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Author(s): Paul O. Ingram

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## NICHIRIN'S THREE SECRETS

by

PAUL O. INGRAM

Tacoma, Washington U. S. A.

One of the most interesting, and yet little understood figures in the history of Japanese Buddhism is Nichiren (1222-1282), the founder of a unique Buddhist tradition which bears his name (Nichiren Shū). Perhaps the most charismatic personality in the history of Japanese religions, he has been labled everything from "prophet" <sup>1)</sup> and "true Buddha" <sup>2)</sup> to "personal and tribal egotist" <sup>3)</sup>. However, since his teachings and personality have in our century spawned the largest, most powerfully influential, and dynamic religious mass movement in contemporary Japanese history, the Value Creation Society of the Orthodox School of Nichiren Buddhism (*nichiren shōshū sōka gakkai*), it would appear that Nichiren's life and thought should be reassessed. Consequently, the purpose of this study is to join with interested scholars in this enterprise by focusing attention upon Nichiren's abridgment and simplification of traditional Buddhist doctrine and practice in terms of his "Three Great Secret Laws" (*sandai hihō*).

### *The Context of Nichiren's Teachings*

Even though it is true for all religious teachers, and especially

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1) Cf. Masaharu Anesaki, *Nichiren, the Buddhist Prophet* (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1916), pp. 3-11.

2) The "theological" position of Nichiren Shōshū Sōka Gakkai. Cf. H. Neill Mc Farland, *The Rush Hour of the Gods* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), pp. 194-202 and Kiyooki Murata, *Japan's New Buddhism, An Objective Account of Soka Gakkai* (New York: Weatherhill, 1971), chapters 5-6.

3) Perhaps Edward Conze's evaluation of Nichiren is typical of those which are most negative: "Nichiren suffered from self-assertiveness and bad temper. and he manifested a degree of personal and tribal egoism which disqualify him as a Buddhist teacher". *Buddhism, Its Essence and Development* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), p. 206. James B. Pratt was a little less negative in his comment that, "In positive philosophical insight, Nichiren had little to contribute". *The Pilgrimage of Buddhism* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928), p. 646.

Nichiren, that their lives and what they taught cannot be considered separately, we shall not attempt a biography of Nichiren here. This has already been done, and in fact, more is probably known about Nichiren's biography than any other pre-modern Japanese Buddhist teacher<sup>4</sup>). We shall, however, make references to his life experiences as these are involved in the development of his Three Great Secret Laws. In this regard, three important facts must be kept in mind from the beginning.

First, the time in which Nichiren lived and taught (that era of the Kamakura Period known as the Hōjō Regency, 1219-1333) was a time of tremendous social, political, economic, moral, military, and religious upheaval. In his *Risshō Ankoku Ron* (*Discourse on the Establishment of the True Teachings for the Security of the Country*), written and presented to the Hōjō government on August 24, 1260, Nichiren described the conditions of the times as follows:

We have seen many signs in heaven and earth; famine, plague, and the whole country filled with misery. Horses and cows are dying on the roads, and so are men, and there is no one to bury them. Half of the population has been stricken, and there is no household that has escaped.

Therefore, many minds are turning towards religious teachings. Some say, "A sharp sword is the name of Amida", and turn in prayer to the Lord of the Western Land. Others take up magical formulas and charms as protection against disease which belong to the Lord of the Eastern Quarter... Others, again in accordance with the secret teachings of Shingon, use many sprinklings of water from the five vases. Then again, some enter into ecstatic meditation and with a calm mind meditate upon the truth free from all care. Some write the names of the seven gods of luck on pieces of paper and place them on the door posts of their houses, while others do the same with images of the Five Great Powerful Ones and the various (Shintō) deities of heaven and earth... But let men do as they will, famine and plague rage; there are beggars everywhere, and unburied corpses line the roads<sup>5</sup>).

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4) The following works are among the most important: Anesaki Masaharu, *Hokke-kyō gyōja Nichiren* [*Nichiren, the Practitioner of the Lotus Sutra*] (Tōkyō; 1933); Masutani Fumio, *Shinran, Dōgen, Nichiren* (Tōkyō: 1956); Yamakawa Chiō, *Hokke shisō shijō no Nichiren Shōnin* [*Saint Nichiren in the History of Lotus Ideologies*] (Tōkyō: 1936); Anesaki, *Nichiren, the Buddhist Prophet*; and George B. Sansom, "Nichiren", in Sir Charles Eliot, *Japanese Buddhism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1934), pp. 416-431.

5) *Nichiren Shōnin Zenshū* [*The Complete Works of Nichiren Shōnin*], 3 vols. (Tōkyō: Nichiren Shū Zensho Shuppansō, 1911), pp. 1-2, hereafter abbreviated *NSZ*. All translations of Nichiren's works cited in this essay are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

Everything that Nichiren taught was directed to not only helping persons caught up in the conditions of this age experience a sense of hope for salvation, but also towards reforming the entire nation socially and politically so that Japan itself could be transformed into a Buddha Land. He was a political and religious reformer who traced the causes of the terrible sufferings of the times to immoral political leadership and a lack of religious unity throughout the country. He thus sought to convince the secular authorities to impose his interpretation of the *Lotus Sūtra* <sup>6)</sup> upon the land as the religion of the state, at the same time calling for governmental suppression of all other forms of Buddhism and Shintō <sup>7)</sup>.

Secondly, the fundamental presupposition behind everything Nichiren taught and wrote is a cyclic theory of history centering upon the notion of *mappō* ("latter days of the law"), the last of three periods of gradual decay of Śākyamuni Buddha's Dharma. At the same time, it must also be noted that this theory of history was the starting point for the teachings of other twelfth and thirteenth century Buddhist reformers as well, especially the leaders of the Japanese Pure Land movement, Hōnen and Shinran. Variations of this theory were also

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6) The *Lotus Sūtra* (Sanskrit, *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*), known as *Myōhō renge kyō* in Japanese, was first translated into Chinese by Dharmaraska during the Western Tsin Dynasty (265-316), and was again translated by Kumarajiva in 407. Nichiren preferred Kumarajiva's translation and interpreted it according to Tendai exegesis. For an old, but reliable English translation of the Sanskrit text, see H. Kern (trans.), *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka* (vol. 21 of *The Sacred Books of the East*, ed. Max Müller, 50 vols. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1898). The most recent revised English translation of Kumarajiva's Chinese text is Bunnō Katō (trans.), *Myōhō Renge Kyō: The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law*, rev. by W. E. Soothill and Wilhelm Schiffer (Tōkyō: Kōsei Publishing Company, 1971). All references to the *Lotus Sūtra* cited in this essay are from Sakamoto Yukio and Iwamoto Yutaka (eds.), *Hokke-kyō*, 3 vols. (Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 1962-76). This edition of the sutra is particularly valuable because it consists of two texts of the sutra: a translation from Sanskrit into Japanese by Iwamoto and a translation from Kumarajiva's text into Japanese by Sakamoto, which are printed on facing pages for contrast and comparison. Kumarajiva's Chinese text is printed on the top half of the pages on which the Japanese translations are printed.

7) See the entire text of *Risshō Ankoku Ron*, NSZ, pp. 1-25. Arthur Lloyd has translated the complete text of this discourse in his *The Creed of Half Japan* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1912), pp. 307-328. In *Risshō Ankoku Ron*, Nichiren was especially critical of the Pure Land teachings of Hōnen (1133-1212). However, throughout his voluminous writings, he also bitterly attacked the Shingon, Zen, and Ritsu schools.

assumed by the Japanese people in general because the contemporary political and social conditions of the time seemed to be its empirical justification<sup>8</sup>). Although the theory of *mapṣṣō* is found in several Mahāyāna sūtras, and therefore there are several versions of it, Nichiren seems to have based his interpretation of it upon a collection of Mahāyāna texts called the *Daijikyō* (*Great Collection of Sutras*)<sup>9</sup>).

The three-fold scheme of periodization as Nichiren interpreted it is as follows (we shall only use the Japanese names)<sup>10</sup>): the first period, called *shōbō*, is the period of "correct doctrine", and it lasted, counting from the date of Gautama the Buddha's death, for one thousand years; the second period, *zōbō*, the period of "counterfit doctrine", lasted for the next one thousand years; and *mapṣṣō*, the period of final termination and decay of the effectiveness of Śākyamuni's teachings, lasting for the next ten thousand years. Connected with this conception of the gradual breakdown of the effectiveness of Śākyamuni's teachings is the theory that the Buddha invented various methods of teaching appropriate to the capacities and abilities of persons living in each of these three ages. Consequently, what is appropriate discipline and practice for persons living in one age will not be appropriate for persons living in the other two ages. This idea, called *upāya* ("skill in means"), is especially set forth in the *Lotus Sutra*<sup>11</sup>), the text which Nichiren believed contained the only teachings suitable to the capacities of corrupted beings living in the age of *mapṣṣō*. Since according to traditional Chinese and Japanese calculations, the Buddha died in 949 B.C., the beginning of the age of *zōbō* was dated 51 B.C., and the beginning of the age of *mapṣṣō* was dated 1051 A.D., precisely the time in Japanese history which marked

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8) Cf. Watanabe Shōko, *Nihon no Bukkyō* [*Japanese Buddhism*] (Tōkyō: Iwanami Shinsō, 1964), pp. 64-140 and Akamatsu Shinshu, *Kamakura Bukkyō no Kenkyū* [*Studies in Kamakura Buddhism*] (Kyōto: Byōrakujī Shoten, 1957), pp. 1-10.

9) Chinese, *Ta-chi-ching*, a sixty-fascicle Mahāyāna sutra collection whose full title is *Daihōdō Dījikyō* (Chinese, *Ta-fang-têng-ta-chi-ching*). The sutras collected in the *Daijikyō* were first brought together under this title in the Korean edition of the Mahāyāna Canon. Cf. Ui Hakuji (ed.), *Bukkyō Jiten* [*Buddhist Dictionary*] (Tokyo: Daitō Shuppansha, 1965), p. 696.

10) The Sanskrit names for these three periods are *saddharma*, *pratirūpa-dharma*, and *paśchimadhama* respectively.

11) See especially chapter two, *hōben* or "expedient method", *Hokkekyō*, vol. 1, pp. 66-133.

the beginning of a long series of civil wars over the question of unifying the country under one warrior clan, and which did not end until the establishment of the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1603.

During the age of *shōbō*, monks and lay followers of the Buddha's teachings were able to understand his Dharma, successfully practice it, and with relative ease attain *nirvāṇa*. Human beings lived longer than they do now, and their mental, physical, moral, and spiritual capacities were strong enough to allow them to practice the extremely difficult meditational and ethical disciplines leading to enlightenment. Evil in the form of pride, lust, and greed had not yet begun to dominate the human spirit. But as this age "ran down" to the age of *zōbō*, evil begins to take a firmer grip upon the world, so that human beings become more and more governed by neurotic cravings and desires (*tanha*) over which they have no control. Thus, even though many monks and laypersons practice the correct disciplines, very few understand the Buddha's Dharma and thereby attain enlightenment. Finally, in the age of *mappō*, no correct doctrine is taught, Buddhism exists only in a corrupted state, and no person achieves enlightenment through its practice. In this age, man's mental, physical, moral, and spiritual capacities have been totally corrupted so that he is completely dominated by his egoistic drives and desires. He is thereby caught in a chain of negative karmic effects from which he cannot escape, and is therefore incapable of freeing himself from the ever recurring round of rebirths in the painful realm of samsaric existence. As can be seen, the basic assumption of this view of history is that the age into which one is born *determines* one's capacities and potential, and thereby one's destiny.

Essential to Nichiren's understanding of the theory of *mappō* was his interpretation of chapter fifteen of the *Lotus Sutra*<sup>12</sup>). The message of this chapter, entitled "Springing out of the Earth", is that Śākyamuni Buddha, who is pictured here as the Lord, that is, as absolute Buddhahood who is the "father" of all worlds and future Buddhas, took form as Gautama the historical Buddha so that sentient beings could be led to *nirvāṇa*. Stated in more traditional Buddhist language, Śākyamuni's human form as the historical Buddha (*nirmānakāya*) was only a limited manifestation of Śākyamuni as

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12) *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 284-322.

*dharmakāya* (Japanese, *hosshin* or “law body”). Therefore, since the Truth (Śākyamuni) is eternal, the historical person who embodies this truth and teaches it to sentient beings is “eternal”, so that Master and disciple have an original and “primal” kinship. It is for this reason that the “Bodhisattvas springing out of the earth” mentioned in this chapter are Śākyamuni’s “original disciples” whose mission it will be to propagate the *dharma* to all sentient beings during the age of *mapṇō* by “skillful means”. The particular Bodhisattva who is given charge of this mission is Jōgyō Bosatsu (Sanskrit, *Viśiṣṭacāritra-bodhisattva*), or the “Bodhisattva of Eminent Conduct”. The point to be made here is that Nichiren gradually came to believe that he was an incarnation of Jōgyō Bosatsu, since only he, he believed, was preaching the *Lotus Sutra* as the sole means of salvation in a way suitable to the capacities of beings living in this degenerate age. Nichiren’s first definite statement in this regard is found in a letter addressed to one of his lay followers, Lord Toki, dated shortly after he had arrived on the island of Sado to begin his second exile in 1271.

During the nearly two months since my arrival on the island of Sado, icy winds have been continually blowing, and though some-times the snowfall is interrupted, sunlight is never seen. My body is penetrated by the cold, whereof, as is told concerning the cold hells, there are eight kinds. As I have written you, during the two thousand two hundred years since the Buddha’s death, various masters have appeared in the world and labored to perpetuate the Truth, knowing its purport, and yet adapting it to the needs of the times. The great masters, Tendai and Dengyō, made explicit the purport of the truth . . . and yet they did not propagate it. One who is to fulfill this task shall appear in this country. If so, may not Nichiren be *this man*? The Truth has appeared and omens are already clearly more manifest than ever before <sup>13</sup>).

The third important point to bear in mind about Nichiren is that from all indications he wanted to restore and reform the Tendai (Chinese, T’ien T’ai) School. In fact, he accepted *in toto* the Tendai conception of *ichinen sanzen*, or the doctrine that the “three thousand

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13) I have for the most part followed Anesaki’s translation in *Nichiren, The Buddhist Prophet*, pp. 62-63, emphasis supplied. Also note the following passage in his *Shoji Ichidai Kechimyoku Shō (Treatise on the Heritage of the Sole Great Thing Concerning Life and Death*, written on March 12, 1272: “Will the Bodhisattva Viśiṣṭacāritra appear in the Latter Days of the Law to open wide the gate of truth, or will he not appear? The Sutra tells us he will (appear). Yet, will it surely happen? Will the Bodhisattva appear or not? At any rate, I Nichiren, have accomplished the pioneering work”. *NSZ*, p. 250.

(*sanzen*) realms of existence" are contained in "one thought moment" (*ichinen*). More specifically, it was Saichō's interpretation of this doctrine that provided the metaphysical underpinnings for Nichiren's specific interpretations of the *Lotus Sutra*. Thus, each of the "ten realms of living beings" (*jikkai*)<sup>14</sup>) includes the other nine in itself, making a total of one hundred realms of living beings. Each of these one hundred realms possesses "ten factors" (*jūnyoze*)<sup>15</sup>), thus increasing the total of the realms of existence to one thousand. In turn, each of these realms are involved in the three conditions of life in phenomenal existence (*saṃsāra*): the realms of sentient beings, nonsentient beings, and the five *skandha* ("groups"), making a total of three thousand realms of existence. The main thrust of this doctrine is that all things exist in a state of monistic interdependence, so that "one thought moment" on the part of any sentient being, no matter what the quality of that thought moment may be, involves the entire structure of existence<sup>16</sup>).

For the purposes of this study, it is not necessary to offer a more detailed analysis of the doctrine of *ichinen sanzen*, but only to note, as we have already done, that Nichiren appropriated it as the metaphysical justification for everything he taught. Consequently, we shall only be concerned with elaborating Nichiren's use of it in his Three Great Secret Laws<sup>17</sup>).

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14) That is, hell, the worlds of hungry spirits, animals, *asuras*, human beings, heavenly beings, *arhats*, *pratyekabuddhas*, *bodhisattvas*, and Buddhas. See *Japanese-English Buddhist Dictionary* (Tōkyō: Daitō Suppansha, 1965), p. 135.

15) That is, form, nature, substance, power, activity, primary causes, environmental causes, effects, rewards, and retributions, and the totality of the above factors. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

16) Cf. Junjiro Takakusu, *The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1956), pp. 124-141.

17) On the other hand, Nichiren's specific approach to religious and secular matters was more similar to the other schools of Kamakura Buddhism. As Joseph M. Kitagawa has noted, "...he disregarded the validity of the transmission of the charisma of ecclesiastical offices. To him, the transmission of the *Lotus Sutra* was based on a 'spiritual succession' from one charismatic person to the next, even though there might be a long time span between them. Thus Nichiren considered himself, on the one hand, the successor of Śākyamuni-Ch'i [founder of the T'ien T'ai School in China] -Dengyō line, and, on the other, also an incarnation of Viśiṣṭacāritra Bodhisattva... to whom Śākyamuni is said to have entrusted the *Lotus Sutra*". *Religion in Japanese History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), p. 120.



*The Three Great Secret Laws*

From the time of its introduction to Japan, the *Lotus Sutra* has maintained a central place of honor and renown. However, Nichiren's fascination with this text was, and perhaps still is, unparalleled in the history of Japanese Buddhism. Consequently, his Three Great Secret Laws represent his attempt to establish a simplified form of Buddhist doctrine and practice centering upon faith in the *Lotus Sutra* as man's only option for salvation in the age of *mappō*. But a religious teaching must not only be "true," he taught, it must also embody truth in forms suitable to the needs and abilities of those being taught. Therefore, any religious teaching must meet "five principles" (*goko*), a notion which Nichiren appropriated from Tendai the Great's commentary on the *Lotus Sutra*: *kyō* (*sūtra*), *ki* (the readiness of persons to respond to the *sūtra*), *ji* (time), *koku* (country), and *kyōho rufu no sengo* (the sequence in which religious teachings and practices are to be propagated) <sup>18</sup>).

What Nichiren meant was that it is important to judge which of the numerous *sūtras* preached by the Buddha was the supreme and final statement of the *dharmā*. Here, Nichiren remained within the Tendai tradition which placed the *Lotus Sutra* at the apex of the Buddhist canon <sup>19</sup>). Yet even the *Lotus Sutra* cannot be taught without regard to the readiness of persons to understand and accept it — hence the second principle (*ki*). According to Nichiren, corrupted persons living in the age of *mappō* need a simplified form of faith in the *Lotus Sutra* as their only means of salvation. The third principle, *ji*, has to do with the correct time for preaching the *sūtra*, which is, of course, the age of *mappō*. Fourth, true Buddhist teaching and practice must be propagated in the correct country (*koku*), and Nichiren believed Japan was the place in which true Buddhist faith would be once and for all established, and from Japan spread throughout the whole world. Finally, anyone trying to propagate Buddhist faith must know

<sup>18</sup>) Cf. *Kyōkijōkoku Shō* (*Treatise on Doctrine, Method, Time, and Country*, NSZ, pp. 1243-1249.

<sup>19</sup>) "One who propagate Buddhist truth, being convinced of the Five Principles, is entitled to become the leader of the Japanese nation. One who knows that the Lotus of Truth is the king of all sutras knows the truth of religion... If there were no one who read the Lotus of Truth, there would be no leader of the nation. If there is no leader, the nation can only be bewildered... and fall into the deepest hells as a result of slandering the truth". *Ibid.*, pp. 1245-1246.

what kind of religion previously prevailed. Thus, in a country where Buddhism had not yet been established, the "provisional" Theravāda tradition might be suitable for propagation. But in the case of Japan, where the Mahāyāna tradition had been established for centuries, faith in the *Lotus Sutra* should be established as the culmination of Buddhist doctrine and practice.

Nichiren offered "three proofs" (*sanshō*) to show that only his teachings fulfilled the conditions of the "five principles" <sup>20</sup>). The first "proof" has to do with written language (*monshō*), meaning a doctrine is true if it has documentary support in the sūtra literature. This is why, for example, Nichiren regarded Zen Buddhism as a heretical teaching because of its supposed rejection of written language in general and the sūtras in particular <sup>21</sup>). The second "proof" is a proof by logic (*rishō*). By this, Nichiren meant that true religion must be logical in its teachings and practices. In the age of *mappō*, a religion must be rigorously based upon an empirical and logical analysis of the human condition, and he believed only his interpretation of the *Lotus Sutra* met this condition. Lastly, there is the "proof of reality" (*genshō*), which Nichiren regarded as the most important proof. By this criteria, he meant that the truth of a religious teaching must be measured by the concrete benefits and results its practice brings to the devotee (a pragmatic theory of truth). Accordingly, since only faith in the *Lotus Sutra* can bring the benefit of salvation in the age of *mappō*, only this religious practice conforms to "reality", meaning the way things "really are" in this degenerate age.

The "five principles" and the "three proofs" provided Nichiren with a rationale for his interpretation of the *Lotus Sutra*, the central elements of which are his Three Great Secret Laws. The first secret law is the law of *daimoku*, or "title", meaning the five Chinese characters of the title of the *Lotus Sutra*, pronounced in Japanese as *myō-hō, ren, ge, kyō*, to which he added *namu*, literally "to take refuge in". The law of *daimoku* is thus the practice of meditatively repeating over and over again the phrase *namu myōhō renge kyō*, "I take refuge in the Lotus of the Wonderful Law Sutra" <sup>22</sup>).

20) *Ibid.*, p. 1247.

21) Anesaki, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

22) Although the Three Great Secret Laws are mentioned elsewhere in his writings, Nichiren's most systematic statement is his *Sandai Hihō Shō* (*Treatise on the Three Great Secret Laws*), *NSZ*, pp. 2610-2615.

Behind the law of *daimoku*, as well as the other two great secret laws, was Nichiren's use of the concept of "Buddha Mind" (*bodhicitta*)<sup>23</sup>, again appropriated from the Mahāyāna-Tendai tradition. According to this doctrine, all sentient beings possess the potentiality for becoming actual Buddhas, even in the age *mappō*, because all sentient beings possess "Buddha Mind", which Nichiren located in what Western psychology is apt to call the "unconscious mind". For this reason, enlightenment is latent in all persons. But during the age of *mappō*, the traditional practices of meditation and ethical discipline are not effective in raising the *bodhicitta* to conscious awareness. Only the practice of *daimoku*, in conjunction with the *honzon*, the second great secret law, can accomplish this. In other words, to fervently chant *daimoku* is an act of faith which raises the unconscious *bodhicitta* to conscious awareness, which in turn results in the experience of enlightenment. This is possible because the five words of the Sutra are themselves embodiments of the truth and power of the whole Sutra. That is, on the basis of the doctrine of *ichinen sanzen*, the mere sounds of the title of the Sutra embody the truth and power of the entire text, so that merely meditatively repeating the words of the title creates an "energy" within the devotee which "raises" his unconscious Buddha Mind to conscious awareness, thereby transforming him into an actual Buddha.

However, in spite of Nichiren's special condemnation of Hōnen's *nembutsu* and Shingon's use of *mantra*, *namu myōhō renge kyō* differs very little in structure from other *mantra*. It in fact functions as a *mantra* as fully as the Tantric *om mane padme hume*. Mantras (*man*, "to think" or "to reflect") are of vedic origin, and were used both as objects of meditation and as magical defenses against calamities<sup>24</sup>). Both functions occur in Nichiren's *daimoku*. This is clear from the following "word interpretation" of the Title which he wrote in *Hokke Daimoku Shō* (*Treatise on the Sacred Title of the Lotus Sutra*):

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23) Japanese, *bodaishin*. The literal meaning of this term is "aspiration to enlightenment" or "mind aspiring to enlightenment". Cf. Ui, Bukkyō Jiten, p. 947.

24) Cf. Agehananda Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition* (New York: Anchor Books, 1970), pp. 9-34 and S. B. Dasgupta, *An Introduction to Tantric Buddhism* (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1950), pp. 1-33.

The character *myō* is written as *sad* in Sanskrit, and *miao* in Chinese. It means “being fully endowed”, and therefore “perfection”. Each character of the *Lotus Sutra* is fully endowed with the blessings of the 69, 384 characters (of the whole text), just as the ocean is composed of drops of water from all the rivers of the world, or just as any wish-granting-jewel, even though as small as a poppy seed, rains down all the treasures of such jewels in the universe<sup>25</sup>).

In this way, the words of the Title “participate” in, and therefore embody the truth of the entire text.

Question: Even if the heart of the *Lotus Sutra* is not understood, merely by chanting the five or seven characters *namu myōhō renga kyō* once a day, once a year, once every ten years, or even only once in a life time, is it possible to not give in to one's evil *karma* or fall into the four evil paths and attain the stage of universal faith?

Answer: Yes, it is!<sup>26</sup>).

Hense, the practice of chanting *daimoku* while believing that the *Lotus Sutra* is the key to salvation, even though the devotee may not even be able to read or understand the content of the text. The metaphysical foundation of this notion, as we have already indicated, is the doctrine of *ichinen sanzen*. On this basis, Nichiren could say:

Chanting *daimoku* twice is to read the entire Sutra twice; one hundred *daimoku*, one hundred times; one thousand *daimoku* one thousand times. Therefore, if you chant *diamoku* without ceasing, you will be continually reading the *Lotus Sutra*... In the age of *mappō* one should embrace and place one's faith in the *Lotus Sutra*... Even though one neither reads nor studies the Sutra, its will bring him good fortune<sup>27</sup>).

Chanted over and over again, *daimoku* becomes, as Harry M. Buck has noted<sup>28</sup>), incarnate in the *honzon*, the second of the Three Great Secret Laws. Accordingly, *daimoku* and *honzon* complement one another, for chanting *daimoku* places the devotee at the “center” of the *honzon* (*hon*, “origin”, “source”; *zon*, “supremacy”). Therefore, as *daimoku* is a verbal embodiment of the entire truth and saving power

25) *NSZ*, pp. 452-453.

26) *Ibid.*, p. 447.

27) *Myoshin Ama Gozen Gohenji (A Letter of Reply to Myoshin Ama)*, dated July 3, 1278, *Ibid.*, pp. 2295-2296.

28) Harry M. Buck, “The Lotus Scripture in the Nichiren Tradition”, (unpublished paper delivered at the national meeting of the American Academy of Religion at Atlanta, Georgia, 1971). Professor Buck's paper is included in the section papers *Asian Religions: 1971* (Chambersburg, Pennsylvania: The American Academy of Religion, 1971), p. 30.

of the *Lotus Sutra*, the *honzon* is a visual embodiment of this same truth and power because it is a calligraphic representation of *daimoku* in *maṇḍala* form, again an extension of the principle of *ichinen sanzen*.

Nichiren enscribed the *honzon* during his second exile on the island of Sado. In fact, he enscribed several versions of it, but all follow the same basic plan. It is an elongated calligraphic rendition of *daimoku* from the top to the bottom of a rectangle followed by Nichiren's signature. Places of honor at the top right and left are filled with the names of Śākyamuni Buddha and Tahō Buddha respectively<sup>29</sup>). The names of the *deva* kings of the four quarters occupy positions around both sides of the *daimoku*, and the remaining space is filled with the names of notable Bodhisattvas mentioned in the *Lotus Sutra*. There are no pictorial representations nor symbols, but only words and names. Therefore, the *honzon* is essentially a merger of *mantra* and *maṇḍala*. This is clear from the following passage:

The august state of the Supreme Being (Svādi-devatā) is this: the Heavenly Shrine is floating in the sky over the Sahā-world (i.e., the abode of mankind) ruled by the Primal Master, the Lord Śākyamuni. In the Shrine is seen the sacred title of the Lotus of Perfect Truth, on either side of which are seated the Buddhas Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna, and also on the sides, at a greater distance, the four Bodhisattva leaders, Viśiṣṭa-cāritra, and others. The Bodhisattvas Manjuśrī and Maitreya are seated further down, as attendants to the former, while innumerable hosts of Bodhisattvas, enlightened by the manifestations of (Śākyamuni), sit around the central group like a great crowd of people looking up towards court nobles surrounding the throne<sup>30</sup>).

Since the reference of this passage is to the apocalyptic vision of the "heavenly stupa" in chapter fifteen of the *Lotus Sutra*, entitled "Springing out of the Earth", Nichiren was representing this "heavenly stupa" in calligraphic form in his *honzon*.

In a fundamental sense, however, Nichiren's *honzon* is deeply rooted within the Indo-Tibetan tradition of *maṇḍala*. Regarding this

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29) *Prabhūtaratna-tathāgata*. In the *Lotus Sutra*, when Śākyamuni expounded the first ten chapters, this Buddha appeared before Śākyamuni in order to praise him.

30) *Kanjin Honzon Shō (Treatise on the True Object of Worship)*, NSZ, pp. 320-321. I have essentially followed Anesaki's translation, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

31) Mircea Eliade, *Yoga, Immortality, and Freedom* (W. R. Track, trans., New York: Bolligen Foundation, 1958), p. 219.

tradition, Mircea Eliade has observed that *maṇḍala* may be rendered as “center” or “that which surrounds”<sup>31</sup>), so that the Indo-Tibetan *maṇḍala* was an “outer enclosure of one or more concentric circles which in turn enclose figures of squares cut by transversal lines. These start from the center and reach to the four corners so that the surface is divided into four triangles”<sup>32</sup>). Therefore, the function of a *maṇḍala* is to provide a focal point, an *axis mundi* from which and to which the devotee may redirect the disintegrative forces of his life into a unified, integrative “center”<sup>33</sup>). In this sense, a *maṇḍala* symbolically represents both the disintegration of the One into the many and the reunification of the many back into the One. The deities symbolized in this way are visualizations of various levels of existence which the one who meditates on the *maṇḍala* realizes to be only psychic manifestations of himself which he must “apprehend and overcome by integrating them into a midpoint”<sup>34</sup>). In short, the devotee “internalizes” the *maṇḍala* by using it as an object of meditation.

For this reason, even though Nichiren's *maṇḍala* is not cyclic in pattern, its function is fundamentally the same as any *maṇḍala*. It graphically represents the “sacred power” of Śākyamuni as absolute reality, the “disintegration” of this sacred power into specific manifestations (the various historical Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas), and the “reintegration” of sacred power back into itself, since all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are partial manifestations of the absolute reality of Śākyamuni. Consequently, by chanting *daimoku* before the *honzon*, the devotee internalizes this sacred power and is thereby able to reintegrate the forces of fragmentation that are the result of life in the age of *mapṣḍ* in this “center”. For this reason, uttering *daimoku* while “fixing the mind” meditatively on the *honzon*, believing what the *honzon* symbolizes — that Śākyamuni, the *Lotus Sutra*, and the devotee are one — accomplishes for the devotee what the established schools of Buddhism attempted by the traditional practices of meditation and ethical discipline. As Anesaki has noted, the *honzon* as “the object of worship . . . is to be sought nowhere but in the inner most

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32) Gueseppi Tucci, *The Theory and Practice of Maṇḍala* (London: Rider, 1961), p. 39.

33) *Ibid.*

34) Bharati, *op. cit.*, chapter 1.

recesses of every man's nature, because the final aim of worship is the complete realization of Supreme Being (i.e., Śākyamuni) in ourselves" 35).

The last of the Three Great Secret Laws, *kaidan*, was a notion which Nichiren developed towards the end of his life during his final retreat at Mount Minobu. Essentially, a *kaidan* ("precepts platform") is a place for receiving the precepts of Buddhist discipline at the time of the ordination of monks. In Japan, the first *kaidan* was established at Tōdaiji Temple in Nara in 754 in order to guarantee the continuing orthodox "succession" of Buddhist tradition. Later, on Mount Hiei, where Nichiren had studied, a second *kaidan* was established by Saichō exclusively dedicated to the "succession" of the Mahāyāna-Tendai precepts. The *kaidan* as the last of the Three Great Secret Laws is essentially an expression of Nichiren's concern that the "succession" of his teachings be preserved and continued in the future after his death. He thus dreamed of establishing a national center with his own "ordination platform" from which his teachings would emanate throughout the whole world, and for this purpose, he selected his final retreat, Mount Minobu. He died before he could accomplish his dream.

At this juncture, it is interesting to note, as Harry Buck has already explained 36), that the "Three Jewels" of early Buddhism — taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṃgha — are echoed in Nichiren's Three Great Secret Laws. In the age of *mappō*, *daimoku* and *honzon* have replaced Buddha and Dharma because fixing the mind on the sacred title as encribed in the *honzon* leads the devotee to an experience of awakening to his own innate Buddha Nature, while the *honzon* itself becomes equivalent to the Dharma to which he has awakened. *Kaidan* superceeds *saṃgha* ("community") because it is the place for the establishment of a new Buddhist community in the age of *mappō*. Thus, in a treatise dated June 24, 1274 in which Nichiren proclaimed his "three secrets" for the first time, he wrote:

What is the mystery which Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, Tendai, and Dengyō have not revealed for more than two thousand years since the Buddha's death? It is nothing else but the *honzon*, the *kaidan*, and the five characters

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35) Anesaki, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

36) Buck, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

37) *Hokke Shuyō Shō* (*Treatise on Seizing the Essence of the Lotus*), NSZ, pp. 355-356.

of the *daimoku*, all according to the truth of eternal enlightenment. Behold, tribulation and commotion follow one after another. Indeed, these are all signs of the appearance of the sage Viśiṣṭacāriṭra and others. They will appear and establish the Three Gateways to the truth of eternal enlightenment [i.e., Buddha, Dharma, and Saṃgha]. Then throughout the four heavens and the four quarters, the universal truth of the Lotus of Perfect Truth will prevail. Can there be any doubt this? 37).

In an important sense, the establishment of the *kaidan* is also an eschatological event which will not only guarantee the "succession" of Nichiren's teachings, but will also be a visible sign of the conversion of the whole to his teachings about the *Lotus Sutra*.

When in a future time, the unity of secular law and Buddhist Dharma is established, and harmony between the two completed, both sovereign and subjects will adhere to the Great Laws. Then the golden age, just as were the ages during the reigns of the sage-kings of old, will be established in these days of degeneration and corruption in the time of *mappō*. Then the establishment of the sacred *kaidan* will be completed by imperial grant and the edict of the dictator at a spot comparable to Vulture Peak. We have only to wait for the coming of this time. The moral law (*kaihō*) will be established in the actual life of man. The *kaidan* will be the seat of all persons of the three countries (e.g., India, China, and Japan), and the whole world will be initiated into the mysteries of confession and expiation. Even the great deities, Brahmā and Indra, will come to the *kaidan* and participate in the initiation 38).

However, the future *kaidan* will not only be a place of ordination, preservation of the teachings, and a concrete symbol of world wide faith in the *Lotus Sutra*. Nichiren also believed that the *kaidan* is in fact any place where the devotee receives "in his body" Śākyamuni's Dharma in the form of *daimoku* and *honzon* 39). In this sense, even though externally the *kaidan* is a place which will be physically located at the foot of Mount Minobu, internally the real *kaidan*, like the center of Nichiren's *maṇḍala*, is "located" in the heart of any person at any time who is totally devoted to the practice of *daimoku*.

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38) *Sandai Hihō Shō, Ibid.*, pp. 2613-2614.

39) "Whenever Nichiren's disciples and followers utter *daimoku*, being united in heart and mind, even in separate existences, like the association of existence between fish and water, there lies the 'heritage of the sole great thing concerning life and death'. This is the essence of what is promulgated by Nichiren. If it should be fulfilled, the great vow of propogating (the truth in the Latter Days of the Law) over the whole world shall have been achieved". *Shoji Ichidaiji Kechimoku Shō, Ibid.*, p. 2499.



### Concluding Summary

In summary, we have seen that chanting *daimoku* while “centering” oneself in the object of worship, the *honzon*, leads the individual to salvation now in the age of *mappō*. We have also noted that the universal salvation of the world, marked by the completion of the *kaidan*, is an eschatological event of the near future. The question now is what Nichiren meant by “salvation”, and in this regard he taught a message of hope that is quite traditional within the context of Mahāyāna soteriological teachings. That is, he differed from the tradition only in terms of the *method* he taught for achieving salvation in the age of *mappō*, not in terms of the *meaning* of salvation. Specifically, “enlightenment” meant for Nichiren the experience of awakening to the fundamental unity of all things in existence because all things possess Buddha Nature. But in the age of *mappō*, this experience can only be aroused by awakening the “Buddha Mind” latent within our deepest selves to conscious awareness (the function of *daimoku*), as well as by “perceiving” the actual concrete world as the abode of Śākyamuni and filled with Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (the function of *honzon*). For this reason, Nichiren could say:

To embrace, read, recite, and take joy in practicing the entire Sutra, consisting of eight volumes and twenty-eight chapters, is “general practice”. To do the same with the *hōben* and *juyo* chapters<sup>40</sup>) is “outline practice”. To exclusively recite a four-verse phrase, or chant *daimoku* is “essential practice”. Of these practices — general, outline, and essential — *daimoku* is the essential practice<sup>41</sup>).

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40) Chapter 2, “Expedient Method” and chapter 16, “Duration of the Life of the Tathāgata”.

41) *NSZ*, p. 450.