

26 Nichiren: *On the Four Stages of Faith and the Five Stages of Practice* (1277)

Introduced by Christoph Kleine

Introduction

The author of this text, Nichiren 日蓮, is considered the founder of one of the major doctrinal traditions of Japanese Buddhism. Formally ordained in the Tendai tradition in 1237, he took the name Zeshō-bō. Thus, like Hōnen, Nichiren was a monk of the Tendai School; he became irreparably estranged from the school, however, due to his idiosyncratic interpretation of the Dharma. Just as Hōnen had promoted the exclusive practice of invoking the Buddha Amida in the formula “Homage to the Buddha Amida” (*namu amida butsu*) as the only viable path to liberation in the latter age of the Dharma, Nichiren tried to convince the people of his time that salvation lay solely in the *Sūtra of the Lotus of the Wonderful Dharma* (*Myōhō rengekyō* 妙法蓮華經, T 9, no. 262; Skt. *Saddharma-puṇḍārika-sūtra*). As a practice, therefore, he recommended the recitation of the formula “Homage to the Sūtra of the Lotus of the Wonderful Dharma” (*nammyōhō rengekyō* 南無妙法蓮華經). Nichiren sharply criticised all other Buddhist schools of his time for not recognising, or not sufficiently emphasising, the paramount importance of the *Lotus Sutra* as the ultimate expression of Buddha Śākyamuni’s teaching.

From the state’s point of view, Nichiren’s attacks on other Buddhist schools of thought and institutions endangered social peace. What is more, it was deemed completely improper that Nichiren, a low-ranking monk, repeatedly addressed the highest authorities, urging them to ban the Pure Land Buddhism based on the teachings of Hōnen, and punish its leaders. As a result, Nichiren himself became the victim of state persecution. In 1271, he narrowly escaped being beheaded, and was instead exiled to the remote island of Sado, where he continued to write down his ideas – often in the form of letters sent to his followers.

The passages reproduced here in English translation are taken from one such letter. The text is titled “On the Four Stages of Faith and the Five Stages of Practice”; it is considered one of Nichiren’s ten major writings. It was probably written in 1277, as a reply to one of his most learned and devout disciples, Toki Jōnin 富木常忍 (1216–1299), who had asked in a letter about the correct practice.

Like so many Buddhist authors of the thirteenth century, Nichiren interprets the decline of political order – which became manifest in various calamities, natural disasters, and the threat of invasion by the Mongols – in terms of the paradigm of the interdepen-

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dence of the Buddha's Law and the ruler's law. In his view, misinterpretations of the Buddha's teachings had caused the decline of the Buddha Dharma, and this, in turn, had led to a decline of the ruler's law. In a similar vein to the Sanmon Petition above, Nichiren claims that the decline of the Buddha Dharma causes the benevolent tutelary gods to leave the country, exposing it to the destructive forces of demons. The only remedy was complete conversion of the whole country to the *Lotus Sutra*. As suggested in the title of one of his most famous writings – *Risshō ankoku ron* 立正安國論 (Treatise on Pacifying the Country by Establishing Orthodoxy) – Nichiren insisted that the country could only be pacified by establishing the correct teaching, as contained in that sūtra.

Bibliographical Information

Nichiren 日蓮. “Shishin gohon shō 四信五品鈔.” In Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎, and Watanabe Kaikyoku 渡邊海旭. *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1934. Vol. 84, no. 2696; 289a02–20.

Page numbers given in square brackets refer to this edition.

The translation adopted here can be found in:

The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin. Tokyo: Sōka Gakkai, 1999. Vol 1, no. 94; 789–90.

Chinese characters, some life dates, and additional notes have been added by Christoph Kleine in square brackets.

A Japanese *kakikudashibun* version is contained in:

Hori Nikkō 堀日亨, ed. *Nichiren Daishōnin gosho zenshū* 日蓮大聖人御書全集. Tokyo: Sōka Gakkai, 1984; 342–43.

Translation Adopted from *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*

The Buddha's Law [*buppō*] was first introduced to Japan in the reign of the thirtieth sovereign, Emperor Kinmei [r. 539–571]. During the twenty reigns, or more than two hundred years, from that time until the reign of Emperor Kanmu [r. 781–806], although the Buddha's Law of the six schools [*rokushū buppō* 六宗佛法] existed in Japan, the relative superiority of the Buddhist teachings had not yet been determined. Then, during the Enryaku era [782–806], a sage appeared in this country, a man

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known as the Great Teacher Dengyō [767–822].^I He examined the teachings of the six schools, which had already been propagated, and made all the priests of the seven major temples of Nara his disciples. In time he established a temple on Mount Hiei to serve as the head temple, and won over the other temples in the country to serve as its branches. In this way the Buddha's Law of Japan came to be unified in a single school [*buppō yui ichimon* 佛法唯一門].^{II} The Ruler's Law [*ōbō*] likewise was not divided but clearly established, so that the nation was purified of evil. If we were to speak of Dengyō's accomplishments, we would have to say that they all spring from the passage [declaring the *Lotus Sūtra* to be foremost among all the sutras the Buddha] "has preached, now preaches, and will preach."¹

In the period that followed, the three great teachers Kōbō [774–835], Jikaku [794–864], and Chishō [814–891], claiming to be following Chinese authority, expressed the opinion that the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* and the others of the three major True Word^{III} sutras are superior to the *Lotus Sūtra*. Moreover, they appended the term "school" [*shū* 宗] to the True Word tradition, a term that the Great Teacher Dengyō had purposely omitted in reference to that tradition, and thus recognized the True Word as the eighth school of Buddhism. These three men each persuaded the emperor to issue an edict upholding the True Word and propagated those teachings throughout Japan, so that every temple accordingly went against the principles of the *Lotus Sūtra*. In so doing, they utterly violated the passage concerning the sutras the Buddha "has preached,

1 [editorial note 33 in the original] *Lotus Sutra*, chap. 10. [CK: The relevant passage reads: "There are immeasurable thousands of myriads of *koṭis* of sutras I have taught in the past, which I teach now, and which I will teach in the future. Among them, however, this *Lotus Sutra* is the most difficult to accept and to understand." 我所說經典無量千萬億,已說、今說、當說,而於其中,此法華經最為難信難解] (*Myōhō rengēkyō* 妙法蓮華經, T09, no. 262; 31, b16–18); English translation from Kumārajīva, and Tsugunari Kubo, *The Lotus Sutra* (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2007, 160)]

I CK: Dengyō Daishi, or Saichō, was the founder of the Tendai school in Japan, which he had imported from China, where he had been ordained in that tradition. The year after his return to Japan in 805, he founded the Tendai school, with its headquarters on Mt Hiei, located at the 'demon gate', northeast of the imperial capital. The performance of rituals on that mountain was supposed to protect the capital from demonic powers.

II CK: Nichiren's account is by no means accurate here. Although Saichō had considerable success, he was far from being the undisputed master of all Buddhists. The six schools located in the former capital of Nara were not at all willing to accept Saichō as an authority.

III CK: "True Word" (*shingon* 眞言) is the Chinese rendering of the Sanskrit term 'mantra.' In the given context, it more specifically refers to the "esoteric teachings" (*mikkyō* 密教) of Buddhism, also known as Vajrayāna, Tantrayāna, or – due to the central position taken by the practice of reciting mantras in that tradition – as Mantrayāna. Kōbō Daishi, or Kūkai, is regarded as the founder of the respective school in Japan, the Shingonshū 眞言宗.

now preaches, and will preach,” and became archenemies of Śākyamuni,^{IV} Many Treasures,^V and the Buddhas of the ten directions.^{VI}

Thereafter, the Buddha's Law gradually declined and the Ruler's Law likewise became increasingly ineffectual. The protective deities who had dwelt here for so long, such as the Sun Goddess^{VII} and Great Bodhisattva Hachiman,^{VIII} have lost their power. Brahmā,^{IX} Śakra, and the four heavenly kings^X have deserted the country, and the country is already on the point of ruin. What thinking person could fail to be pained at and to lament such a situation?

In conclusion, the *perverted dharmas* [*jahō* 邪法] propagated by the three great teachers are disseminated from three temples: Tōji,^{XI} Sōji'in^{XII} on Mount Hiei, and Onjōji^{XIII}. If measures are not taken to prohibit the activities of these temples, then without a doubt the nation will be destroyed, and its people will fall into the evil paths. Although I have generally discerned the nature of the situation and informed the ruler, no one has ventured to make the slightest use of my advice. How truly pitiable!

IV CK: Lit. “the sage from the Śākya clan,” a very common honorific name for the so-called ‘historical Buddha’ – i.e. the founder of ‘Buddhism.’

V CK: Tahō 多寶, Skt. Prabhūtaratna, a past Buddha who appears in chapter eleven of the Lotus Sutra.

VI CK: The “ten directions” are the eight points of the compass (north, east, south, west, northeast, northwest, southeast and southwest) plus the directions of up and down (zenith and nadir). Accordingly, “ten directions” roughly means ‘everywhere.’

VII CK: Tenshō Daijin or Amaterasu Ōmikami 天照太神; i.e. the ancestral goddess of the imperial family.

VIII CK: 八幡, one of Japan's main deities, was given the Buddhist title Great Bodhisattva in 781, making him the first Japanese deity to be officially designated a bodhisattva. In the Kamakura period, the Minamoto clan, who had founded the military government in Kamakura (the *bakufu* or Shogunate), chose Hachiman as their patron deity, who thus eventually came to be regarded as the deity of warriors or the god of war.

IX CK: Bon[ten] 梵[天], the great heavenly king Brahmā, an Indian god adopted into Buddhism as one of the two major tutelary gods, the other being Tai[shakuten] 帝[釋天] – i.e. Śakra devānām indrah, or just Śakra or Indra.

X CK: The four guardian gods who protect the four quarters of the universe. They are held to be Indra's generals, each of which dwells on one side of the axis mundi, Mt Sumeru, to ward off the attacks of malicious spirits.

XI CK: 東寺, i.e. the headquarters of the Shingon school founded by Kōbō Daishi Kūkai in the southeastern corner of Kyōto.

XII CK: 總持院 or Hokke Sōji'in 法華總持院, a centre of the esoteric practice within the Sanmon branch of the Tendai school, located in the ‘Western Valley of the Eastern Pagoda’ on Mt Hiei.

XIII CK: 園城寺, i.e. the headquarters of the Jimon branch of the Tendai school, located at the foot of Mt Hiei, in Sakamoto, close to Lake Biwa.