm of the environment” (*kokudo seken*), it is perhaps the last of these constituent factors — the terrestrial world — that been expounded least in direct relation to people’s capacity (*ki*).

It is in the further emphasis that it placed on the realm of the environment even while carrying on the originality of the Tiantai Buddhist patriarch Zhiyi that might be said to lie the uniqueness of Nichiren's view of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

2) The significance of "a correct understanding of the country" as one of the "Five Guides of Propagation"

In contrast to the Pure Land teaching of *kiho ittai*, Nichiren emphasized the Five Guides of Propagation (*gogi*) of a correct understanding of the teaching (*kyo*), the people's capacity (*ki*), the time (*ji*), the country (*koku*), and the sequence of propagation (*jo*). Nichiren had already, on the sixteenth day of the seventh month of 1264, harangued key figures in the Kamakura shogunate with his *Rissho ankoku ron*, a critique he sought to deliver to the authorities as a "Correct Teaching" with which to chastise the ruler of the country.

The following year saw Nichiren banished to Ito on the Izu Peninsula, where he composed *Kyo ki ji koku sho* [The Teaching, People's Capacity, Time, and Country] and expounded the importance of working to propagate the *Lotus Sūtra* in accordance with the substance of the Five Principles.

While Buddhism is thought to have originally emphasized these various elements, the teachings of the Pure Land school recognized living beings as being foolish and ignorant, and thus regarded devotion to Amitabha Buddha as of paramount importance. It may have been this that engendered the development of the principle of *kiho ittai* (perhaps as a result of misgivings from the Pure Land school [*jodomon*] about the Path of Sages schools [*shodomon*]).

In contrast, Nichiren emphasized the elements of "country" and "sequence of propagation" as well as "teaching," "people's capacity," and "time." He likely preached the necessity of carefully scrutinizing the close relationship between the teaching and the national land. In fact, Nichiren did quote an article from the *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* to point out the existence of a relationship between the nature of the country and the spread of Buddhism, and in the *Shugo kokka ron* and other writings described his respect for the tradition of the country of Japan by citing the *Ichijo yoketsu* [Essentials of the One Vehicle] of the monk Genshin.

3) Aspects of the actual country and the dissemination of the teaching Nichiren's thought, as expressed in the *Rissho ankoku ron*, mentioned above, remained consistent throughout his life. Indeed, in both the *Kaimoku-sho* and the *Kanjin honzon sho*, two of his greatest writings, it is described how his presentation of the *Rissho ankoku ron* to the authorities held an important significance.

Basically, this is to say that the essence of this third section on Nichiren's "emphasis on the actual country," as already stated in the previous two sections, was already implicit in his arguments arising from his understanding of the *Lotus Sūtra*. This sense of having inherited a Buddhism grounded in a sense of reality can be tangibly felt to project throughout Nichiren Shonin's surviving writings.⁹

6. The Appeal of the Eternal Buddha to the Ignorant Beings of the Latter Age

Since the Heian period, people have been wracked with fear of the arrival of mappo, the degenerate "Latter Day of the Law." The expectation of being enveloped with the Buddha's mercy at the dawn of this latter age seems something way beyond the scope of our imagination today.

This expectation appears to have provided the foundation for the exaltation of Pure Land thought by proponents of Pure Land teachings such as the sages Eikan, Genshin, Honen, and others directed by Nichiren Shonin.

However, Nichiren questioned the stance of the Pure Land Buddhists, who rejected all other Buddhist traditions by conflating them as the "Gate of the Path of Sages" (*shodomon*) in favor of the view that salvation in the Latter Age could only be attained via the "Gate of the Pure Land" (*jodomon*). An important basis for the main point of Nichiren's criticism seems to be (1) his doubts about how the Pure Land Buddhists did not reflect sufficiently on this imperfect *sahā* world, so full of suffering (Skt. *sahāloka*). (2) Additionally, although a detailed discussion would be qualified by a variety of logical interventions, in the end we will understand that Nichiren, based on the philosophy of *shaba-soku-jakko* ("the *sahā* world is in itself the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light") advocated by Tendai Buddhism, persisted in his belief and acceptance that behind this actual world so full of woe lay the Pure Land of

Eagle Peak (Skt. *Gridhrakūta*). Although the phrase *shaba-soku-jakko* seems to imply that the Pure Land of the Eternal Buddha, Śākyamuni, should be seen to reflect the imperfect *sahā* world, from his reading of "The Life Span of the Thus Come One" chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Nichiren further believed and accepted that the *Lotus Sūtra* would continue to be preached on Eagle Peak for all of eternity. In other words, we will always continue to receive the salvation of the Eternal Buddha in the Pure Land of Eagle Peak.

The closing passage of the *Kanjin honzon sho* reads as follows:

When the skies are clear, the ground is illuminated. Similarly, when one knows the *Lotus Sūtra*, one understands the meaning of all worldly affairs.

Showing profound compassion for those unable to comprehend the gem of the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, the Buddha wrapped it within the five characters [of *Myoho-renge-kyo*], with which he then adorned the necks of the ignorant people of the latter age. The four great bodhisattvas will protect anyone who embraces the five characters as faithfully as T'ai-kung Wang and the Duke of Chou supported King Wen, and as devotedly as the Four White-Haired Elders served Emperor Hui" (*STNSI* 720; *NSZ* 2: 291).

The drift of this passage may be understood as follows. "When the skies are clear, the ground is illuminated": if we confirm our understanding of Buddhism in line with this natural law, then for the sake of those who cannot understand the grace of the Buddhist precept of *ichinen sanzen*, the Eternal Buddha, showing great compassion, wrapped this grace in the gem of these five characters [consisting only of *Myoho-renge-kyo*], which he then hung from the necks of the people of the latter age (who are ignorant of the Buddha's teachings).

In the *Lotus Sūtra*, the Eternal Buddha for the first time calls forth his eternal disciples, who had been hitherto unknown to his earthly followers. These were bodhisattvas who had received the teaching by the Eternal Buddha (*honge-no-bosatsu*), who welled out of a fissure in the earth in vast numbers equal to the grains of sand in sixty thousand Ganges rivers, and who were further ordered to spread the dharma in the world after the death of the Buddha. These disciples were led by the four bodhisattvas "Superior Practices" (Jp. *Jogyo*; Skt. *Viśiṣṭacāritra*), "Boundless Practices" (Jp. *Muhengyo*; Skt. *Anantacāritra*), "Pure Practices" (Jp. *Jogyo*; Skt. *Viśuddhacāritra*), and

“Firmly Established Practices” (Jp. Anryugyo; Skt. Supraṭiṣṭhitacārita).

Could there be any doubt that these four great bodhisattvas were certain to protect the base and inferior people who believed in and accepted the five characters of Myoho-rence-kyo in the latter age?

From Chinese history, we read of the ancient Chinese philosophers Jiang Ziya (aka Jiang Taigong Wang) and the Duke of Zhou, who came to the aid of the young King Cheng, and of the four sages who, after fleeing the turmoil of war to live in seclusion on Mount Shang, later offered their support to the young Emperor Hui Di. That is, should even a base and foolish person embrace the five characters of *Myoho-rence-kyo*, it is certain that the disciples of the Eternal Buddha will protect that person out of the devotion with which they serve the Eternal Buddha.

While this phrase is so familiar to the followers of Nichiren Buddhism that they can recite the sentences impeccably by heart, this may be said to be a demonstration of how to revere the Eternal Buddha, who encompasses the whole of the past, the present and the future. Moreover, the words might also be said to reveal the entire scope of the guidance and salvation granted by the Eternal Buddha to the base and foolish people of the latter-day age of *mappo* that has succeeded the death of the Buddha.

7. The Spirit of Buddhist Synthesis Underlying the Concept of *daimoku juji*

Buddhism, which was introduced to China from India, has sought a synthetic understanding grounded in an organizational perspective, in pursuit of a comprehensive understanding of its vast wealth of scriptures and a foundation for Buddhist belief. Seeking a solution to this problem, the thirteen schools of Chinese Buddhism undertook the philosophical attempt of achieving a synthetic understanding of Buddhism by means of a systematic process of doctrinal classification (*kyoso hanjaku*, literally “the judgement and interpretation of the various facets of Buddhist teachings”).

After spreading from India, Buddhism’s journey northeastwards through Asia resulted in a robust tradition of belief in the bodhisattva Maitreya and Amitābha Buddha, formidably represented in the forms of Buddhist sculpture, as well as an associated faith in the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. The great Buddha installed in the Great Buddha Hall of Nara’s Todai-ji Temple

in Japan is generally accepted to be the celestial Buddha Vairocana that features in the Flower *Garland Sūtra*. In the Trikāya (literally "three bodies: Dharma body, reward body, manifested body") doctrine advocated by the Tendai school of Buddhism, however, this same Buddha would be called by different names according to such bodily manifestations – Birushana for the "truth body" (Skt. *dharmakāya*), Rushana for the "body of communal enjoyment" (Skt. *sambhogakāya*), and Śākyamuni for the "transformation body" (Skt. *nirmānakāya*). In China, it is said that the construction of large Buddhist sculptures of this figure from the *Flower Garland Sūtra* was an attempt to synthesize multiple Buddhas. That both the doctrinal discussion of *kyoso hanjaku* and creation of these large Buddhist sculptures were both informed by spirits of integration that in each case aspired to Buddhist synthesis is very suggestive. In Japan, as well, there was the establishment of the Kokubunji system of provincial temples, not to mention the movement by the monk Saicho (posthumously known as Dengyo Daishi) to establish a Buddhist ordination platform based in pure Mahāyāna Buddhism (*daijo endon kaidan*).

Seen in this way, we can perhaps once more appreciate the significance of how Nichiren, feeling Buddhism to be threatened by the crisis represented by the rapid development and spread of Pure Land belief, swore to restore Buddhism through the revival of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

In the *Kanjin honzon sho*, Nichiren writes as follows:

Question: Who is the messenger mentioned in the passage, "he sends a messenger home to announce"?

Answer: It means the four ranks of sages. The four ranks each fall into four categories. [...] Fourth, the four ranks of sages of the essential teaching are the bodhisattvas emerging from the earth, numerous as the dust particles of a thousand worlds, who are certain to appear in the beginning of the Latter Day. When the sūtra says, "he sends a messenger home to announce," it refers to the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. "This good medicine" is the heart of the "Life Span" chapter, or Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, which is endowed with name, entity, quality, function, and teaching (*STNSI* 716–717; *NSZ* 2: 278).

The general meaning of this passage could perhaps be understood as follows:

Question: [In the "The Life Span of the Thus Come One" chapter of the

Lotus Sūtra] who is the messenger mentioned in the passage “he sends a messenger [to his] home to announce [to his grieving children]”?

Answer: It means the four ranks of sages [bodhisattvas who will spread the essential teachings of the Buddha in the world after his death]. The four ranks each fall into four categories. [...] Fourth, the four ranks of sages of the essential teaching are the bodhisattvas emerging from [out of a crack in] the earth, numerous as the dust particles of a thousand worlds, who are certain to appear in the beginning of the Latter Day [at the order of the Eternal Buddha]. [Therefore,] when the [*Lotus*] *Sūtra* says, “he sends a messenger home to announce,” it refers to the Bodhisattvas of the Earth [appearing now in this Latter Day age]. “This good medicine” is the heart of the “Life Span” chapter [i.e., the core teaching formulated for bringing enlightenment to all sentient beings in the Latter Day age], or Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, which is endowed with [the five-fold deep meaning (*goju gengi*) consisting of] name, entity, quality, function, and teaching [i.e., this *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* does not simply explain the terms (*name*), but also defines the substance (*entity*), makes clear the principles (*quality*), discusses their application (*function*), and discriminates the doctrine (*teaching*). In other words, it is thus revealed how the teaching is endowed with a deep meaning that encompasses these five qualities].

Furthermore, we also know that Nichiren often prepared annotated illustrations (such as the “Rooster Diagram” mentioned above) to instruct his disciples on the overall structure of Buddhism. In one such example, as in the “Five Periods Diagram” and “Rooster Diagram,” Nichiren lists the *Flower Garland Sūtra*, the *Āgama sūtras*, the *Correct and Equal* (*vaipulya*) sūtras, the *Perfection of Wisdom* (*prajñāpāramitā*) sūtras, and *Lotus Sūtra*, noting their respective commentaries, the names of the sects they inspired, and the founders of those sects in the lower sections of their respective pages. Under the *Lotus Sūtra* are listed the Shoshu ehyo [“Various dependent”], Butsuryu [“Buddha-founded”], Tiantai [“Tendai”], Hokke [“Lotus”], Himitsu [“Secret”], and Kenrosho [“Openly revealed”] schools. (STNSI: 2337 [Doc. 2 “Ichidai goji zu”]). I feel that in the expression used for the first of these, the Shoshu ehyo School, we can perhaps glean a suggestion of the spirit of Buddhist synthesis described earlier.

Conclusion

The impetus for composing this paper was my belief that the essence of *daimoku juji* had already been revealed in the *Shugo kokka ron*, said to have been composed by Nichiren at the age of thirty-eight. I leave a detailed discussion to another paper, limiting myself here an account of my impressions about the background of Nichiren's embrace of the *daimoku*.

While the composition of a detailed commentary on *daimoku juji* would have to wait until the emergence of Nichiren's *Kaimoku-sho* and *Kanjin honzon sho*, the fact that Nichiren began reciting the *daimoku* in 1253 at the age of thirty-two naturally suggests that such a commentary was already present deep inside him. While Nichiren's discussion in the *Shugo kokka ron* does not extend to the elucidation of the profound doctrine of natural transfer in the Eternal Buddha's two laws of *ingyo-katoku*, it clearly states the significance of "one moment of belief" (*ichinen shinju*) and "responding with joy" (*zuiiki*) to the teaching of the Eternal Buddha as revealed in Chapter 17 of the *Lotus Sūtra* on "Distinctions in Benefits," which serves as an explanatory supplement to the essential core of the *Lotus Sūtra* expounded in Chapter 16 on "The Life Span of the One Thus Come."

I feel we must never forget that Nichiren's basic commentaries on embracing the *Lotus Sūtra* and sūtra-chanting, grounded in a spirit of Buddhist synthesis, had already been constructed on the basis revealed in the writings of his later years.

Publication notes

Japanese version published in *Chie no tomoshibi: Abidaruma bukkyo no tenkai: Mitomo Ken'yo hakushi koki kinen ronbunshu. Chugoku, Chosen hanto, Nihon-hen (Mitomo Ken'yo hakushi koki kinen ronbunshu)* [The Lamp of Wisdom: The Development of Abhidharma Buddhism: China, Korea, Japan volume (A Festschrift in Honor of Dr. Ken'yo Mitomo's 70th Birthday)] (Tokyo: Sankibo Busshorin, 2016), pp. 338–355.

Notes

1. *Motai Kyoko, Kanjin honzon sho kenkyu josetsu* [An Introduction to the Study of the *Kanjin honzon sho*]; Kitagawa Zenchō, *Nichiren kyogaku kenkyu* [Studies

of Nichiren's Teachings], Chapter 2 Nichiren shonin no *Hokke-kyo* shikidoku to "mirai-ki" no shiso [An embodied reading of Nichiren Shonin's *Lotus Sūtra* and the philosophy of the "future chronicle"]; Watanabe Hoyo, Mappo gu-ki to honmon *Hokke-kyo* [The Bases of Nichiren's View on the *Lotus Sūtra*], in *Nichiren bukkyo-ron* [Nichiren Buddhist Thought], pp. 21~; *Nichiren Shonin ibun jiten (kyogaku-hen)* [Nichiren Glossary (Teachings Volume)] s.v. "mirai-ki"; *Nichiren-shu jiten* [Nichiren Dictionary] s.v. "mirai-ki", (p. 402)

2. Motai Kyoko, *Kanjin honzon sho kenkyu josetsu* [An Introduction to the Study of the *Kanjin honzon sho*]; Otani Gyoko, *Nichiren kyogaku kenkyu* [Studies of Nichiren's Teachings], Juji-ron [The theory of "embracing"]
3. In addition, it should be noted that the initial chanting of the *daimoku* (*daimoku shisho*), and thereafter the *daimoku juji*, is regarded as the One Great Secret Law, and that from this opens out the Three Great Secret Laws consisting of the True Object of Worship of the Essential Teaching (*honmon no honzon*), the High Sanctuary of the Essential Teaching (*honmon no kaidan*) and the Daimoku of the Essential Teaching (*honmon no daimoku*). On this point, a detailed discussion may be found in Mochizuki Kanko, *Sandai hiho no seiritsu to soshiki* [The Establishment and Organization of the Three Great Secret Laws] in his own *Nichiren kyogaku no kenkyu* [Studies of Nichiren's Teachings] (Kyoto: Heirakuji Shoten, 1958).

Regarding the interpretation of the Three Great Secret Laws and One Great Secret Law, commentaries by various sages are covered in Mochizuki Kanko, *Nichiren-shu gakusetsushi* [An Intellectual History of the Nichiren Sect] and Shugyo Kaishu, *Nichiren-shu kyogakushi* [A History of the Teachings of the Nichiren Sect]. Also, abbreviated overviews can be found under their respective headings in *Nichiren-shu jiten* [Nichiren Sect Dictionary] (Tokyo: Nichiren-shu Somuin, 1981), Rissho Daigaku Nichiren Kyogaku Kenkyujo, ed. *Nichiren Shonin ibun jiten (rekishi hen; kyogaku hen)* [A Nichiren Glossary (History Volume; Teachings Volume)] (Minobu, Yamanashi: Minobusan Kuonji, 1985), and Miyazaki Eishu, ed. *Nichiren jiten* [Nichiren Dictionary] (Tokyo: Tokyodo Shuppan, 1979).

4. STNSI *Showa teihon Nichiren Shonin ibun* [Showa Standard Edition of the Extant Writings of Nichiren Shonin] (4 volumes). The first edition was edited for publication by Rissho Daigaku Nichiren Kyogaku Kenkyujo. It is still edited by the Rissho Daigaku Nichiren Kyogaku Kenkyujo, but now issued by Minobusan Kuonji. Originally published from 1952 through 1959. A revised edition has since been published, and remains current. General editor Mochizuki Kanko, Director Suzuki Ichijo, ten committee members. General editors Inada Kaiso, Hori Nichiko, Tsuji Zennosuke, and Igi Hisaichi. References are to *Showa teihon Nichiren Shonin ibun*, vol. 4 (Revised and expanded edition of April 28, 2000; third printing). Volume 1 (No. 1 *Sei-hen* I, pp. 1–957), Volume 2 (No. 1 *Sei-hen* II, pp. 959–1933), Volume 3 (No. 2 *Zoku-hen*, pp. 1935–2219; No. 3 *Zuroku*,

pp. 2221–2475; No. 4 *Dankan*, 2477–2540; No. 5 *Koki*, pp. 12541–2728; No. 6 *Mokuroku*, pp. 2729–2871), and Volume 4 (*Sei-hen shinka* pp. 2873–2874, *Oya shahon okugaki*, pp. 2875, *Zuroku shinka*, pp. 2877–2923, *Dankan shinka*, pp. 2925–3019, *Sei-hen shinka* pp. 3025–3023, *Dankan shinka*, pp. 3025–3047, and *Sakuin*)

5. NSZ *Nichiren Shonin zenshu* [Collected Writings of Nichiren Shonin] (7 volumes). Published by Shunjusha. Principal editors Watanabe Hoyo and Komatsu Kuniaki. Of the texts in *Showa teihon Nichiren Shonin ibun*, the writings originating primarily from Nichiren's actual handwriting (*goshinseki*) or old manuscripts (*koshabon*) are categorized into "Shugi [Doctrines] 1–3," "Shingyo [Faith and Practice]," "Seiden & deshi [Biography and Disciples]," and "Shinto 1–2 [Followers]" with the upper half of the page showing the original text with phonetic transcription and the lower half a translation in contemporary Japanese.

A team of nine editors contributed to this publication. Since this article quotes both the original *kanbun* and the phonetic transcription, I cite the volume and page number reference for the *Nichiren Shonin zenshu* whenever necessary. However, the phonetic transcription I use may not necessarily agree with that found in the *Nichiren Shonin zenshu*. The study of Nichiren Shonin's handwritten texts has been advanced by the work of many scholars, including that of the late Yamanaka Kihachi of the Rissho Ankoku-kai and his colleagues. Yoneda Jun'yu's publication of *Heisei shinshu Nichiren Shonin ibunshu* is a feat of editing that could be said to signal a new tide of publications based on the results of studies conducted since the publication of the *Showa teihon Nichiren Shonin ibun* and of *Nichiren Daishonin goshinseki* edited by the Rissho Ankoku-kai. The *Nichiren Shonin zenshu* is an attempt at translation based on the texts organized by these pioneering scholars.

6. Collected in *STNSI*, vol. 3, No. 3 *Zuroku*; Watanabe Hoyo, Nichiren bukkyo no seishin bunka ninshiki [Spiritual and Cultural Awareness in Nichiren Buddhism], in *Nichiren bukkyo-ron* [Nichiren Buddhist Thought], p. 89.
7. *STNSI* p. 1047ff, "Senji-sho."
8. *Nichiren Shonin ibun jiten (rekishi-hen)* [Nichiren Glossary (History Volume)]; Mochizuki Kanko, ed. *Nichiren Shonin go ibun kogi* [Extant Sermons of Nichiren Shonin], vol. 3 "Kanjin honzon sho kogi [Lecture on *The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind*]"; Watanabe Hoyo, *Kokuho Kanjin honzon sho sangyo* [An Appreciation of *The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind*, a National Treasure], pp. 188ff.
9. Watanabe Hoyo. Features of Nichiren's Understanding of the *Lotus Sūtra*: Ichinen sanzen and Myoho goji, *Journal of Indian and Buddhist studies* 63(3), 1111-1117.