

NICHIREN

“All that is born and dies is a birth and death of the Scripture, the Lotos in its ultimate reality. . . . Then, to utter the Sacred Title of the Lotos with the conviction that the three are one—the three, this is, Sakyamuni, the Buddha who from eternity has realized Buddhahood; the Lotos of Truth, which leads all beings, without exception, to Buddhahood; and we, beings in all the realms of existence. To utter the Sacred Title is therefore the Heritage of the Sole Great Thing Concerning Life and Death. This is the essential key to (the religious life of) Nichiren’s disciples and followers, namely, adherence to the Lotos of Truth.”

Essay of Nichiren.

The name of Nichiren stands out as the most picturesque and striking figure in the history of Japanese Buddhism. The son of a fisherman of Kominato, province of Awa, this boy—that was destined to take his place in the ranks of the immortals—was born in 1222. In his youthful days he gave proof of extraordinary intelligence, astonishing all by his sagacity and mature powers of reasoning. At the age of eleven he entered as a pupil the monastery of Seishōji near his home, where he remained studying his religion until four years later, when he took the tonsure and assumed the name of *Renchō* (Lotos-Eternal). The next year the boy-priest came to Kamakura, continuing a course of studies under

the distinguished divines of the capital for four years ; then revisiting his native place, in the solitary mountains adjoining the temple of Seishōji this voluminous writer composed his first essays.

Shortly afterwards returning to Kamakura he encountered a renowned priest from Kyōto, whom he accompanied to Hiyeizan—the Buddhist stronghold overlooking Lake Biwa—remaining there for eleven years absorbed in study and in contact with the most erudite ecclesiastics of the time, including the famous Chinese priest Doryū, who some five years later, at the request of the Regent Tokiyori, became Lord Abbot of the great Kamakura monastery, Kenchōji. All these years the young reformer profoundly devoted himself to the study of his religion, and the fame of his scholarship and spiritual asceticism began to be spread abroad.

And now the time of probation was at an end ; Nichiren—or Renchō, as he was still called—was ready to enter the arena as teacher, proselytiser and founder of the new sect. At the age of 31 (1253) he returned to his original temple of Seishōji, and there in the silence and the inviolable seclusion of the mountain, entered into a state of profound fasting, meditation and prayer. At daybreak on the morning of the eighth day the first rays of the rising sun pierced the mists of dawn, gilding with its radiance the lonely figure kneeling in spiritual ecstasy upon the woodland peak. The saint arose and saluted the flood of golden light illuminating the world as the symbol of his creed—ejaculating with passionate fervour the formula and watch-word of his sect, that has been since repeated by countless millions of souls :—

“ Namu Myōhō-Renge-Kyō ”

“All adoration to the Lotos of Truth”

This dramatic moment was the birth of the *Hokke-Shū*, of Nichiren Sect: from that time the saint went forth to wrestle with the souls of men, and to expound his doctrines as Nichiren, or ‘Lotos of the Sun.’

At once starting upon his career as reformer, his listeners construed his impassioned discourse as the ravings of a madman; Nichiren barely escaping from their attacks without serious injury. However he was enabled to flee from his assailants and again repaired to Kamakura—at that time the most important city of the empire—where he took up his abode in a straw hut in the part called *Matsuba-ga-yatsu* (Valley of Pine-needles). Henceforth he devoted the evenings to study and to the composition of his essays: during the daytime he emerged to preach his doctrines in the public thoroughfares, proclaiming himself with intense conviction as the only true exponent of the law, and a divine messenger sent to bring salvation to mankind.

At that time the city of Kamakura was experiencing a succession of calamities—earthquakes, tempests, inundations, pestilence, and a famine so severe that human beings, as well as horses and animals, were dying of hunger wholesale, their bodies lying unburied by the roadside. Nichiren attributed this dreadful condition to the moral shortcomings of the panic-stricken inhabitants; discovering in the scriptures prophecies of the woes that would overtake those who degraded the true religion by their evil deeds and superstitions. This stormy priest was the first in the land to practise sectarian aggression—until then the attitude of the various rival sects of Buddhism in Japan had been one of gentle tolerance.

He was likewise the first to make use of this dramatic method of promulgating his doctrines in public, and which he warmly defended: when rebuked that street propaganda was derogatory to the priesthood, he retorted that it was necessary for the soldier upon the field of battle to take his food standing; all criticisms were silenced before his ready eloquence. The site occupied by Nichiren for his sermons by the wayside is situated in the street running parallel to Hachimian, and is carefully preserved: enclosed with a granite fence, the central object is said to be the identical stone upon which the reformer rested during his discourses.

The doctrine so fiercely promulgated was based upon the *Pundarika Sutra*—the mysterious 'Law of the White Lotos' which was the final teaching of Buddha; and which, he asserted, contained the fundamental essence and culmination of all the former instructions classified under three heads—worship, law, and morals. Fierce intolerance and denunciation of all the former sects of Buddhism was a salient feature of Nichiren's teachings: to the remonstrance that all the other sects could not be false and heretical he retorted that the scaffolding merely availed until the temple was built—"Know ye that the *Jodo* is the road to Hell; the *Zen*, the teaching of infernal hosts; the *Shingon*, a heresy that will destroy the nation; the *Ritsu*, a deadly enemy of the land"!

Meanwhile Nichiren was reaping a steady harvest of followers and supporters, not only amongst the lower orders, but men of high education, even distinguished samurai, were converted to his doctrines. One of his earliest important believers was the samurai Shijō Kingo, the beloved disciple; an ardent and faithful adherent

who did his utmost to support and succour the saint during his persecutions, even at the risk of his own life. The residence of this devoted man subsequently became a small temple, and still exists (near the Hase station) as a memorial to his fidelity.

Obviously Nichiren's sentiments did not enhance his popularity with the other sects: moreover the sequence of severe calamities that befell the city of Kamakura was attributed by popular superstition to Nichiren's agency, thereby incurring the general odium and more than ever intensifying the unpopularity of his doctrines. During his discourses he was not only insulted by word, but was constantly attacked by the mob; returning to his dwelling covered with blood and wounds. But persecution little availed to daunt this heroic spirit; it is recorded that he appeared to welcome ill-usage and cruel treatment, and in an ecstasy would give thanks to the Almighty that he was deemed worthy to suffer a baptism of blood in the cause of the All-Highest. Indeed, several of his disciples died a martyr's death while protecting their beloved master from the fury of his assailants.

In the year 1260 Nichiren had the temerity to present to the Regent Tokiyori (an ardent follower of the *Zen* Sect) his celebrated treatise *Risshō Ankoku Ron* (The Establishment of Righteousness and the Security of the Country), wherein plain language was used regarding the perilous condition of the people and the futile attempts of their rulers to save them: it moreover contained the prophecy that a foreign invasion was near at hand. In this essay the other sects of Buddhism and their priests are severely condemned:—

“Woe unto them! They have missed the entrance

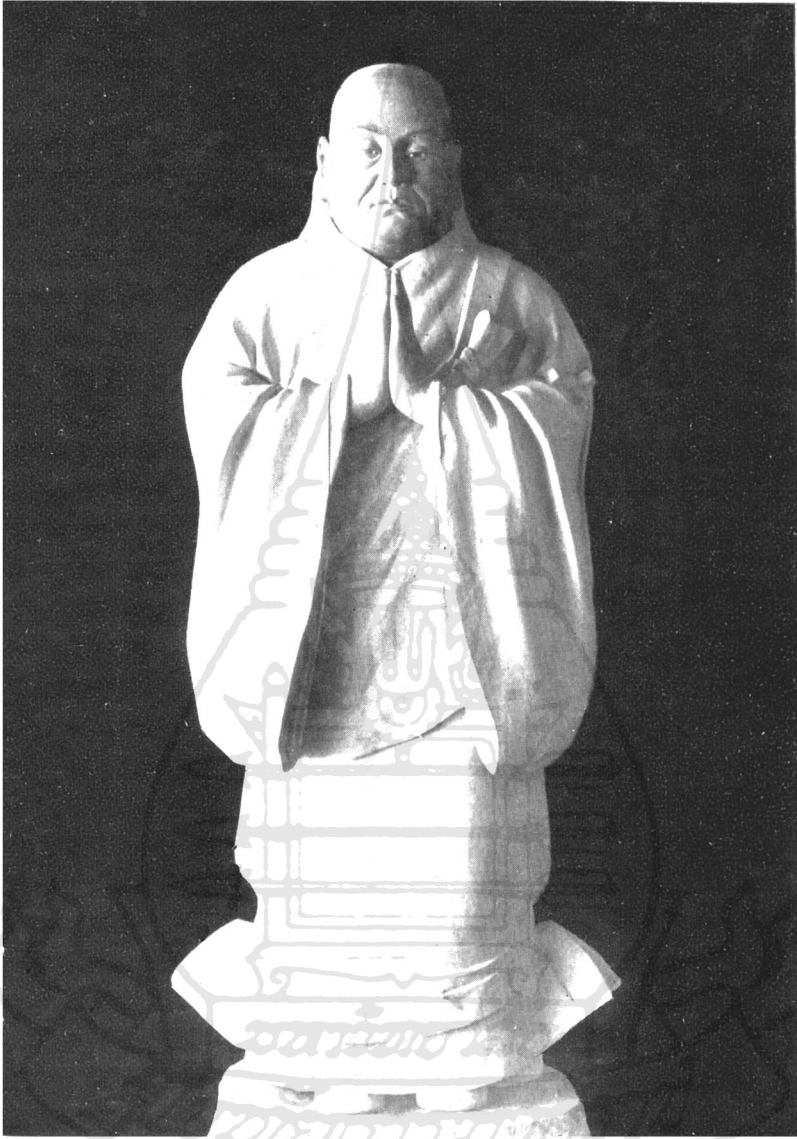
into the gate that leads to the true Buddhism, and have fallen into the prison-house of the false teachings. They are fettered, entangled, bewildered. Whither will their blind wanderings lead them?"

This treatise not unnaturally had the effect of stirring up wrath and indignation on all sides—the political powers, as well as the ecclesiastical faction, becoming open enemies of the new reformer. His hermitage was attacked and set fire to in the night, but Nichiren was again successful in eluding his foes, escaping on this occasion to the province of Shimōsa. However the next year he was captured by command of the Regent, and as a disturber of the public peace was banished to Itō in the province of Idzu: a signpost still stands upon the sand-dunes of the Kamakura beach recording the fact that this famous priest started into exile from that spot. During the period of banishment his activities continued unabated, the number of his followers were steadily increasing, and many books and essays were written. Sheltered in the hut of a poor fisherman—of whose kindness he always cherished grateful memories—Nichiren remained in Idzu for some two years: when released he returned to Kamakura to resume his propaganda. The next few years were spent in missionary journeys around the neighbouring provinces, including a visit to his native place—where the prophet was again furiously attacked and again escaped from death by almost a miracle. It is recorded that during these wanderings, in the 48th year of his age the saint ascended the snowy heights of Mount Fuji and buried upon the sacred mountain the *Hokke* scriptures, copied by his own hand.

In 1271 Nichiren was again seized as an offender

against the public peace—this time at the instigation of the various other sects of Buddhism—and sentenced to be executed at Katase, the village upon the mainland opposite the island of Enoshima. As an example, the prisoner was mounted upon a horse and carried around the streets of Kamakura by his guards before proceeding to the place of execution, arriving at Katase in the dead of night: many of his sorrowful disciples and converts assembled, weeping by the roadside to take a last farewell. The devoted Kingo, with his brothers, led the horse's bridle; accompanying their beloved master into the valley of death with every expectation of laying down their own lives at the same time.

According to the well-known popular tradition the scene that followed was dramatic in the extreme. Nichiren, incessantly repeating the scriptures, knelt upon the rope-mat and bared his neck to receive the fatal stroke. At the moment the executioner brandished his sword on high, a sudden crash of thunder shook the earth; the sky was lit up, and from the black clouds a hissing ball of fire shattered the uplifted sword into three pieces, paralysing the arm of the executioner, who fell to the ground. This miraculous demonstration being naturally construed as a mark of divine wrath, a messenger hastened at full speed to report to Kamakura what had occurred. However the previous night a heavenly being had appeared to the Regent in a dream, warning him not to slay the captive priest: a reprieve had already been despatched, the two messengers meeting at a small stream that flows into the sea on the *Shichirigahama* beach, and which to this day bears the name of *Yukiai-gawa*, or 'River of Meeting.'



Statue of Nichiren.

Carved from a bough of the consecrated Pine-tree, and installed at the shrine of Amagoi-ike

An important and interesting temple was erected at Katase in close proximity to the site of the execution-ground, wherein various relics of the saint are preserved: this is Ryukōji, or 'Temple of the Dragon's Mouth': nearby is the small dark cave wherein Nichiren was imprisoned while awaiting his doom. These events took place September 12th, 1271. Every year as the anniversary recurs the temple precincts are thronged by crowds of devotees, who arrive the previous day in large parties and gaily decorated processions from far and near to commemorate the miraculous deliverance of their beloved saint, and spend the whole night in a state of religious fervour worthy of their founder—loudly vociferating the formula (which has been translated 'All glory to the scripture of the Lotus of Good Law'), to the incessant accompaniment of hand-drums; a process absolutely deafening to those who prefer milder methods of attaining salvation.

The Regent Tokimune on this occasion transmuted Nichiren's sentence to banishment in the distant island of Sado, where after a long and perilous journey he arrived at the beginning of December, 1271. His only shelter was a delapidated hut situated in a bleak graveyard, where he experienced severe hardships: barely sufficient of the poorest food was obtainable to sustain life, moreover his thin monk's habit of coarse hemp afforded but meagre protection to the deep snows and icy winds of that rigorous climate. Harsh treatment and attacks from his enemies accentuated his forlorn and abandoned condition, and however the dauntless spirit of the saint might soar above all trials and persecutions, he must surely have perished from cold and starvation during the

long winter months had not rescue been forthcoming from an unexpected quarter.

One night one of his opponents, armed with a sword, approached the isolated hut with the intention of killing the devil-priest.' Nichiren, kneeling upon the bare earth, was reciting the scriptures: the intense sincerity and magnetic quality of his voice arrested and affected his intending slayer to such an extent that the man experienced a complete change of heart, becoming a faithful convert; together with his wife the devoted couple did all in their power to succour and ameliorate the pitiful condition of the castaway. Many other converts were won by his impassioned oratory: even in that wild and distant spot Nichiren was able to write many essays and to hold communication with his disciples.

Three years later the exile was released and permitted to return to Kamakura. There he was accorded an interview with the Regent, to whom he expounded his doctrines, again warning him of the impending attack on Japan by outsiders, which he prophesied would occur not later than the same year. This prediction was verified, for a few months later (Oct. 1274) the first Mongolian attack occurred, when the islands of Tsushima and Iki were much devastated by the enemy and large numbers of Japanese soldiers fell in battle. Thereupon Nichiren's status underwent a complete change. Thousands embraced the *Hokke-Shu*, or 'Sect of the Lotus-flower,' and the reformer's triumph was complete: a charter being conferred by the Regent granting him full liberty in the promulgation of his doctrines. Moreover he was offered by Tokimune a temple and lands in Kamakura, but earthly glory held no attractions for this lofty soul, and

now Nichiren's real greatness becomes evident. The world lay at his feet, but he renounced it, and with a small band of followers retired into the seclusion of a wild mountain—Minobu San: there, in a hut of the most austere simplicity, he dedicated his remaining days to study of the scriptures and to the instruction of his disciples.

Around this dominant figure are entwined countless legends and traditions. It is said that on the morning of his birth (Jan. 1222) the farmers, going to their labour in the fields on that cold winter's daybreak, marvelled to behold the glory of the lotos-flowers that rose from the mud and tangle of last year's withered leaves, opening their pure glistening chalices in the frosty atmosphere to herald the advent of the saint. Moreover at the same time a spring of crystal water suddenly gushed from the earth in close proximity to the cottage wherein his parents dwelt—a manifestation that was held to symbolise the purity and truth of his teachings. It is impossible for devotees and admirers of Nichiren to make pilgrimages to the place of his birth, for the actual site whereon the fisherman's cottage stood has long disappeared, and lies beneath the blue ripples upon the ocean bed; this part of the sea-coast having been washed away by the fierce storms and tidal waves of succeeding centuries. A universally known legend records that at the time his enemies determined to compass the destruction of Nichiren by setting fire to his hermitage, a celestial messenger, disguised as a beautiful monkey with long snow-white fur, mysteriously appeared and guided the saint to a place of safety. The cave that afforded him a refuge on that occasion is supposed to be on a hill in the back-woods

of Dzushi, and is easily accessible from Kamakura: at the entrance of the cave hangs a representation of Nichiren attended by his little rescuer. A picturesque mountain-temple built in the rock adjoins this interesting spot, that was erected in commemoration of this incident and is known as *Sarubatake* or 'Garden of the Monkey.'

Nichiren remained in his retreat at Minobu until the age of sixty—a haven of peace and rest after the vicissitudes and persecutions of a tempestuous career extending over forty years. This mountain was included in the territory of a distinguished samurai named Hagii, who was also a devoted adherent of Nichiren: the former naturally wished to make life easier, and to reduce the privations of the saint in his wild retreat, but Nichiren's ascetic nature could not change; he would accept no favour. However an exception was made in the gift of a horse from Lord Hagii—to which animal he was deeply attached—and later, shortly before his death he consented to the construction of an assembly-hall for the instruction of his followers.

The master, with his seven disciples, lived a life of utmost austerity: one of the little band would now and again descend to the valley below, in quest of fresh water and the meagre supply of fresh vegetables upon which they subsisted. The cold of winter was rigorous in the extreme, and must have recalled the saint's earlier sufferings during his exile in Sado: he writes that although the height of his hut was but seven feet, snow lay on the ground to the depth of ten feet. "Ice makes up the walls and the icicles are like the beads of garlands decorating shrines." The spring flowers of that lofty region did not bloom until summer, and the fruits only ripened

at the approach of winter: the sole human beings that ever appeared being an occasional wood-cutter, and at rare intervals a comrade in religion, braving the dangers of the lonely mountain passes to visit the hermit in his retirement. Their life, and the beauty of its setting, is graphically described by Nichiren in his letters—the fantastic shapes of the great rocks; the dense forest; the roar of the torrent in the valley; the distant views, and the surrounding rugged peaks: at night the silence of that desolate region was broken by the cry of the wolves and the wild monkeys, and occasionally the melancholy whining call of the stag to his mate.

After some eight years of this isolated existence Nichiren was attacked by illness. At this period he writes “During these eight years illness and age have brought me severe suffering, both body and mind seem crumbling into ruin—my weakness daily increases: for ten days I have taken no food and my suffering is increased by the bitter cold—my body is like a stone!”*

After a time he was persuaded to repair to the curative hot springs of Hitachi in the hope of ameliorating his condition.

On Sept. 9th, 1282, the little procession set forth on the last journey from the mountain home so dear to the master's heart, and to which he was destined never to return. Of this retreat he wrote “Here at last, thanks to the protection of Lord Hagii am I able to study the scriptures in peace, without fear of attack.” The saint, in his emaciated condition, travelled slowly upon his trusty horse, supported by four of his disciples: also the son of Lord Hagii, with twenty of his retainers, escorted

* Translated by Professor M. Masasaki.

the failing priest upon the long and arduous journey. However after nine days of travel Nichiren, in his enfeebled condition, felt himself unable to proceed: they had now reached the plain of Musashi, so he decided to rest awhile and break the journey in the mansion of another important samurai and faithful adherent called Ikegami Munenaka, whose residence was situated near Omori, on the outskirts of the present capital. Here the little band arrived on Sept. 18th; but the master grew steadily weaker, and it was evident that his end was approaching. His intrepid spirit never failed: large numbers of followers and devotees flocked around the dying saint, whom he exhorted and instructed until the last moments.

From his death-bed Nichiren indited several letters, one being affectionately concerned with the welfare of his faithful friend the horse, who, with the groom, he had entrusted to a friend for safe keeping, and to protect him from rough treatment after his master should have passed away. On the 13th of October this great saint and reformer breathed his last: to the fervent reiteration of the formula *Namu Myōho-rengē-kyō*, mingled with the tears and lamentations of all the multitude assembled, Nichiren ended his stormy career upon this earth and in the 61st year of his age passed to the Higher Enlightenment.

According to his own desire the sacred ashes were sent to Minobu--of which the saint had written that his soul would haunt that paradise upon earth for all eternity. A relic was retained at Ikegami to become the object of special veneration at the commemorative temple that was erected upon this hallowed spot by the faithful samurai and disciple Lord Ikegami, from whom that district takes its name. This celebrated and most popular tem-

ple is known as *Honmonji* (the Main Gate)—one of the headquarters of the sect and Mecca of the faithful: every year upon the anniversary of the death-day of their beloved founder the whole neighbourhood is thronged with worshippers and the scene constitutes a remarkable tribute to his memory. A special sanctuary encloses the actual spot whereupon Nichiren breathed his last, with the pillar (now draped in silk) against which the master leaned during his last hours upon earth—affecting memorials that are venerated with utmost devotion by the faithful. A temple had originally been erected upon Minobu San to commemorate the tomb: this was succeeded some two centuries later (1474) by elaborate and more imposing edifices: although devastated by fire upon seven different occasions, they have always been rebuilt—being known by the original name of *Minobu San Kuonji*. The scene becomes most impressive upon the anniversaries of the great requiem festival of the 13th October, when large numbers of pilgrims and worshippers repair to this remote mountain to do homage before the tomb of the great departed.

The Nichiren is essentially a democratic sect, making an especially strong appeal to the lower classes. The abstruse study of the *Hokke-Kyo* being attainable only to the initiated, to the ordinary believer the sole requirement deemed essential to the attainment of enlightenment consists in the reverent recitation of the formula *Namu Myōho-Renge-Kyo* chanted to a vigorous accompaniment of drums—and to which full justice is done by the inexhaustible enthusiasm of his pious followers.

In common with the great leaders of men of every age and clime Nichiren has his translators, by whom he

has been scoffed at—and even denounced as a charlatan and mountebank—for what they are pleased to describe as his theatrical and Salvation-Army methods; but whatever may have been the temperamental and intellectual errors of this great man, none can gainsay that he was passionately true to his convictions, passionately brave, honest and sincere: moreover his teachings have borne abundant fruit, for at the present day in Japan thousands of temples are dedicated to the Nichiren doctrines, his devoted adherents numbering many million souls.

“When you fall into an abyss and someone has lowered a rope to pull you out, should you hesitate to grasp the rope because you doubt the power of the helper? Has not Buddha declared ‘I alone am the Protector and Saviour?’ There is the power! Is it not taught that faith is the only entrance (to salvation)? There is the rope! One who hesitates to seize it, and will not utter the Sacred Truth, will never be able to climb the precipice of *Bodhi* (Enlightenment)... Our hearts ache and our sleeves are wet (with tears) until we see face to face the tender figure of the one who says to us ‘I am thy Father.’ At this thought our hearts beat, even as when we behold the brilliant clouds in the evening sky, or the pale moonlight of the fast-falling night... Should any season be passed without thinking of the compassionate promise ‘Constantly I am thinking of you?’ Should any month or day be spent without revering the teaching that there is none who cannot attain Buddhahood? Devote yourself with your whole heart to the ‘Adoration to the Lotus of the Perfect Truth,’ and utter it yourself as well as admonish others to do the same. Such is your task in this human life.”

Writings of Nichiren (Prof. Anesaki)