

Revisiting Nichiren

Editors' Introduction

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Nichiren is the general of the army that will unite the world. Japan is his headquarters. The people of Japan are his troops; teachers and scholars of Nichiren Buddhism are his officers. The Nichiren creed is a declaration of war, and *shakubuku* is the plan of attack.... The faith of the Lotus will prepare those going into battle. Japan truly has a heavenly mandate to unite the world.

— Tanaka Chigaku (1861–1939)

Shūmon no ishin (Restoration of the [Nichiren] sect)

For him, the truth always took precedence over the nation. For the sake of the truth, he could approve even the nation's destruction.... What an evil are those priests who seek to promote their own sect's prosperity under such rubrics as "nationalistic religion"! How sorry I feel for Nichiren, being praised for his nationalism by vulgar priests!

— Takayama Chōgyū (1871–1902)

Nichiren Shōnin to Nihonkoku (Nichiren Shōnin and Japan)

Divested therefore of his thirteenth-century garb, of the aberration of his critical knowledge, and of a little taint of insanity that might have dwelt in him (as it dwells in all great men, I suppose), there stands before us a remarkable figure, one of the greatest of his kind in the world. No more independent man can I think of among my countrymen. Indeed, he by his independence and originality made Buddhism a Japanese religion.... *Nichiren minus his combativity* is our ideal religious man.

— Uchimura Kanzō (1861–1930)

"Saint Nichiren"

NICHIREN (1222–1282) IS KNOWN primarily as the originator of the Nichiren Buddhist tradition, which began as one of the new Buddhist movements of the Kamakura period (1185–1333). He lived during an eventful age, having been born the year after Hōjō Yoshitoki's victory

over the retired emperor Gotoba in the Jōkyū Uprising of 1221, which solidified warrior rule in Kamakura, and died the year after the second attempt of the Mongols to invade Japan in 1281. His own career was stormy as well, owing to his insistence on the exclusive truth of the *Lotus Sūtra* as the only vehicle of salvation in the Final Dharma age (*mappō*). Ousted from the provincial temple where he had been ordained, he later came into conflict with Bakufu authorities in Kamakura and was twice exiled. His followers were also imprisoned, or had their lands seized, or in a few cases were put to death. But Nichiren persevered, and, after his death, his fledgling community would grow into a major Buddhist tradition. Today there are nearly forty religious bodies that claim descent from Nichiren, including both traditional Buddhist denominations and new religious movements.

As the quotations cited above illustrate, not everyone has seen Nichiren in the same way. The modern period in particular has spawned a proliferation of divergent images of this Buddhist teacher. He has been represented as a thaumaturge whose prayers saved Japan from the Mongol invasion, as a patriot and prophet of Japanese world conquest, as a defender of universal truth, as a Marxist hero of the common people, and as a subject for the study of religious psychology. Some writers have noted only his harsh, uncompromising attitude, finding him to be arrogant and self-righteous, while others have stressed his gentleness toward his followers. He has been likened to such diverse figures as the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, Jesus, Mohammed, Loyola, Savonarola, Luther, and Joseph Smith. Such images, however, often say more about how Nichiren has been appropriated in the modern world than about this medieval figure himself.

In fact, outside Nichiren sectarian circles, until quite recently there has been relatively little scholarship on Nichiren, especially in comparison to others of the new Buddhist “founders” of the Kamakura period such as Hōnen (1133–1212), Shinran (1173–1263), or Dōgen (1200–1253). The extreme ultranationalism of some wartime Nichirenist movements, along with the Nichiren tradition’s exclusive truth claim that goes against current pluralistic sensibilities, are among the factors leading to the postwar marginalization of Nichiren as a militant, intolerant, and even fanatical figure, atypical of both Japanese religion specifically and Buddhism more generally. Serious scholarship on Nichiren in the West has been all but nonexistent.

Recently, however, this has begun to change. New methodological approaches in the history of Japanese Buddhism have led to a rethinking of Nichiren among Japanese scholars. The broader discipline of Buddhist Studies is also expanding its focus beyond purely doctrinal

concerns to include Buddhism's embeddedness in culture, politics, economics, and social practices, a trend that also invites reconsideration of Nichiren. We are grateful to the editors of *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* for enabling us to present this special issue as a step in this direction and hope that it will encourage further endeavors.

The idea for this special issue was inspired by a session organized by Ruben Habito on the theme of "Revisiting Nichiren," presented at the 1997 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in San Francisco. After much discussion we agreed, although with some reluctance, that we could not possibly cover the entire Nichiren tradition in a single issue. This issue focuses primarily on Nichiren himself, in the context of his own time. The dramatic rise of the Nichiren Hokke-shū and its relation to urban *machishū* culture in the late medieval period; the resistance of the Nichiren *fuju fuse* movement to growing Tokugawa Bakufu control of religion; early modern Nichiren Buddhist popular practices; the emergence of Nichiren Buddhist lay movements in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the many faces of nationalistic wartime Nichirenism; postwar Nichiren Buddhist-based peace movements; and contemporary constructive theology in a Nichirenist mode are all aspects of the later Nichiren tradition that must await detailed treatment in another venue.

In compiling this special issue, we have had three specific aims in mind: (1) to help revise outmoded and oversimplified stereotyped views of Nichiren ("nationalist," "prophet," "fanatic," "martyr") by exploring (or "revisiting") key aspects of his thought and career; (2) to shed light, through Nichiren, on the religion, society, and culture of Japan's early medieval period; and (3) to contribute to ongoing debates over definitions of Kamakura Buddhism, such as the opposition between "old" and "new" Buddhism, or between the "exo-esoteric system" (*kenmitsu taisei*) of the major temple-shrine complexes and marginal heterodox movements. More generally, we have sought to provide a basic English-language resource on Nichiren for interested colleagues and students. With this latter aim in mind, we attach at the end of this introduction a "select bibliography" of scholarly works in Western languages on Nichiren and his subsequent tradition. (Since studies of Nichiren-based new religious movements are quite numerous, only a few representative ones are included here.)



"Those who would study Buddhism," wrote Nichiren, "must first learn about the time." Like many of his contemporaries, Nichiren believed his own time to be that of the Final Dharma age, a bleak, degenerate

period when human beings are particularly burdened by karmic hindrances and liberation is difficult to achieve. At the same time, however, he adopted the Tendai Buddhist teaching of the “three thousand realms in one thought-moment,” which holds that the Buddha realm is inherent at each moment in the minds of ordinary worldlings. “Nichiren Shōnin’s View of Humanity” by Asai Endō, the first essay in this issue, explores how Nichiren appropriated these two, essentially contradictory, ideas and maintained a creative tension between them as the foundation of his thought. Asai also fruitfully compares Nichiren with Hōnen, to shed light on how Nichiren understood the relationship between the Buddha and unenlightened persons and the question of whether salvation is achieved through personal effort or through the power of the Buddha’s compassion.

Over the course of his career, Nichiren wrote voluminously; his extant corpus contains 498 writings, including both doctrinal essays and letters to his followers, as well as 66 charts, outlines, and extracts, to say nothing of several hundred additional holographic fragments. Of the 498 writings, an astonishing 115 works survive in Nichiren’s handwriting, and another 25, destroyed in a fire at the Nichirenshū head temple on Mt. Minobu in 1875, are known to have existed. However, it has long been recognized that the Nichiren collection also contains some writings that are probably not his own work but rather apocrypha attributed to him by later disciples. Sueki Fumihiko’s contribution, “Dealing with Nichiren’s Problematic Works,” shows how inclusion or exclusion of questionable writings can in some cases radically affect interpretation of Nichiren’s thought, in particular his stance toward the doctrine of original enlightenment (*hongaku hōmon*) and his views concerning the relationship of Buddhism to the state. Focusing on the *Sandai hihō shō* (On the three great secret Dharmas)—probably the most controversial work in the entire Nichiren collection on account of its instruction concerning the establishment of an imperially sponsored *kaidan* or ordination platform—Sueki demonstrates that arguments for or against the authenticity of particular texts are seldom based purely on textual grounds but have, historically, been inextricably intertwined with the political considerations of Nichiren’s interpreters. He also proposes a creative methodological approach to those writings where Nichiren’s authorship is uncertain.

Nichiren was not only a thinker but a person of action: central to his teaching is the claim that the *Lotus Sūtra* must not only be studied but lived. This is the subject of Ruben Habito’s essay, “Bodily Reading of the *Lotus Sūtra*.” Habito shows how Nichiren appropriated the sutra’s own injunctions to “receive and keep” it as the path to supreme

enlightenment, accumulation of worldly merit, and protection from calamities. He links this emphasis on “receiving and keeping” both to the larger *dhāraṇī* tradition of the Mahāyāna and to Nichiren’s own teaching that all good practices are encompassed in the chanting of the sutra’s *daimoku* or title, in the formula *Namu-myōhō-enge-kyō*. Habito also analyzes a structure of reciprocal validation between Nichiren and the *Lotus Sūtra*, in which Nichiren habitually read his own experience as bearing out the sutra’s prophecies of the trials its practitioners must undergo in the evil last age and, at the same time, read the sutra as legitimating his experience. Central to Nichiren’s concept of “receiving and keeping” the sutra was his conviction that one who does so dwells perpetually in the Buddha’s presence. This mystical awareness of the Buddha’s presence, Habito argues, informed the religious vision underlying Nichiren’s actions in the social and political sphere and infused him with joy, even in the face of persecution.

Nichiren’s public religious career may be said to have begun in 1260, when he submitted his admonitory treatise *Risshō ankoku ron* (On the establishment of right doctrine and peace of the nation) to the Kamakura Bakufu. Readings of this work that present Nichiren as a fervent nationalist are challenged in “State and Religion in Nichiren’s Thought,” Satō Hiroo’s contribution to this issue. Satō argues that established Buddhist institutions in Nichiren’s day had traditionally been subordinated to the ruling authority and performed the ritual function of “nation protection”; in their vocabulary, “nation” (*kokka*) referred primarily to the *tennō* or emperor, and “nation protection” meant the safety and stability of imperial rule. In Nichiren’s thought, however, emphasis shifts away from the ruler, and the “peace of the nation” refers rather to the well-being of the land and the people who inhabit it. Satō places Nichiren within the context of emerging medieval beliefs in a universal, transcendent principle or authority (such as a cosmic Buddha or the law of karmic causality) to which even rulers were subordinated. He also points to Nichiren’s historical significance in teaching a view of salvation that was not confined to the individual’s inner, subjective realm but would be actualized as positive social transformation.

A very different reading of Nichiren’s famous treatise is presented in William Deal’s article, “Nichiren’s *Risshō ankoku ron* and Canon Formation.” Though interpretations of this treatise have differed radically, it has almost always been read primarily as a statement of Nichiren’s thinking about the relationship of the Buddha-Dharma to social realities and to worldly rule. Deal, however, analyzes it in terms of Nichiren’s strategies of legitimation through canon formation. He shows how,

through his reference in this treatise to specific Buddhist sutras and commentaries and his rejection or dismissal of others, Nichiren in effect created a “situated canon” to promote specific ideas and practices in support of his religious worldview. Deal finds that through this “politics of canonization,” Nichiren asserted the authority of the *Lotus Sūtra* in a way that significantly reworked both Tendai and other early Buddhist models of nation protection, making the state responsible for protecting the Dharma, and not the other way around.

In the latter part of his career, Nichiren harshly criticized the esoteric teachings (*mikkyō*) of both Taimitsu and Tōmitsu traditions, blaming reliance on *mikkyō* for neglect of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the disasters befalling the country that he saw as happening in consequence. Nichiren sectarian scholarship has therefore tended to represent Nichiren as rejecting the esoteric teachings. A strikingly revisionist reading is presented by Lucia Dolce in her essay, “Criticism and Appropriation: Nichiren’s Attitude toward Esoteric Buddhism.” Dolce argues that Nichiren’s criticism of *mikkyō* was a self-legitimizing strategy and that esoteric elements in fact profoundly inform his thought and practice. In particular, she investigates the esoteric antecedents of his calligraphic mandala and practice of chanting the *daimoku*. Dolce’s reading also challenges recent theories of Kamakura Buddhism that see *mikkyō* as characteristic of the institutionally dominant forms of Buddhism but unrelated to the new Buddhist movements.

Nichiren has often been studied in the context of larger scholarly issues in the history of medieval Japanese religion. Jacqueline Stone’s article, “Placing Nichiren in the ‘Big Picture’: Some Ongoing Issues in Scholarship” investigates Nichiren’s place in theories about Kamakura Buddhism. She shows how he has been represented as either conservative or radical according to alternative models of Kamakura “new Buddhism” and how debates over the place of original enlightenment thought in his teaching have shaped theories about the relationship of the new Kamakura Buddhist movements to their parent, Tendai tradition. A fuller understanding of Nichiren, Stone argues, would reveal substantial continuities as well as breaks between the new movements and the religious establishment, as can be seen, for example, in Nichiren’s views of Japan.

This issue also includes two book review articles. Unlike the usual book review, which evaluates a newly published volume, these reviews aim at introducing to a Western readership some classic works of Nichiren scholarship. Stone reviews three significant postwar biographies of Nichiren. Habito reviews two collections of essays dealing with modern readings of Nichiren, thus adumbrating the ongoing

importance of this medieval Buddhist figure for contemporary Japan.

We have made only minimal attempts to standardize throughout the issue either the translations of specific passages from Nichiren's writings or of Buddhist technical terms, allowing leeway for personal preference to individual authors and translators. Chinese names and terms have been romanized according to the *pinyin* system. All quotations or other references to Nichiren's writings are cited from the critical edition of his work, the 1988 revised version of the four-volume *Shōwa teihon Nichiren Shōnin ibun* (Shōwa-period standard edition of the works of Nichiren Shōnin), edited by the Nichiren Kyōgaku Kenkyūjo (Research Center for Nichiren Doctrinal Studies) of Rishō University and published by Minobusan Kuon-ji in Yamanashi Prefecture. This collection is abbreviated throughout the issue as *STN*.

With the exception of Asai Endō's article, all contributions were written specifically for this special issue. We are grateful to Professor Asai for allowing us to translate his early essay as a fitting introduction to our issue. We would also like to thank all our contributors for their efforts. We are pleased to acknowledge Hiraga Hondoji in Matsudo, Chiba Prefecture; Yamanaka Seitoku of the Rishō Ankokukai; and Yūzankaku Shuppansha in Tokyo for their permission to reproduce the mandalas accompanying Lucia Dolce's article. We would also like to thank Kelly Olsen of the Associated Press for the photograph of the "Kaiketsu Nichiren" image in Inokashira Park, sculpted in 1954 by Kitamura Seibō. Lastly, we wish to thank the editors of *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, both for proposing this special issue and for their editorial help throughout, without which it could never have been published.

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ABBREVIATED CHRONOLOGY OF NICHIREN'S LIFE AND RELATED EVENTS

(Days and months are given according to the lunar calendar.
Years have been converted to the Western calendar.)

- 1221 The retired emperor Gotoba attempts to overthrow the Bakufu and is defeated by Hōjō Yoshitoki (the Jōkyū Uprising).
- 1222 Nichiren born in Awa Province.
- 1233 Enters Kiyosumi-dera for study.
- 1237 Ordained by his teacher Dōzen-bō, taking the name Zeshō-bō Renchō.
- 1238–1239 Around this time he goes to Kamakura for study.
- 1242 Having returned briefly to Kiyosumi-dera, writes *Kaitai sokushin jōbutsu gi*. Soon after, sets out for an extended period of study on Mt. Hiei and at other temples in the region of the imperial capital.
- 1252 Around this time he returns to Awa.
- 1253 Gives first public sermon at Kiyosumi-dera on 4/28 (traditionally regarded as the founding of the Nichiren sect). Around this time he assumes the name “Nichiren.”
- 1254 Also around this time, Nichiren successfully pursues a lawsuit on behalf of the local *shōen* proprietor, Nagoe-no-ama, against the *jitō* and *nenbutsu* devotee, Tōjō Kagenobu. Conflict worsens between their respective supporting factions among the monks of Kiyosumi-dera. Nichiren forced to leave the temple; takes up residence in Kamakura.
- 1257 The great Shōka-era earthquake—latest in a series of disasters—destroys large sections of Kamakura (8/23). Further calamities, including earthquakes, storms, flooding, crop damage, famine, and epidemics, continue over next few years.
- 1260 Nichiren submits his admonitory treatise *Risshō ankoku ron* to Hōjō Tokiyori, the retired shogunal regent (7/16).
- 1261 Around this time, Nichiren defeats several leading Pure Land clerics in debate. Later, his hermitage is attacked by *nenbutsu* adherents. Nichiren is arrested by Bakufu officials and exiled to Izu (5/12).
- 1263 Pardoned from sentence of exile to Izu (2/22) and returns to Kamakura.
- 1264 Around this time Nichiren returns to Awa Province and offers prayers for his mother's recovery from illness. At Komatsubara in Tōjō he is ambushed by Kagenobu's men (the “Komatsubara Persecution,” 11/11); Nichiren and others of his party are wounded

and one killed. Over the next few years, Nichiren visits Awa, Suruga, and possibly other Kantō provinces to preach and encourage followers.

- 1268 In the first month a letter arrives from the Mongol empire demanding that Japan enter a tributary relationship or face an attack. Back in Kamakura, Nichiren begins to reassert the admonitions of his *Risshō ankoku ron* in letters to persons of influence.
- 1271 Clerics hostile to Nichiren file suit with the Bakufu against him. Nichiren arrested (9/12) and nearly executed (the “Ryūkō” or “Tatsunokuchi Persecution”). Persecution also leveled against his followers in Kamakura. He is held in custody for a month and then sent into exile on Sado Island. There, he is assigned as lodging a ruined chapel in a graveyard (the Tsukahara *sanmaidō*).
- 1272 In the second month, the regent’s half-brother, Hōjō Tokisuke, leads an unsuccessful rebellion. Fighting breaks out in Kyoto and Kamakura. Also in the second month, Nichiren completes the *Kaimoku shō*. In the summer, he is assigned a new place of residence at Ichinosawa.
- 1273 Nichiren writes the *Kanjin honzon shō* (4/25).
- 1274 Pardoned from sentence of exile (2/14) and returns to Kamakura (3/26). Questioned by Hei no Yoritsuna, deputy chief of the board of retainers, as to when the Mongols will attack (4/8). Nichiren again admonishes that only devotion to the *Lotus Sūtra* can save the country. His warnings again go unheeded; he leaves Kamakura (5/12) and arrives at Minobu (5/17), eventually deciding to remain. Devotes himself there to writing and teaching disciples. In the tenth month, Mongol forces attack the islands of Iki and Tsushima and move on to Hakata. After intense fighting the invading fleet vanishes, probably due to a typhoon.
- 1279 In the ninth month, twenty of Nichiren’s peasant followers in the Fuji area are arrested and taken to Kamakura. The next month, three are beheaded (the “Atsuhara Persecution”).
- 1281 In the fifth month, a second Mongol fleet arrives. Iki, Tsushima, and northwestern Kyushu are again attacked. In the seventh intercalary month, the major portion of the invading fleet is destroyed by a typhoon.
- 1282 In the ninth month, in failing health, Nichiren is persuaded to leave Minobu for the Hitachi hot springs. Forced by illness to halt at the residence of Ikegami Munenaka. Designates six main disciples to head the community after his death (10/8). Dies on 10/13.

IN MEMORIAM

TAKAGI Yutaka (1928–1999)

JUST AS THIS ISSUE was entering the final stages of production, we were saddened to learn of the recent death of Takagi Yutaka, a leading historian of Japanese Buddhism, who passed away on May 10 of this year. We wish to take this occasion to honor his memory and his immense scholarly contributions, especially to Nichiren studies.

Takagi Yutaka was born in 1928 in Shizuoka Prefecture. He graduated in 1951 from the History Department of Tokyo University of Liberal Arts (Tōkyō Bunrindaigaku) and received his doctorate in 1970 from the same institution. He was for many years a professor at Risshō University in Tokyo, where he taught first on the Faculty of Liberal Arts and then on the Faculty of Buddhist Studies, until his retirement in March 1999.

Professor Takagi's work focused primarily on the Buddhism of early and medieval Japan. A particular interest of his was the multiple forms of *Lotus Sūtra* devotion in their social and cultural contexts. This research was published as his monumental *Heian jidai Hokke Bukkyōshi kenkyū* (A study of the history of the Buddhism of the *Lotus Sūtra* during the Heian period, 1973) and also in numerous scholarly articles appearing in the series *Hokekyō kenkyū* (*Lotus Sūtra* studies) and in various journals. His studies of premodern Japanese Buddhism also include *Shinran* (1980), *Kamakura Bukkyōshi kenkyū* (A study of the history of Kamakura Buddhism, 1982), and *Bukkyōshi no naka no nyonin* (Women in the history of Buddhism, 1988), as well as several volumes that he edited or co-authored and also dozens of articles in scholarly journals and reference works. In his work on Nara and Heian Buddhism, Professor Takagi shed light on previously little studied areas, such as the religious practices of women, the history of Japanese nuns, communities of 'holy men' (*hijiri*) outside the formal monastic hierarchy, and *Lotus Sūtra* devotees (*jikyōsha*). Methodologically innovative, he drew on a wide variety of sources including literary, artistic, social, historical, and legal materials, as well as more conventional "religious" documents, in his analysis of Buddhist developments, amply demonstrating the benefits of a thoughtful interdisciplinary approach. His studies of Kamakura Buddhism go beyond facile

dichotomies between “old” and “new” Buddhist movements to investigate broader trends that, in different ways, engaged medieval Buddhists across institutional and denominational boundaries, such as competing views of sin and evil, changing notions of Buddhism's relation to political authority and to the native kami, and the connection between consciousness of the Final Dharma age and new ideas about Japan's place in the Buddhist cosmology. His intellectual vision was flexible and nuanced, never constrained by the categories and conventions of sectarian scholarship or other academic orthodoxies, and his work will surely prove seminal for future studies.

In addition to all this, Professor Takagi was a leading specialist on Nichiren and the early Nichiren community. His painstaking and exhaustive archival research on primary documents led to a more accurate and complete picture of Nichiren's early, formative years than had hitherto been available; it also formed the basis for his detailed analysis of Nichiren's community and its relation to the warrior society of the eastern provinces and to the policies and politics of the Kamakura Bakufu. His most representative publications in this area include: *Nichiren to sono montei* (Nichiren and his followers, 1965); *Nichiren: Sono kōdō to shisō* (Nichiren: His actions and thought, 1970), outstanding among the postwar biographies of Nichiren and reviewed in this issue; and many groundbreaking articles. He also coedited several major studies of Nichiren and Nichiren Buddhism, including the Nichiren volume (1970) of the *Nihon Shisō Taikei* collection and the four-volume annual series *Nichiren to sono kyōdan* (Nichiren and his religious institution, 1976–1979). Those of us who study Nichiren and the medieval Nichiren tradition will always be deeply indebted to him for these contributions.

Professor Takagi was remarkable not only for his devotion to scholarship and outstanding scholarly achievements, but also for his generosity and kindness. He was respected by colleagues in the fields of history, literature, and Buddhist studies and deeply appreciated by his students. Modest and unassuming, he never imposed his presence but was always ready to share his knowledge with anyone interested in Japanese Buddhism or Japanese history. Both personally and through his published research, he has touched many of us, in Japan and abroad. We will miss him greatly.