

Nichiren Shonin's Propagation of the Lotus Sutra through his Writings*

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Preface

The Kamakura (鎌倉) Period (1185-1333) was the age when new practices of Buddhism such as Jodo (浄土) (Pure Land) and Zen (禪) blossomed. Nichiren Shonin (日蓮聖人) (1222-1282) is one of the pioneers who introduced a new approach to Buddhist practice during that age. Nichiren's attitude was to vigorously promote his ideas. Focusing on engaging in as much communication as he could with his followers, he was a prolific letter writer, thus producing a great volume of writings. Including letters and charts, the collection of his writings totals some 900 works. An official of the archives of the Kamakura shogunate was one of Nichiren's followers, and his disciples also carefully preserved his writings. Thus, a considerable number of Nichiren Shonin's handwritten works still exist. The number of authenticated works, which include both fragments and full texts of his writings exceeds 600.

A collection of 281 of his authenticated works are contained in the volume *The Complete Works of Nichiren Shonin (Shun-ju-sha)*, co-authored by Dr. Hoyo Watanabe and Dr. Hosho Komatsu. This volume is upheld as the standard for present-day research on Nichiren Shonin. There are 258 works in the collection that are classified as letters, although some of these are quite lengthy and could be considered as treatises or theses. My purpose for this presentation is to try to classify these letters by purpose and subject.

The Intent of Nichiren's Letters

Nichiren Shonin was born in Awa (安房) (presently, Chiba Prefecture) in 1222. He learned Buddhism in the temples of Kamakura, Kyoto, and Nara. He founded the Nichiren sect of Buddhism in 1253. In 1260, he submitted a work called *Rissho-ankoku-ron (立正安国論)* to the Kamakura shogunate. Shortly after that his hermitage was attacked by mobs aroused by his criticisms of other sects in that work, and he was subjected to continued personal persecutions thereafter. He was exiled to Izu (presently,

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Shizuoka Prefecture) in 1261. After his return to his homeland in 1264, he was again subjected to personal attacks.

He was again exiled, this time to Sado (佐渡) Island (Niigata Prefecture), in 1271. After he received a pardon in 1274, he held many discussions with the leading figures of the shogunate in Kamakura, and, following that, he retired, taking up residence at Mt. Minobu (身延). Nichiren passed away in 1282 in Ikegami (池上) (presently the Metropolis of Tokyo) at the age of 61.

For this project I researched 258 of Nichiren's letters written between 1253 and 1281. A chronological classification of these works within three 10-year periods revealed few writings within the first period, 1253-1262. His output gradually increased within the middle period, 1263-1272, and he was most prolific in his writings during the last period, 1273-1282, while he was in retirement at Mt. Minobu. The letters were then classified, as follows, according to their discerned subjects or purposes (Table 1).

- 1) Writings on the Rishsho-ankoku-ron (立正安国論). In this seminal treatise submitted to the Kamakura shogunate in 1260, Nichiren strongly promoted faith in the Lotus Sutra while criticizing other sects. It was an important step for him as a religious leader. He drew particular attention to a line from the "Senjaku-shu (選択集)," a work by Honen (法然), founder of the Jodo (浄土) sect. The part in question read, "sha-hei-kaku-hou" (捨閉闍拋) (all sutras except the Jodo Sanbu-kyo (浄土三部經) [the three main sutras of the Jodo faith] can be disregarded). Nichiren, as champion of the Lotus Sutra, vigorously challenged this statement. The older established sects, especially Jodo, perhaps regarding Nichiren as a noisy upstart, resented Nichiren's brazen challenge. Moreover, several important figures within the shogunate were followers of the Jodo sect. As a result, Nichiren was subjected to prolonged persecution. There are twelve letters with Rishsho-ankoku-ron as the main focus.
- 2) Discussion of Other Works: Several letters written by Nichiren after 1263 contain references to, or are discussions of, other works of his, notably the Kanjin-honzon-sho (観心本尊抄).
- 3) Letters requesting books: In these letters, which span all of the time periods, Nichiren asks his followers to bring him works for reference, indicating his desire to accumulate reference materials for his research and writings.
- 4) Letters on the subject of being persecuted: In those days an attack upon Japan by Mongolia was feared imminent. Because of this, the shogunate was making efforts to maintain calm within the nation in preparation for the expected foreign invasion. At that time, Nichiren's sect was rapidly expanding, and at the

same time it was experiencing criticism from other sects. The shogunate, unnerved by the unrest seemingly generated by Nichiren, exiled him to Sado Island in 1271. Letters mentioning the banishment increased during that time. His lay followers and disciples were ferociously attacked at Atsuhara (熱原) (presently, Shizuoka Prefecture) in 1279, and after that event, several letters of encouragement to his disciples appear.

- 5) Letters about disputes with other sects: Nichiren's followers and disciples were often in confrontations and disputes with other sects. In his letters concerning these matters he gave advice in great detail, counseling his followers to avoid private disputes in order to minimize misunderstandings.
- 6) Status reports: Nichiren wrote many letters detailing his environment and living situation after he retired to Mt. Minobu in 1274.
- 7) The state of Japan and natural disasters: There are many letters sent from Mr. Minobu dealing with the correlation Nichiren perceived between unwholesome societal trends and natural disasters.
- 8) Traditional letters of New Year Greetings.
- 9) Guidance in religious life: When his followers presented Nichiren with gifts and materials, they often attached letters asking questions of him regarding faith and practice. These letters are his responses to those questions.
- 10) Attainment of Buddhahood by a woman: It is expounded in the 12th chapter of the Lotus Sutra that a woman attains Buddhahood. In his letters addressed to women, Nichiren assures them of the attainment of buddhahood. These letters were most likely written in response to questions raised by women on this issue
- 11) Criticisms: Nichiren often criticized other sects in his letters. Letters of this kind may have been addressed to believers who had converted from other sects.
- 12) Official Decorum: Letters in which Nichiren gives his disciples, pupils, and lay followers suggestions regarding behavior at Court.
- 13) Illness: There are many letters addressed to followers who are suffering from illnesses. Nichiren generally advises them to receive medical treatment and maintain their faith in the Lotus Sutra.
- 14) Letters of Consolation: There are many condolence letters to followers who suffered the loss of loved ones—responses to the expressed grief of wives who lost their husband and families who lost beloved children.
- 15) Family conflicts: There are numerous letters discussing family problems. A particular example, discussed later, relates to brothers from a samurai family who were disowned by their father over the matter of faith and the restoration of harmony in the family through Nichiren's guidance.

- 16) Expressions of gratitude: Giving evidence to the fact that lay followers often visited him at Mt. Minobu, there are many letters in which Nichiren offers his appreciation for these visits.
- 17) Memorial Services and Unlucky years: There are many letters in which he gives guidance about memorial services, including specific details of how the services are to be conducted. One letter seems to be in response to a woman's question concerning an unlucky year ("yakudoshi (厄年) ," traditionally considered as years to be especially careful to avoid crises because of a time of weakening of the body and spirit; for men, the 42nd year, for women, the 33rd year).
- 18) Employment concerns: Given the time of the Kamakura Period, there were many worries about relationships between lords and retainers , and Nichiren often wrote to followers to give them counsel on how to overcome worries about their work situations.
- 19) Financial concerns: One of the three letters on this subject reveals that Nichiren prepared some relief money for a follower whose life was difficult. Another shows that a woman borrowed traveling expenses from him in Sado.
- 20) Others: A letter to a disciple who forgot a sutra, and a letter requesting a disciple to send him kimonos.

Examples of Letters

1) Writings on the Rissho-ankoku-ron:

Kingodono-gohenji (金吾殿御返事) (1270)

In this letter Nichiren tells of the success of a Dharma meeting at a memorial service of T'ien-t'ai (天台) . An official correspondence that came from Mongolia in 1268 initiated a crisis and a foreign invasion. Nichiren had predicted the invasion in the Rissho-ankoku-ron. In this letter he emphasizes the truth of his prophecy, and he declares that he immediately sent letters to the leading figures of the Kamakura shogunate requesting a debate with other sects.

2) Discussion of Other Works:

Shotou-siji-gosho (正当此時御書) (1273)

After the official correspondence came from Mongolia, Nichiren was banished to Izu (伊豆) and Sado. Following his persecution, he became determined to finally express all of the sincere beliefs that he had not yet spoken of. He wrote the

Kanjin-honzon-sho (観心本尊抄) in Sado, and this letter is a request for that work to be read. The thesis is a revelation of his religious development up to that time.

3) Letters requesting books:

Juju-bibasha-ron-tazune-idashi-gosho (十住毘婆沙論尋出御書) (1259)

Nichiren asks his followers to bring him works of the Jodo sect for reference, indicating his desire to accumulate reference materials for his research and writing of the Risho-ankoku-ron.

4) Letters on the subject of being persecuted:

Toki-dono-gohenji (土木殿御返事) (1271)

This letter gives minute details of the conditions of his banishment to Sado. Nichiren was arrested on September 12, and on September 13 he was taken to the site of execution by decapitation to have his death sentence carried out. He managed to avoid execution and he wrote this letter on September 14.

Nichiren stayed in Echi (依智) City of Sagami (相模) (presently, Atsugi City in Kanagawa Prefecture) for a while and wrote a letter in which he predicted that those who believed in the Lotus Sutra were bound to be persecuted. He expresses the joy of a practice through which prophecies could be fulfilled.

5) Letters about disputes with other sects:

Gyobin-sojo-goetsu (行敏訴状御会通) (1271)

The priests of various sects such as Ryokan (良観) (a sect of religious precepts) accused Nichiren. This letter is a petition against that suit. The priests criticized the acts of Nichiren and his disciples point by point. They specifically accuse Nichiren of making the Lotus Sutra the champion of Buddhist sutras, and of criticizing other sects. Nichiren rebutted the points of the Ryokan's criticism one by one.

6) Status reports:

Ajichi-shufuku-gosho (庵室修復書) (1277)

This letter was sent to a lay follower in the winter of this year. The temporary hermitage of Nichiren was completed in 1274, but it had suffered damage over the ensuing four years. Pillars had rotted away, and the walls of the four sides crumbled.

So, he initiated repairs to it in the winter of 1277 with the cooperation disciples and lay follower's. The letter tells Mr. Nanbu, a feudal lord at Mt. Minobu, of the status of the repairs.

7) The state of Japan and natural disasters:

Taifu-gosho (大風御書) (1281)

Gale-force winds struck Kamakura on April 12 of 1274, and strong winds blew in Kamakura on April 28 of the same year as well. Nichiren inquires about the extent of damages in this letter. He also asked about how the people of Kamakura thought and felt about this natural disaster. People in those days considered natural disasters to be signs of upcoming misfortune. It seems that Nichiren was thinking about comparing the strong winds of 1274 with signs of the Mongolian attack.

8) Traditional letters of New Year Greetings:

Haruno-hajime-gosho (春の始御書) (1282)

In this New Year's greeting that Nichiren wrote to a follower he says that it is joyful that the New Year begins with flowers in full bloom, and writes that the joy is the same as that of the brilliant shining of the full moon.

9) Guidance in religious life:

Hokyo-hojuji (宝軽法重事) (1276)

A letter sent from Mt. Minobu by Nichiren to Mr. Nishiyama, who lived at the base Mt. Fuji. Mr. Nishiyama was a feudal lord of Nishiyama (西山) (Shizuoka Prefecture, Fuji area) who, along with his wife, held Nichiren in great esteem. Nichiren wrote, "Treasures are light, but that Buddha-Dharma is heavy." He says that Buddha-Dharma is more important than gold and silver, and that the Lotus Sutra is the most important, even in Buddha-Dharma. He also says that the 16th chapter, "Nyorai-juryou-hon (如来寿量品)," is the most important of the Lotus Sutra. He recommends the eternal Buddha to Mr. Nishiyama and that he apply himself actively to the faith as the object of worship.

10) Attainment of Buddhahood by a woman:

Hokke-daimoku-sho (法華題目鈔) (1266)

This letter was written at Seicho-ji, the temple of Nichiren's birthplace. It

appears that this letter was written to a woman, for Nichiren writes that it is possible for a woman to become a Buddha, based upon chapter twelve of the Lotus Sutra. The Lotus Sutra asserts that all people have the Buddha nature i.e., the possibility to become a Buddha. Despite the fact that the status of women was low in the Kamakura era, Nichiren firmly asserted that women could attain buddhahood. Because of this, many female believers sympathized with his teachings.

Sennichi-amagozen-gohenji (千日尼御前御返事) (1278)

This is a letter to the wife of Abutsu-bo (阿仏房), who had become a follower of Nichiren when he was banished to Sado Island. Abutsu-bo traveled the great distance from Sado to Mt. Minobu to visit Nichiren on three occasions. On at least one occasion he brought along a letter from his wife to Nichiren. From the text of Nichiren's response, it can be surmised that her letter contained questions about the Lotus Sutra's doctrines. In the letter he answers her questions, praises the couple's faith, and expresses appreciation for the pains taken by Abutsu-bo to visit him.

11) Criticisms:

Ota-dono-gari-gosho (太田殿許御書) (1275)

A letter sent from Mt. Minobu by Nichiren to Mr. Ota, one of the Nichiren's leading lay followers. Nichiren criticized the Shingon-mikkyo (真言密教) in this letter because Mr. Ota was originally a Shingon-mikkyo follower.

11) Official Decorum:

Monchu-tokui-sho (問注得意鈔) (1269)

Mr. Toki and two other lay followers were called to the civil court of the shogunate in May of 1269. Nichiren sent this letter to them at that time. It seems that a matter of Buddha-Dharma was in the background, aside from the matter of the main issue of judgment. Nichiren gives the three people strict instructions about language, attitude, and movement at the court, and suggests that they don't act emotionally.

12) Illness:

Nanjo-hyoe-shichiro-dono-gosho (南條兵衛七郎殿御書) (1274)

A letter sent by Nichiren to Mr. Nanjo (a Samurai and lay follower) inquiring about his illness. Nichiren suggests that he maintain strong faith in the Lotus Sutra to get over the illness. Mr. Nanjo was at a loss because there was a person close to him

who was a Jodo (浄土) (Pure Land) follower. Nichiren said that Mr. Nanjo should take the Buddha's instruction as a foundation rather than Amitabha's. He then states that the Lotus Sutra is the most sacred book of Buddhism. He says that life after death is promised by the faith in the Lotus Sutra.

13) Letters of Consolation:

Uenodono-haha-amagozen-gohenji (上野殿母尼御前御返事) (1280)

This letter was addressed to the wife of Mr. Nanjo (refer to example No.13). She lost a husband when she was young, although at that time she was pregnant and gave birth a to second son after the husband's death. Her sorrow was great because this child died as a sixteen-year-old youth. She sent materials to Nichiren at Mt. Minobu on the occasion of that child's 49th day memorial service. Nichiren writes that he can't believe that the child, who he was expecting to be follower of the faith, had died, as though it were a dream. But, he offers consolation to her by saying that the child is resting peacefully in the wonderful world of the eternal Buddha.

14) Family conflicts:

Hyoe-sakandonno-gohenji (兵衛志殿御返事) (1278)

This is a letter sent to the Ikegami brothers, in which Nichiren tells about his life on Mt. Minobu and discusses the revived relationship between the brothers and their father. Estranged over the matter of faith, the family had been reconciled under Nichiren's guidance. In appreciation, the brothers sent a heavy cotton kimono and money to Nichiren at Mt. Minobu. This is Nichiren's letter expressing his gratitude. He praises the pious act of the offerings made from time to time by the Ikegami family. He writes that it is especially cold on Mt. Minobu, and that he is suffering from a chronic gastro enteric illness that has worsened since the end of the previous year, along with diarrhea that seems endless. Expressing his appreciation for the warm clothing sent by the family, he says that he feels better when he wears them. He also complains that there are always some 40 to 60 people in residence at his hermitage, a situation that doesn't allow him quiet study time. Finally, he tells of his happiness that the relationship between father and brothers was harmoniously resolved.

15) Expressions of gratitude:

Mushi-mochi-gosho (十字御書) (1278)

“Mushi-mochi” (蒸餅) is steamed rice cake. This is a letter of thanks to a lay follower who sent some to Nichiren at Mt. Minobu as a humble New Year's offering. These rice cakes are traditionally used for New Year's celebrations at Buddhist temples in Japan. Priests recite sutras in the temples after rice cakes and other foods are offered to Buddha. This letter is a confirmation that the offering of rice cakes to the temple was part of his sect's practice in the Kamakura period.

16) Memorial Services and Unlucky years:

Mokuenzo-kaigen-no-koto (木絵二像開眼之事) (1273)

This letter is addressed to a lay follower named Shijo Kingo. It seems that he planned to carve an image of Buddha out of a tree. Buddha has 32 special characteristics, one of which is that he has a beautiful voice. Wooden images cannot speak in a beautiful voice, therefore one of the important characteristics would be missing in such an image of Buddha as an object of worship. Nichiren guides him by saying the image would be fully adorned with all 32 characteristics if the Lotus Sutra were placed in front of it.

17) Employment concerns:

Sushun-tenno-gosho (崇峻天皇御書) (1277)

This is a letter of thanks from Nichiren to Shijo Kingo (四条金吾) for his kindness in sending kimono, money, persimmons, pears, and seaweed. Kingo was in conflict with his colleagues and had been suspended from his duties as attendant to his lord, and had had his possessions confiscated over the matter of faith. However, because of his medical knowledge, he was ordered to resume his attendant duties when his lord became ill. As his treatment of the lord went well, his suspension was lifted and he was restored to good graces. He had reacquired the lord's trust under the guidance of Nichiren.

19) Financial concerns:

Ichinosawa-nyudo-gosho (一谷入道御書) (1275)

Nichiren was at the mansion of Nyudo Ichinosawa in the latter part of his banishment to Sado. He watched Nichiren, and also gave him advice on agricultural techniques. One day, a nun visited Nichiren from Kamakura, but her money had run out. Nichiren made a promise to give a Lotus Sutra to Ichinosawa if he could borrow some money from him. But Ichinosawa gave the Lotus Sutra to his grandmother who

believed in the Lotus Sutra because he, himself, was an eager follower of Nembutsu (念佛) .

20) Others:

Bo-ji-kyo-ji (忘持經事) (1276)

Mr. Toki, a leading lay follower, went to Mt. Minobu to bury his mother's ashes, and visited with Nichiren. They hadn't seen each other for a while and they talked a long time. Mr. Toki was quite happy, and left for home, but he left his valuable Lotus Sutra in Nichiren's place at Mt. Minobu. Nichiren returned the Lotus Sutra to him with a humorous letter saying, "You are the most forgetful man in Japan."