

THREE NICHIREN TEMPLES

In the district of Kamakura known as *Matsuba-gayatsu* (Valley of Pine-needles) are three temples of the Nichiren Sect in close proximity to each other—Ankokuji, Myōhōji, and Chōshōji: these are well worth inspection for their picturesque environment and the charming views commanded from the enclosing hills. For centuries these three foundations have been contesting in rivalry as to which is of the first importance in their association with the master: according to the opinion of various of the Nichiren devotees, the small temple of Ankokuji is supposed to be the identical site of the founder's hermitage wherein he found a shelter from the year 1253, during the stormy time of persecution. Here the saint is said to have meditated for four years before publishing his famous treatise *Risshō Ankoku Ron*, or 'Treatise upon Peace and Righteousness', which resulted in his attempted execution and ultimate banishment to the island of Sado. This essay is said to have been actually written in the cave to the right on entering the gate, wherein is a monument to Nichiren, protected from falling rocks by a wooden canopy.

Beside the entrance to Ankokuji stands a noble pine-tree of curious and unique shape, its huge trunk encircled by the *shimenawa*, or sacred rope. This veteran is possibly one of Kamakura's most ancient pines; but alas, its dignity and beauty have suffered grievously in the severe

typhoon of Oct. 1917, which proved so devastating to many of these ancient survivals—numbers of the venerable trees in the Hachiman approach being uprooted and destroyed upon that fatal night. In the vicinity of the historic cave an ascent leads to a beautiful spot above, fringed with great pines and affording a wide prospect of sea and distant landscape between their far-spreading boughs. This path winds along the crest of the hill, and if continued in a westerly direction gradually descends through the emerald shadows of a bamboo grove to the graveyard of the temple—especially appealing in early spring when the numerous plum-trees are in bloom, perfuming the air with their delicate fragrance. Above the bamboo thicket is another cave associated with the meditations of Nichiren, and containing a statue of the saint with his little friend of the legend—the white monkey guiding him by the long sleeve of his robe, and piloting the master to a haven of refuge from his assailants.

The temple of Ankokuji was first built during Nichiren's lifetime in the year 1274 to commemorate his association with this historic site: two buildings alone have survived to the present day—the *Hondo*, or Main Temple, and a small offshoot dedicated to Inari, god of harvest; behind which is the famous cave.

A noticeable feature of the main altar is an enormous head of the Buddha. This unexpected object originally belonged to the temple of Zuirinji, near Ueno, Tōkyō: a venerable priest of that foundation cherished the intention of fashioning a huge effigy of Shaka, but only lived to complete the head. Superstition credits this head with efficacy in the cure of disease.

The beautiful and interesting old temple of *Myōhōji*

is situated on the hillside a few paces westward of An-kokuji : according to the temple record Nichiren first came to make his home upon this site in 1253 ; after his return from exile in the province of Idzu the saint dwelt in this part for nineteen years, and from here he retired to Minobu in the fifth month of the year 1272. The building originally erected upon the present site was known as Honkōkuji : at the time of Nichiren's death in Oct. 1282 the saint is said to have specially committed the care of this temple to his disciple Nichirō. In early days various personages of distinction presided over the destiny of Myōhōji. The fourth priest was Nichirō, uncle of the first Ashikaga *Shōgun* Takauji : a famous pupil and disciple of this dignitary was said to have been a scion of the Imperial house, a natural son of the martyred Prince Morinaga (p. 71) and who assumed the name of Nichiyei on entering the priesthood.

During the Prince's imprisonment in the cave at Daitonomiya he was attended by a court-lady named Minami-no-Kata : after the assassination she is said to have borne a son to the royal captive, who was known as *Ryōgon-Shinno* until he took the tonsure. Myōhōji was rebuilt upon the original site in 1357 under the auspices of Nichiyei, who presided over it himself until his death occurred in 1397, at the age of sixty-four. Upon the summit of the hill behind the temple he constructed a *Kuyōtō*, or memorial, to the spirit of his father, Prince Morinaga, where he daily offered prayers and burnt incense in memory of his murdered parent : another monument also exists as the memorial of Minami-no-Kata.

The temple was falling into a condition of dilapidation, but some hundred years ago was completely renovated

and reconstructed by a daimyō of Kiūshū, Lord Hosokawa, to commemorate the death of his beautiful young daughter. The interior is unexpectedly attractive, being lavishly ornamented with paintings—even those omnipresent emblems of the Nichiren sect the big drums bearing a design of lotos-flowers, now considerably impaired by the enthusiasm of the faithful. The *fusuma*, or sliding doors, are decorated with various scenes and figures—also sprays of blossom, storks, peacocks, angels playing instruments etc.; while the ceiling is gay with clusters of flowers painted in caissons with charming effect. The altar glitters with numerous gilt figures of saints and divinities, the centre-piece being a large effigy of Nichiren, his head draped with a silken covering. The ceiling above the sanctuary is decorated with a quaint design of waves and clouds.

Upon the altar of a side-chamber (on the left) various treasures of the temple are deposited, amongst which is an elaborate antique reliquary enclosing a small piece of bone, said to be a sacred relic of Nichiren. The corresponding chamber on the right contains a venerable effigy of Prince Morinaga; also an ornate case enshrines a large black statue of his posthumous son, Nichiyei, clad in his priest's robes of ancient silk, and which, it is averred, are the identical vestments worn by the defunct ecclesiastic during his lifetime.

Above the gate of the Kings the rock is pierced by two deep caves: one containing a large representation of Nichiren rudely hewn of granite: the other is a mausoleum wherein repose many of the departed priests of Myōhōji. The large temple upon the upper level is the *Hokke-do* or 'Hall of the Scriptures', whose altar is embellished with a magnificent gilt sanctuary enclosing

another ancient statue of Nichiren: the large figure carved in wood and tinted in natural hues (on the right) is another representation of the founder arrayed in his priestly vestments. Facing the steps is a white building—the *Shakado*, or 'Hall of the Buddha', wherein is a large statue, but only visible upon special occasions. The ornamental cluster of ancient *sotetsu* (*cycas revoluta*, or unrolled cocoa-palm) constitutes a link to the early days, and is said to have been planted by Nichiyei.

Adjoining the belfry, with its fine old bell of green copper, another long ascent of mossy and somewhat dilapidated steps guides the wanderer to the crest of the hill above, from whence a romantic prospect is unfolded. The track on the right leads to the ancient memorial to Prince Morinaga, erected by his son. . A notice-board records the fact that, at the time his hermitage was attacked, this was the path by which Nichiren escaped when escorted by his celestial guide in the guise of the white monkey to the shelter of the cave in the backwoods beyond. The path bearing to the left of the ascent culminates in a secluded and beautiful spot encircled with great pines, and wherein is a group of ancient grey monuments, heavily mossed. One of these lichened stones bears an inscription to the effect that this grove was a favourite retreat of Nichiren during his sojourn in the hut below, and doubtless the solitude and peace of this woodland sanctuary—with its vision of the changing ocean, the distant mountain-ranges and the pure snows of Fuji—would make a strong appeal to the saint, who was at that time at the height of the persecutions and perils of his stormy career, striving in deadly earnest to win the souls of men amidst oft-recurring scenes of turbulence and conflict.

The third of this group lies opposite Ankokuji to the south, just beyond the railway lines. *Chōshōji* was originally an offshoot of Myōhōji established by a disciple of Nichiren called Nichisai, who died in 1299. Later it was re-erected by another disciple, Nichiryū, who was a native of Nichiren's birthplace, Kominato, Bōshu and was missionary to the central provinces of Japan, (1385-1464). This old temple is romantically situated at the foot of the hills, and is embowered with flowering trees: the foot-path at the rear, beside a row of ancient monuments, leads to the uplands above; a descent can be effected from this beautiful spot by another route leading to Zaimokuza. The building on the right of the *Hondo* is the Hall of Prayer.

Various personal relics and writings ascribed to Nichiren are preserved at this temple, which assumes a very gay and crowded aspect on festivals connected with the saint. Within the courtyard is an ancient maple whose gnarled and twisted boughs are protected by a fence; it is asserted that this tree, as a dwarf plant, was tended by Nichiren himself: although obviously of great age, its feathery foliage is still luxuriant, in late spring the new leaves assuming a delicate rose-pink hue that turns to green with the advance of summer. Near the roofed gate of Chōshōji a spring of exceptionally pure water gushes from the earth within a stone enclosure; this is known as the *Nichiren Sui* (Spring of Nichiren), and is famed as the spot where miracles are said to have been performed by the saint.