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The Atsuhara Affair

The *Lotus Sutra*, Persecution,
and Religious Identity in the Early Nichiren Tradition

In 1279, twenty peasants who were lay followers of the Buddhist teacher Nichiren were summarily arrested at Atsuhara in the Fuji district of Suruga province and were sent for trial to Kamakura, where three of them were beheaded. This incident is known in the history of Nichiren Buddhism as the Atsuhara persecution. The first part of this article outlines the circumstances of the persecution and the political and religious tensions that fueled it and considers how Nichiren was able to persuade his followers to remain steadfast in the face of a grave threat. The second part examines links between Nichiren's interpretation of the persecution and larger themes in his teaching of exclusive devotion to the *Lotus Sutra*, especially that offering one's life for the sutra's sake guarantees one's attainment of buddhahood. Lastly, the article touches on how later accounts of the Atsuhara persecution shaped a normative ideal within the Nichiren tradition of how *Lotus* devotees should meet opposition from those in power.

KEYWORDS: *Lotus Sutra*—Atsuhara—Nichiren—Nikkō—persecution—martyrdom

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SO PRECIOUS are its teachings, the *Lotus Sutra* suggests, that one should uphold them even at the cost of one's life. In the "Fortitude" chapter, a host of bodhisattvas declares in the Buddha's presence, "We do not cherish bodily life. We value only the unsurpassed Way" (T 9.36c). They enumerate the trials they will endure in order to uphold and spread the *Lotus* in the evil age following the Buddha's nirvana: slander and abuse; attack by swords and staves; enmity from kings, ministers, and respected monks; and repeated banishment. Similarly, the "The Life Span of the Tathāgata" chapter says that the primordially awakened Śākyamuni will appear to those who, "single-mindedly desiring to see the Buddha, do not begrudge bodily life" (T 9.43b). In the long history of *Lotus Sutra* interpretation, the figure who took closest note of these passages was undoubtedly the medieval Japanese Buddhist teacher Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1282). Originally a monk of the Tendai School, Nichiren revered the *Lotus* as Śākyamuni Buddha's highest teaching and maintained that, now in the Final Dharma age (*mappō* 末法), only the *Lotus Sutra* leads to Buddhahood; other teachings must be set aside as provisional. Various disasters confronting his contemporaries, such as famine and epidemics within the realm and the threat of Mongol invasion from without, represented in his eyes the direct result of people abandoning the *Lotus Sutra* and relying instead on teachings that were inferior and incomplete. Over the course of his career, Nichiren's claims for the exclusive efficacy of the *Lotus* and his criticism of other Buddhist forms provoked opposition from Buddhist leaders and government officials; he was twice arrested and exiled, and attempts were made on his life. Thus he claimed to have read the *Lotus Sutra* not only with his mouth and mind but also with his body (*shikidoku* 色読), living out in his own person the sutra's predictions about the hostility that will confront its devotees in an evil latter age (HABITO 2009). From this perspective, the opposition that he encountered could be seen as both validating the sutra's words and also legitimizing his own actions as its devotee. Out of his own experience of persecution, Nichiren forged an unwavering faith in the salvific value of undergoing great trials for the *Lotus Sutra*'s sake. By enduring such difficulties, he maintained, one could expiate one's past karmic offenses and fulfill the compassionate practice of a bodhisattva; by giving up one's life, if required, for the *Lotus Sutra*, one would be certain to become a Buddha in one's next existence (STONE 2002 and 2007). Nichiren's faith in the soteriological significance of meeting persecution in upholding the *Lotus* not only helped sustain his following during his lifetime but would deeply influence his subsequent tradition.

The Hokkeshū or “Lotus sect,” as Nichiren’s followers were called in medieval times, has in fact a history of individuals known as “martyrs” (*junkyōsha* 殉教者), who willingly incurred the anger of the authorities in order to reassert Nichiren’s exclusive claims for the *Lotus Sutra*.¹

Nichiren’s ideas about the religious meaning of enduring great trials were shaped not only by his own hardships but also by the need to encourage his followers, who also met with antagonism on account of their faith—whether as individuals, from their relatives and feudal lords, or as members of his following as a whole. On two occasions during Nichiren’s lifetime, groups within his broader community were targeted by government officials. The first instance occurred in the wake of Nichiren’s arrest and exile to Sado Island in 1271, when, by his own account, officials of the bakufu, the shogunate or military government, drew up a list of some two hundred sixty of his followers living in Kamakura where the bakufu had its base, intending to banish them (*Shuju onfurumai gosho* 種種御振舞御書, *Teihon* 2: 970). Of that time, he wrote, “My disciples have been banished or imprisoned, while their lay supporters have had their lands confiscated or were expelled from their clans” (*Nyosetsu shugyō shō* 如説修行鈔, *Teihon* 1: 736). Out of a thousand followers in Kamakura, he later said, nine hundred ninety-nine had abandoned their faith (“Nii-ama gozen gohenji” 新尼御前御返事, *Teihon* 1: 869; TAKAGI 1965, 181–85). The second instance was the so-called Atsuhara persecution (Atsuhara *hōnan* 熱原法難), a series of violent acts and questionable legal proceedings that targeted not Nichiren himself but his followers, both monks and laity, in Atsuhara village in the Fuji district of Suruga province (present-day Shizuoka Prefecture) during the late 1270s and that threatened to engulf his entire following. In the end, twenty lay devotees were arrested and three executed. This second government action against a group of Nichiren’s followers formed the occasion for Nichiren to rearticulate, late in his life, his teachings on the importance of readiness to give up one’s life, if need be, for the *Lotus Sutra*. It also suggests that, by that point in the formation of his community, this ultimate commitment to the *Lotus* was shared, not only

1. The designation *junkyōsha* for those Hokkeshū figures who incurred persecution from the authorities in spreading Nichiren’s teaching is historically rather recent and may derive from the use of this term in reference to Japanese Christian martyrs of the early modern or Tokugawa period (1603–1868). There have been at least two modern collected accounts of Nichiren Buddhist *junkyōsha* as a category (INOUE 1931; MIYAZAKI 1966); the term *junkyō* (sacrificing one’s life for the teaching) has also been applied specifically to the leaders of the medieval Nichiren *fūjū fuse* 不受不施 movement (NARAMOTO and TAKANO 1972), and to Nichiren himself, in the title *Nichiren: Junkyō no nyōraishi* (Nichiren: Martyr and envoy of the Tathāgata), a popular biography by TAMURA Yoshirō (1975). The word *junkyō* appears only infrequently in Buddhist sources; *shashin* (discarding the body) is a much more common, though not precisely equivalent, term (STONE 2007).

by Nichiren himself and his educated monk-disciples versed in the sutra and its commentaries, but by unlettered peasants.

Virtually all that we know about the Atsuhara affair comes from the writings of two people: Nichiren himself and to a lesser extent one of his leading disciples, the monk Hōki-bō 伯耆房, also known as Nikkō 日興 (1246–1333), who headed Nichiren's followers in Suruga. Any relevant bakufu records have been lost, possibly destroyed with the fall of the Kamakura shogunate in 1333. Those arrested and executed were quite probably illiterate; in any case, they left no records. Thus by default it is the writings of Nichiren and Nikkō that tell the story, and one cannot assess the facts of the case independently of their account.² Nonetheless, their references to the persecution offer considerable insight into the organization of Nichiren's following, his powers of leadership, and his message of absolute dedication to the *Lotus Sutra*. This article will focus on Nichiren's interpretation of the Atsuhara affair and the rhetorical strategies by which he was able to invest hostility from those in power with religious meaning and thus hold his community together in the face of serious threat. The first part will outline the circumstances and chronology of the persecution as well as Nichiren's response. The second part will analyze how Nichiren and Nikkō's reading of the Atsuhara affair was linked to broader themes in Nichiren's teaching about meeting persecution for the *Lotus Sutra*'s sake as an unparalleled salvific opportunity and also touch on how accounts of the Atsuhara persecution contributed to a normative ideal of faith and practice for the later Nichiren tradition.

Background of the Persecution

The trouble at Atsuhara came to a head in the context of several interrelated social, institutional, and political tensions. What began as a local conflict soon involved the larger apparatus of bakufu authority and was aggravated by the mounting threat of a Mongol attack on Japan. A brief summary of these contributing factors will first be in order.

2. Chief sources for the Atsuhara persecution include the 1279 *Ryūsenji mōshijō*, a petition of protest written by Nichiren, possibly with Nikkō's collaboration (see note 5 below); several letters from Nichiren to disciples at the time of the persecution; Nikkō's 1278 petition *Shijukuin mōshijō*; and a brief historical note in Nikkō's 1298 *Honzon bun'yo chō*, all of which are cited in this article. The most extensive modern scholarly study of the Atsuhara persecution was undertaken by Hori Nichikō (1867–1957), who was briefly the fifty-ninth chief abbot of Taiseikiji, head temple of the Nichiren Shōshū denomination of Nichiren Buddhism. Hori's detailed analysis of primary documents related to the affair appears in his *Atsuhara hōnan shi* (HORI 1922), which he drew upon for his later biography of Nikkō (HORI 1974). The social and political background of the Atsuhara affair has been insightfully analyzed in a study by TAKAGI Yutaka (1965, 193–220), to which Part I of this article is much indebted. For more popular accounts of the persecution, see SATŌ 1994, 189–211, and 2003, 300–309.

In 1279, when the persecution broke out, Nichiren had been living for about five years in his retreat at Mt. Minobu in Kai province (present-day Yamanashi Prefecture), which bordered on Suruga. In 1274 he had been pardoned from his second sentence of exile, to Sado Island. On his return, failing again to convince bakufu officials of his claim that only faith in the *Lotus Sutra* could protect the country against invasion by the Mongols, he soon left Kamakura and settled at Minobu, where he devoted himself to writing and training disciples. From that time on, his leading monk-disciples—Nisshō 日昭 (1221–1323), Nichirō 日朗 (1245–1320), Nikō 日向 (1253–1314), Nitchō 日頂 (1252–1317), and others—assumed direct charge of proselytizing and guiding local communities of followers in the eastern or Kanto provinces. Heading Nichiren's followers in Suruga was Nikkō, known at the time as Hōki-bō and later as Byakuren Ajari 白蓮阿闍梨. Nikkō's chief lay supporter in the area was one Nanjō Tokimitsu 南条時光 (d. 1332), son of Nanjō Hyōe Shichirō 南条兵衛七郎 (d. 1265), a warrior thought to have met Nichiren and become his follower during a tour of duty in Kamakura. Tokimitsu was the bakufu-appointed steward (*jitō* 地頭) of Ueno in the upper Fuji district; thus he is also known as “Ueno-dono” 上野殿. The joint efforts of Nikkō and Tokimitsu won a growing number of converts in the Fuji area. The elite among them were members of the local landholding *bushi* or warrior families, many of them related to either Nikkō or Tokimitsu. Nikkō's mother was from the Yui 由井 or Nishiyama 西山 branch of the Kawai 河合 family, and through her, he was also related to its Takahashi 高橋 branch, while Tokimitsu was linked through his sisters' marriages to the Ishikawa 石川 and Niida 新田 families, all of whom counted *Lotus* devotees among their members. In Suruga as elsewhere, ties of blood and marriage formed the basis for the spread of Nichiren's teachings among provincial warrior clans (TAKAGI 1965, 197–99; s.v. “Nanjō” in *Ibun jiten*, 834–36).

Nikkō also converted a number of resident monks at Tendai temples in the Fuji area who may have been related to these warrior families or to the peasants who worked their lands.³ Like Nichiren, Nikkō had begun his religious career as a Tendai cleric. He himself was a monk responsible for officiating at routine ritual or liturgical services (*kusō* 供僧) at the temple Shijukuin 四十九院 at Kanbara in Fuji, where he had first taken the tonsure as a boy. He also had ties to another

3. The family connections of Nikkō's converts among local monks are not easy to determine. At Ryūsenji in Atsuhara, Nichizen, like Nikkō, is said to have had ties to the Yui family, although Nikkō's record says only that he came from Kawai, where the Yui were based (NSZ 2: 112). Traditional accounts identify Nichiben as the eldest son of Jinshirō, one of the peasants killed in the persecution, though HORI Nichikō questions this (1974, 1: 136). Nonetheless, the distinction between warriors and cultivators was not sharply drawn, and it is quite possible that some of the monks converted by Nikkō and his disciples came from among the local peasantry as well as *bushi* families.

local temple, Jissōji 実相寺 in Iwamoto. At Shijukuin, Nikkō gained as followers of Nichiren's teaching the monks Nichiji 日持, Kenshū 賢秀, and Shōken 承賢, and at Jissōji, the monks Higo-kō 肥後公, Chikuzen-bō 筑前房, Buzen-bō 豊前房 (or Buzen-kō 豊前公), and Nitchū 日仲. And at Ryūsenji 滝泉寺 in Atsuhara, which would become the epicenter of the persecution, he converted Shimotsuke-bō Nisshū 下野房日秀 (d. 1329), Echigo-bō Nichiben 越後房日弁 (1239–1311), Shō-bō Nichizen 少輔房日禅 (d. 1331), and others. While Nichiren was critical of the Tendai Buddhism of his day, the presence of so many of his followers among the monks of Tendai temples in Suruga indicates that, during his lifetime, the fact of becoming Nichiren's disciple did not in and of itself entail a rejection of Tendai sectarian identity.

Like Nikkō, several of his converts among local monks were *kusō*, a mid-ranking position within the temple hierarchy that brought them into close contact with the peasantry. Some *kusō* had small private landholdings donated to them in exchange for performing ritual services, and their interests were thus closely allied to those of the farmers who worked these lands (TAKAGI 1965, 195, 201; HORI Nichikō 1974, 1: 136–37). To these peasants they began to preach Nichiren's teaching of exclusive devotion to the *Lotus Sutra*. The heart of Nichiren's message—that salvation is possible simply through chanting the title or *daimoku* of the *Lotus Sutra* in the formula *Namu-myōhō-rence-kyō* 南無妙法蓮華經—was readily accessible to unlettered people. Nichiren's more famous disciples, known to posterity through his letters, tended to be of the warrior class. But Nichiren also had followers among a lower social group, some of whom did not receive letters for the simple reason that they could not read; nonetheless they are known from inscriptions on calligraphic mandala *honzon* that Nichiren made for them as personal objects of worship (TAKAGI 1965, 68, 78, note 5). Nikkō's 1298 *Honzon bun'yo chō* 本尊分与帳 (Record of distribution of the object of worship), a record of those among his followers, monks and lay people, who had received mandalas inscribed by Nichiren, mentions several devotees from the Atsuhara area (NSZ 2: 112–18). These three, often interrelated groups—local warrior families, monks, and farmers—comprised Nichiren's following in the Fuji district. Of the three, it was last group, the peasant farmers, who would bear the most serious consequences of the persecution.

In the latter 1270s, the bakufu was mobilizing defenses in the southern island of Kyushu in preparation for a second Mongol invasion and also commissioning temples and shrines to pray for the enemy's defeat. The first Mongol attack, in the autumn of 1274, had been thwarted by a typhoon that devastated the invading fleet, but another attempt was expected at any time. This country-wide defense effort was linked in complex ways to local tensions between bakufu officials and Nichiren's followers in the Suruga area. The Hōjō shogunal regents, the wielders of actual power in the bakufu, had used the need for heightened defense

measures as an opportunity to extend the hegemony of their own, Hōjō, family at the expense of the direct vassals of the shogun (*gokenin* 御家人), leading to friction between the two groups. Power was increasingly monopolized by the head of the main Hōjō house (*tokusō* 得宗; HORI Kyotsu, 1974, 193–96). At the time of these events, Hōjō Tokimune 北条時宗 (1251–1284) held the position of both shogunal regent (*shikken* 執権) and *tokusō*. Under his leadership, government affairs came to be decided by the private Hōjō family council (*yoriai* 寄合), independently of the formal council of state (*hyōjōshū* 評定衆) and other bakufu agencies. Suruga province lay within the Hōjō head's personal domain (*tokusō ryō* 得宗領), so local surveillance was especially strict. In addition, in Suruga, Nichiren numbered several direct vassals of the shogun among his followers: the Takahashi and Yui in the lower Fuji district (Shimokata), and the Nanjō and Ishikawa in the upper Fuji district (Kamikata), were families of the direct vassals of the shogun. Thus there were preexisting political tensions between the *tokusō* government and some of Nichiren's leading supporters in Suruga (TAKAGI 1965, 199, 216–17). Among the latter, Nanjō Tokimitsu and Ishikawa Hyōe Nyūdō 石川兵衛入道 were also stewards. In part because of their local influence, these individuals had emerged as leaders among Nichiren's lay devotees in the Fuji area; at the same time, however, as bakufu-appointed stewards, they were especially vulnerable to pressure from the authorities. In 1277, two years before the events at Atsuhara, Nichiren had warned Tokimitsu about precisely this danger:

If word spreads that you appear to be a devotee of the *Lotus Sutra*, then those close to you as well as those with whom you have no particular connection will all go out of their way to admonish you, as though they were your friends, telling you that if you place faith in Nichiren you will go astray and will incur the displeasure of the authorities.... So it is best not to casually let your loyalties be known. Those possessed by a great devil will persuade one person to recant and then, having toppled him, use him as a snare for capturing many others.

(“Ueno-dono gohenji” 上野殿御返事, *Teihon* 2: 1308–1309)

Nichiren and his followers had for some time been targeted by bakufu officials as a potentially disruptive group because of their outspoken criticism of other Buddhist teachings and institutions. When the first communication from the Mongol empire had arrived in 1268, demanding that Japan enter into a tributary relationship or be subdued by force, Nichiren and his followers saw this as fulfillment of a prediction made earlier in his admonitory treatise *Risshō ankoku ron* 立正安国論 (On establishing the true Dharma and bringing peace to the country), submitted to the bakufu in 1260. In this work, based on predictions in the sutras, Nichiren had asserted that in consequence of neglecting the true Dharma, Japan would suffer invasion from abroad. After the first Mongol demand, Nichiren renewed his memorializing of top officials to cease support

for monks and temples espousing teachings other than the *Lotus*, including eminent monks of the major temples in Kamakura patronized by the Hōjō. Nichiren's arrest and exile to Sado in 1271 seems to have been part of a larger move on the bakufu's part to quell dissident elements at home in preparation for mobilizing the country's defenses (TAKAGI 1965, 189; KAWAZOE 1984, 109–10). In the wake of the 1274 Mongol attack, with tensions mounting in preparation for a renewed attempt, Nichiren foresaw that Suruga was a place where conflict between his community and the authorities could easily erupt, and he repeatedly warned his followers to be careful. For example, in a letter to the lay monk Takahashi Nyūdō 高橋入道, a prominent devotee in Kajima in Suruga, Nichiren explained why he had not stopped to visit him after leaving Kamakura en route to Minobu in 1274:

Suruga province is the domain of the governor of Sagami [the regent and *tokusō*, Hōjō Tokimune], and in the Fuji area in particular there are many people connected to the widows [of ranking bakufu officials] who harbor resentment toward me, considering me to be an enemy of the late lay monks of Saimyōji 最明寺殿 and Gokurakuji 極楽寺殿 [the former regent Hōjō Tokiyori 北条時頼 and his co-signer or *rensho* 連署, Hōjō Shigetoki 北条重時].⁴ I was concerned that, should they get word [that I had visited you,] it would bring grief to all of you. Up until now I have not even replied to your messages, fearing to cause you trouble. I always tell the monks [that is, my disciples] to avoid the area of Kajima in Fuji in their travels, but I am still anxious about what may happen.

(“Takahashi Nyūdō-dono gohenji” 高橋入道殿御返事, *Teihon* 2: 1089)

In repeated letters to other followers as well, Nichiren emphasized the need to be united against a possible threat, saying, “Tell the people in Suruga to by all means be of one mind” (“Jōren-bō gosho” 淨蓮房御書 [1274], *Teihon*, 2: 1078; “Misawa shō” 三沢鈔 [1278], *Teihon* 2: 1443).

Confrontations at Local Temples

Trouble in the Fuji district of Suruga first surfaced in the local temples mentioned above, where monks who were Nichiren's followers came into conflict with temple administrators. The first incident occurred at Ryūsenji in Atsuhara around 1276, when the temple's deputy administrator (*injudai* 院主代), one Heino Sakon Nyūdō Gyōchi 平左近入道行智, confronted the Nichiren group. We know about this incident from the *Ryūsenji mōshijō* 滝泉寺申状, a petition of

4. Nichiren elsewhere suggests that these women played a role in his arrest and exile to Sado, by reporting to officials slanders made against him by leading monks in Kamakura (*Shuju onfurumai gosho*, *Teihon* 2: 962).

protest to bakufu officials written by Nichiren, possibly with Nikkō's collaboration, in 1279.⁵ According to this document, Gyōchi told the Nichiren followers, "The *Lotus Sutra* is not a teaching on which one can rely." He demanded that they immediately cease reciting it and instead recite the *Amida Sutra* and the invocation of the Buddha Amida's name, requiring that they sign an oath to that effect if they wished to secure their position and livelihood within the temple (*Teihon* 2: 1681). One of them, a Mikawa-bō Raien 三河房頼円, gave in and wrote the oath as demanded. The others refused and were accordingly evicted from their individual lodging temples (*jūbō* 住房). One of these monks, Nichizen, left Ryūsenji and went to Kawai, where he had relatives. Nisshū and Nichiben had no one on whom to rely and refused either to write the oath or to leave Ryūsenji. Though stripped of their position and temple lodgings, they managed to remain on the Ryūsenji precincts, possibly working small private landholdings in their possession with the aid of local farmers who were their supporters (HORI Nichikō 1974, 1: 136).

Historian TAKAGI Yutaka (1965, 205) suggests that Gyōchi may have been a Pure Land devotee, and that the conflict between him and Nisshū, Nichiben, and the others may have reflected a polarization of the Ryūsenji community into those with Pure Land allegiances and those who, being Nichiren's followers, revered the *Lotus Sutra* alone. If so, one can well imagine that, especially for the Nichiren side, a split of this kind over questions of orthopraxy might have played an important role in delineating the two sides of the conflict. However, as Takagi also notes, it would have been but one of the factors aggravating tensions within Ryūsenji. According to the *Ryūsenji* petition, Gyōchi had for some time abused his position as the temple's deputy administrator for his own profit and does not seem to have been someone deeply concerned about the proper forms of Buddhist practice. This document—which charges that Gyōchi persecuted Nichiren's followers in order to cover up his own offenses—accuses him, among other things, of having a monk named Izumi-bō Renkai 和泉房蓮海 cut up a copy of the *Lotus Sutra* and recycle the paper for building repairs; of appropriating roofing materials belonging to the temple community for his private use; of extracting fines (perhaps a bribe?) from the monk Hyōbu-bō Jōin 兵部房静印, described as an ignorant thief, and then appointing him to the position of *kusō*; of mobilizing the peasants on temple lands to hunt quail and deer for

5. A draft, held by Nakayama Hokekyōji in Chiba, is written in two different hands. The larger portion, addressing doctrinal issues, is in Nichiren's handwriting, while a section detailing Gyōchi's offenses and the events at Atsuhara is thought to have been written by Nikkō (HORI Nichikō 1974, 1: 122–24; s.v., "Ryūsenji mōshijō," *Ibun jiten*, 1186–87). An alternative suggestion is that Nikkō first drafted the petition together with Nisshū and Nichiben and then sent it to Nichiren at Minobu for his revisions (HORI 1922, 99; s.v. *Nikkō shisho* 日興賜書, NJ 304). I treat it here primarily as Nichiren's work. See also note 11 below.

consumption in the temple superintendent's quarters; and of poisoning the fish in the temple pond to sell at the local market (*Teihon* 2: 1681). Apart from the truth or falsehood of these charges, Gyōchi's surname and title—Hei no Sakon Nyūdō—suggest that he was only a lay monk and also that he belonged to that branch of the Taira (a.k.a. Hei 平) family who were hereditary Hōjō vassals; he may thus have owed his appointment as deputy temple administrator to Hōjō connections and local influence rather than clerical qualifications (TAKAGI 1965, 212). The identity of Ryūsenji's chief temple administrator at this time is unknown, and Gyōchi appears to have been answerable only to the bakufu.⁶ Whether or not he himself was a Pure Land devotee, Gyōchi might still have objected to the growing presence at Ryūsenji of a faction not amenable to his control. One can easily imagine that their devotion to the *Lotus* alone as the only teaching valid for the age would have provided the Nichiren clerics with a rationale for resisting any unwelcome authority external to their own group. At the same time, because their religious identity lay precisely in this *Lotus* exclusivism, they were vulnerable on this point; if required to perform some rite or offer some incantation not based on the *Lotus Sutra*, they would have to refuse if they were not to betray their own commitment. We shall return to this issue below.

Nichiren's disciples at other local temples experienced similar conflicts with temple authorities. In 1278, at Jissōji in Iwamoto, a monk known as Owari Ajari 尾張阿闍梨 drew on the *Nirvāṇa Sutra* as cited in the *Fahua xuanyi* 法華玄義 (Profound meaning of the *Lotus*), the *Lotus Sutra* commentary of the Tiantai founder Zhiyi 智顗 (538–597), to question the propriety of the Nichiren monks' criticisms of other teachings. We know about this from a letter that Nichiren wrote to a disciple living at Jissōji, one Buzen-kō Nichigen 豊前公日源, who had sought Nichiren's advice on the matter. Nichiren's reply, dated 1/16 of that year, explains that the word *myō* 妙 in the *Lotus Sutra*'s title has the meaning not only of the non-differentiated absolute (*zettai-myō* 絶対妙), in which all teachings are opened and integrated into the one vehicle, but also of relative hierarchy (*sōtai-myō* 相對妙), in which value distinctions between “true” and “provisional” must be acknowledged; from this perspective, he argues, only the *Lotus Sutra* can open the coarse to reveal the subtle. “To [cause others to] sever attachment to the provisional and enter the true is the constant teaching approach of Śākyamuni, Prabhūtaratna, and all buddhas of the ten directions” (*Jissōji gosho* 実相寺御書, *Teihon* 2: 1435).

While it is not known whether the dispute at Jissōji escalated beyond this doctrinal disagreement, Nichiren's letter to Buzen-kō refers to a confrontation

6. TAKAGI (1965, 206–207) notes that, during the 1270s and 1280s, an increasing number of temple administrators and ritualists were bakufu appointees, a fact probably related to government sponsorship of prayer rites for the defeat of the Mongols.

at yet another local temple, Shijukuin in Kanbara, where Nikkō was based. That same year, a Shijukuin administrator (*jimu* 事務), Nii Risshi Gon'yo 二位律師嚴譽, seized the lodging temples and their attached lands held by Nikkō and those of his fellow monks who were Nichiren's disciples, and expelled Nikkō and the others from the temple. This incident is known from the *Shijukuin mōshijō* 四十九院申状, a petition of protest that Nikkō wrote in the third month of 1278 on behalf of himself and Nichiren's other disciples at Shijukuin.⁷ According to this document, Gon'yo had asserted that the Nichiren faction (*tōrui* 党類), while claiming to uphold the Buddha Dharma, in fact embraced "a heterodox path, a great evil teaching" (*gedō daijakyō* 外道大邪教); thus the monastic assembly had reached a group decision to expel them (NSZ 2: 93).

Nikkō's strategy in this petition was to counterattack using the same doctrinal grounds that had been deployed against him. Only the *Lotus*, he retorted, contains a statement to the effect that it is foremost among all teachings that the Buddha "has preached, now preaches, or will preach" (T 9.31b). "To repudiate [on the basis of the *Lotus*] the [provisional] teachings of skillful means is not some fraudulent teaching of Nichiren Shōnin but altogether represents the golden words of Śākyamuni Buddha, the purpose for which he appeared in this world." To denounce monks of the true Dharma as heretics was outrageous, Nikkō declared; Gon'yo should be quickly summoned to face them and the rights and wrongs of the matter investigated (NSZ 2: 93–94).

In this way, monks who were Nichiren's disciples at temples in the Fuji district came into conflict with temple administrators and higher-ranking prelates over the issue of their *Lotus* exclusivism. *Lotus Sutra* devotion was widespread, by no means the monopoly of Nichiren's community, and it is difficult to imagine that anyone, Tendai monks in particular, would have regarded the *Lotus Sutra* itself as an evil or heterodox teaching.⁸ The problem lay rather in the position of Nichiren's followers that the *Lotus* alone is true. Not only was it possible to raise legitimate doctrinal objections to such a claim, but this stance could readily translate into a religiously mandated basis for resisting any authority outside

7. This was not the first such *mōshijō* that Nikkō had authored. In 1268, he wrote the *Jissōji daishū shūjō* 実相寺大衆愁状, a petition on behalf of the monks of Jissōji protesting the improper conduct of another bakufu-appointed temple administrator (FSY 10: 305–16).

8. Followers of the exclusive nenbutsu movement of Hōnen (1133–1212) argued that the *Lotus Sutra*, along with all sutras other than the Pure Land sutras, pertained to the "path of the sages" (*shōdōmon* 聖道門) and should be set aside as beyond the capacity of people in the Final Dharma age; Gyōchi's reported statement that "the *Lotus Sutra* is not a teaching on which one can rely" would make sense from this standpoint. However, we do not know whether or not an exclusive Pure Land doctrine such as Hōnen's had spread at Ryūsenji. HORI Nichikō (1974, 1: 124–25) suggests that the temple may have been affiliated with the Yokawa precinct of the great Tendai monastery on Mt. Hiei, but no details are available.

Nichiren's own community. As TAKAGI notes (1965, 206–208), Gon'yo's charges as cited in Nikkō's petition suggest that Nichiren's following at Shijukuin had grown to the point where they were considered a “faction” and thus seen as a threat needing to be countered.

The Atsuhara Persecution

Though ejected from their personal lodgings at Ryūsenji by Gyōchi, the temple's deputy administrator, Nikkō's converts Nisshū and Nichiben continued to reside on the temple precincts and presumably also continued to preach to their lay followers. Frustrated at his inability to rid Ryūsenji of Nichiren's disciples, Gyōchi appears to have enlisted the support of the local agency of the bakufu (*mandokoro* 政所) in the lower Fuji district in order to harass those disciples' lay supporters. At this point, what had begun as a confrontation within the temple community began to escalate into actual persecution.

Our chief source for subsequent events is the *Ryūsenji mōshijō*, a petition of protest that Nichiren composed in the tenth month of 1279 for submission to bakufu authorities; part of it may have been written by Nikkō. According to this document, in the fourth month of that year, during a festival associated with the nearby Asama (or Sengen) Shrine 浅間社, local officials acting at Gyōchi's instigation attacked and wounded with a sword a *Lotus Sutra* practitioner, identified as the “son of Shirō” 四郎男;⁹ in the eighth month, one “son of Yashirō-bō” 弥四郎坊男, possibly the same individual, was beheaded—an act possibly intended as a symbolic stand-in for the beheading of Nisshū and the other *Lotus* devotees at Ryūsenji (*Teihon* 2: 1681; s.v. “Yatōji Nyūdō,” *Ibun jiten*, 1146). Matters culminated in the ninth month, during the harvest, when twenty lay believers were arrested on charges of stealing grain.

What exactly occurred on that occasion is not altogether clear. According to the *Ryūsenji* petition, Gyōchi filed charges to the effect that, on 9/21, Nisshū, mounted on horseback and leading a company of persons armed with bows and arrows, had burst into the precincts of Gyōchi's quarters at the temple and forcibly seized the rice harvest from his fields, removing it to Nisshū's lodging. Nisshū and his supporters vehemently denied the charges, and a letter from Nichiren dated 10/12 suggests that the facts were quite the reverse; Gyōchi's faction had been the ones who had forcibly seized the harvest from “several tens of fields” belonging to peasant *Lotus* devotees (“Hōki-dono gohenji,” *Teihon* 2: 1676). The same letter specifically names two individuals, Daishin-bō 大進房 and

9. HORI Nichikō suggests (1974, 1: 134, 147) that the shrine event in question was an archery contest (*yabusame*), a boisterous occasion when it would have been relatively easy to harm someone unnoticed. He also suggests that, since Asama Shrine was undergoing repairs that year, the event would have been held not at the shrine itself but at a temporary site.

Yatōji Nyūdō 弥藤次入道, as the persons whose actions, prompted by Gyōchi, had led to the injury and killing of followers in Atsuhara. Daishin-bō appears to be the same person as Daishin Ajari, an influential disciple of Nichiren in Kamakura who seems to have been called to the Fuji area sometime around 1275 to assist Nikkō's proselytizing efforts. He wavered for a time in his allegiance, briefly rejoining Nichiren's followers by 1278, but then decisively turned against them (s.v. "Daishin Ajari," "Daishin Ajari no bō," and "Daishin-bō," *Ibun jiten* 685–86). Yatōji Nyūdō was a brother of the three men among the twenty peasants arrested who would later be put to death. According to Nikkō's record, it was also at Yatōji's petition that the twenty were sent to Kamakura for examination and sentencing (*Honzon bun'yo chō*, NSZ 2 :116). Evidently personal betrayals from within Nichiren's community and among family members, as well as opposition from without, played a role in the persecution.

Because Atsuhara lay within the domain of the head of the Hōjō clan (*tokusō*), the matter fell under the jurisdiction of the Hōjō's board of retainers (*samurai dokoro* 侍所). Nonetheless, sending the prisoners all the way to Kamakura for examination by the *tokusō*'s private judiciary would seem an excessive response to an incident of local theft, suggesting that the charges against them may have served as a pretext for attempting to break the influence of Nichiren's followers in Suruga. This suggestion gains strength from the identity of the official to whose custody they were remanded—none other than Hei (or Taira) no Saemon no jō Yoritsuna 平左衛門尉頼綱 (d. 1293), deputy head of the board of retainers. Yoritsuna was a hereditary vassal of the Hōjō and one of the chief pillars of the *tokusō* government. He appears to have been a relative of Gyōchi. He was also the same magistrate who, eight years earlier, had ordered Nichiren's arrest and exile to Sado.

Nichiren's Response and the Fate of Those Arrested

Although he remained at Minobu throughout these events and was not himself the direct target of attack, Nichiren nonetheless emerges as a central figure in the Atsuhara affair, as almost all information concerning it comes from his writings. Nichiren kept himself closely informed of the circumstances as they developed and provided detailed guidance through an efficient network of disciples who acted as messengers between Minobu in Kai, Fuji in Suruga, and Kamakura in Musashi. His assertive leadership, even at a distance, and his ability to provide a compelling interpretation of events can be seen in his responses to the arrest. This section will briefly review how matters unfolded, as reconstructed from notices in Nichiren and Nikkō's writings.

The first indication of the trouble at Atsuhara appears in a fragment of a letter Nichiren addressed to Nikkō and others—presumably Nisshū, Nichiben,

and other disciples from Ryūsenji—dated 9/26, five days after the arrests. In it Nichiren tells them, “I have already reported this matter to Brahmā, Indra, and the sun and moon [deities]. They will not dare go against [their vow to Śākyamuni Buddha to protect *Lotus Sutra* devotees]. You should each think of this [occurrence] as the workings of heaven (“Hōki-dono narabi ni shonin gochū” 伯耆殿並諸人御中, fragment no. 438, *Teihon* 4: 2874). Unfortunately, all but the last few lines of this letter have been lost. Nonetheless, judging from the date and content, this surviving passage would seem to represent Nichiren’s initial response to receiving news of the arrests: to assure his disciples that this was no mere arbitrary event but a portent of some larger significance yet to unfold.

A few days later, on 10/1, Nichiren wrote at length to his followers in Kamakura where the prisoners had been taken, sending his letter in care of Shijō Saburōzaemon no jō Yorimoto 四条三郎左衛門尉頼基 or Shijō Kingo 四条金吾 (1229–1296), one of his chief lay devotees. After Nichiren’s death, it would be given the title “Shōnin gonanji” 聖人御難事 (On the sage’s ordeals). In this letter, Nichiren reminds his followers that persecution is predicted in the *Lotus Sutra* itself, where it says, “Since hatred and resentment of this sutra abound even while the Tathāgata is present, how much worse it will be after his nirvana!” (T 9. 31b). He asserts that, in meeting great trials at the hands of the authorities, he and by implication his disciples are the very ones fulfilling the sutra’s predictions: “Had I not appeared in the Final Dharma Age, the Buddha would have been a great liar, and Prabhūtaratna and the other buddhas of the ten directions [who testified to the truth of the *Lotus Sutra* at the assembly on Vulture Peak] would have borne witness to great falsehood” (*Teihon* 2: 1673). Nichiren’s followers in Kamakura may have had access to the prisoners, as Nichiren also suggests what to say to them:

Continue to encourage those ignorant Atsuhara people but don’t threaten them.¹⁰ Tell them to be fully resolved. They should think that a good outcome would be astonishing and [instead] expect that the worst will certainly occur.

10. As SATŌ Hiroo notes (2003, 309), the phrase “those ignorant Atsuhara people” (*kano Atsuwara no guchi no monodomo*) has been criticized by some scholars as reflecting unconscious class bias on Nichiren’s part. IZUKA Hiroshi (1981) may have been attempting to circumvent such criticisms when he suggests that this passage refers not to those who were arrested, but to others still remaining in Atsuhara who might have been vacillating in their faith. However, Iizuka does not explain why, were that the case, a letter containing instructions for how to encourage followers in Atsuhara in the Fuji district would have been entrusted to the keeping of Shijō Yorimoto, who was living in Kamakura. The criticism to which Satō refers is itself anachronistic in assuming that doctrines of soteriological equality such as Nichiren’s should have been understood as also entailing social equality—a correlation seldom drawn in premodern Japan. In all probability, the phrase represents Nichiren’s blunt reference to the arrested peasants’ lack of education, perhaps specifically to their limited knowledge of Buddhist teachings.

If they think that they are hungry, tell them about the realm of hungry ghosts. If they complain that they are cold, tell them about the eight cold hells. If they say that they are frightened, tell them that a pheasant pursued by a hawk or a mouse stalked by a cat feels no differently than they do. (*Teihon* 2: 1674–75)

From Nichiren's perspective, to renounce faith in order to escape harassment by worldly authorities would only result in more painful retribution in the life to come; thus he urges that the prisoners ready themselves for whatever ordeal the bakufu may have in store and not delude themselves into thinking that they may escape. Nichiren then extends a similar warning to his followers in general:

If your resolve should slacken even in the slightest, demons will seize the advantage. We ordinary worldlings are so foolish that we fear neither the warnings in the sutras and treatises [which are close at hand,] nor matters at a distance. But close your eyes and imagine [what will happen] if Hei [no Saemon, that is, Yoritsuna] and [Akita no] jō [Adachi Yasumori] unloose their anger upon our entire following. (*Teihon* 2: 1674)

This reference to the wrath of Hei no Yoritsuna and Adachi Yasumori 安達泰盛—after the regent, the two most powerful figures in bakufu—suggests that Nichiren saw the arrest of the Atsuhara peasants as possibly signaling a move against his followers as a whole, and he adds, “If people muster armed men to put down our following, saying that we are going to raise a disturbance, you must write to me here at once” (*Teihon* 2: 1675).

In that same, tenth month, Nichiren drafted a petition to bakufu officials—technically, a refutation of charges (*chinjō* 陳狀)—in defense of Nisshū, Nichiben, and his other disciples at Ryūsenji, rebutting Gyōchi's accusations. Known as the *Ryūsenji mōshijō*, mentioned above, it is written in the personae of Nichiben and Nisshū and was presumably submitted under their names (*Teihon* 2: 1677–82).¹¹ In this petition, Nichiren argues that exclusive devotion to the *Lotus Sutra*, for which Nisshū, Nichiben, and others have been expelled and their lay followers attacked, is the only thing that can protect Japan against the Mongol threat. We will return to this theme in his writings below.

In what appears to be a cover letter for the petition he had readied on Nisshū and Nichiben's behalf, Nichiren also wrote to Nikkō, Nisshū, and Nichiben on 10/12, giving detailed instructions (“Hōki-dono gohenji” 伯耆殿御返事, *Teihon*, 2: 1676). These three may have hurried to Kamakura to assist the prisoners, though the record does not explicitly state this (HORI Nichikō 1974, 1: 141). Should the

11. See note 5 above. The *Ryūsenji mōshijō* is one of three responses to charges that Nichiren wrote in the name of disciples being harassed by persons in authority. The others are the *Shimoyama goshōsoku* 下山御消息 (*Teihon* no. 247) and the *Yorimoto chinjō* 頼基陳狀 (no. 249), both written in 1277.

prisoners be released with some guarantee of their security, Nichiren says, the monks should not seek legal redress by submitting the petition. But should they need to press the matter with the bakufu's board of inquiry (*monchūjo* 問注所), they should concentrate their statements on the culpability of Gyōchi and his associates for the violence against Nichiren's followers at Atsuhara. If Gyōchi produces witnesses, they should say that those witnesses are the very persons who supported him in stealing the harvest from the Atsuhara peasants. If he produces written statements, they should denounce them as forgeries. They should protest vehemently, in the hope that "those above may get word of it." Nichiren seems to have believed that, whatever the actions of bakufu subordinates, Hōjō Tokimune, the regent himself, would not take action against his followers without clear evidence of wrongdoing (see, for example, similar statements in "Kubo-no-ama gozen gohenji" 窪尼御前御返事, *Teihon* 2: 1502–1503, and "Shōnin gonanji," 2: 1674). No matter what, Nichiren admonishes, his followers must not let themselves be persuaded to sign oaths (*kishōmon* 起請文); the focus of any court proceedings should be confined to the acts of theft and violence committed by Gyōchi's side. Nichiren appears to have been quite knowledgeable about the bakufu's judicial system, perhaps because, earlier in his career, he himself had negotiated a lawsuit on behalf of Nagoe-no-ama 名越の尼, a lay nun who was the estate proprietor (*ryōshu* 領主) of the manor where Kiyosumidera (or Seichōji) 清澄寺 in Awa, the temple where he had become a monk, was located (TAKAGI 1970, 52; KAWAZOE 1984, 83–85).

Only one other explicit reference to those arrested occurs in Nichiren's extant writings, in a brief letter, again to Nikkō and his disciples, dated a few days later, on 10/17. At this point, Nichiren urged them to take action with the judicial bureau. He had clearly received word that interrogation of the prisoners had begun.

Your message of the 15th arrived [today], on the 17th. You say that, at the time of their interrogation [*gokanki no toki*], they chanted *Namu-myōhō-renge-kyō*. This is no ordinary event. Perhaps the ten *rākṣasas* [who vowed to protect believers] entered the person of Hei no Kingo [Yoritsuna] to test the devotees of the *Lotus Sutra*. That would be like the case of the youth of the Snow Mountains or King Śibi [who were both tested by the gods]. Or perhaps [as the "Fortitude" chapter says], "Evil demons will enter their bodies [to injure devotees of the *Lotus*]." [That the prisoners were able to maintain their resolve] is the meaning of the oath sworn by Śākyamuni, Prabhūtaratna, the buddhas of the ten directions, Brahmā, Indra, and other deities to protect practitioners of the *Lotus Sutra* in the fifth five-hundred-year period [that begins the Final Dharma age]. ("Hendoku iyaku gosho" 変毒為薬御書, *Teihon* 2: 1683)

By standing firm under interrogation, the Atsuhara peasants had proved their faith in Nichiren's eyes, graduating in his estimation from "ignorant people" to devotees meriting equally with himself the name of "practitioners of the *Lotus*

Sutra” (*Hokekyō no gyōja* 法華經の行者). The term *gokanki* 御勘氣 (the anger of superiors or punishment inflicted by them) here is somewhat ambiguous, and it is not clear how far proceedings against the prisoners had advanced by the time Nichiren wrote this. Whatever the case, it is significant that, judging from this passage, he understood the protection of the buddhas and tutelary deities to mean, not that devotees of the *Lotus Sutra* would be spared harsh trials, but that they would be able to maintain faith despite them.

Nichiren’s extant writings make no further mention of the prisoners from Atsuhara. The only direct reference to their fate occurs in Nikkō’s *Honzon bun’yo chō*, which is also the earliest surviving notice of the identity of the three who were executed. How long after the event he recorded the matter is unknown.¹² The passage in question, an explanatory note inserted into a list of names of followers on whom he had bestowed mandala *honzon* inscribed by Nichiren, reads as follows:

*Jinshirō 神四郎 (elder brother), resident of Atsuhara village in the lower Fuji district.

*Yagorō 弥五郎 (younger brother), resident of the same village in the lower Fuji district.

*Yajirō 弥次郎 [or Yarokurō 弥六郎;¹³ younger brother?], resident of Atsuhara village in the lower Fuji district.

These three were among twenty disciples of Echigo-bō [Nichiben] and Shimotsuke-bō [Nisshū]. They took faith in the first year of the Kōan era (1278). At the petition of their younger brother Yatōji Nyūdō, they were arrested and taken to Kamakura. Eventually they were beheaded. That was the doing of Hei no Saemon Nyūdō [Yoritsuna]. He had his son, Iinuma Hangan 飯沼判官 (age thirteen), shoot them mercilessly with *hikime* arrows and ordered them to say the nenbutsu. But though he pressed them in this way twice and even three times, not one of the twenty would say it. He sent for these three, who were the leaders, and had them beheaded. The remaining seventeen were imprisoned but eventually released. Fourteen years later, Hei no Nyūdō and Hangan, father and son, plotted rebellion and were destroyed. That both father and son [met their end in this way] was no ordinary matter. They had incurred in this life the punishment [*genbachī* 現罰] of the *Lotus Sutra*. (NSZ 2: 116)¹⁴

12. The *Honzon bun’yo chō* is dated Einin 6 (1298), more than twenty years after the persecution. However, it appears to have been prepared for the seventeenth anniversary of Nichiren’s death, and Nikkō may have been keeping this record for some time before finalizing it (s.v. “Honzon bun’yo chō,” NJ 377).

13. Another edition of the text gives this name as “Yarokurō” (FSY 9: 258).

14. There is also a mandala *honzon* kept at Kitayama Honmonji inscribed by Nikkō on the eighth day of the fourth month, Tokuji 3 (1308), and bearing the notation: “Jinshirō, a resident

Hikime 藁目 were blunt tipped, hollow arrows that emitted an eerie whistling sound when shot, used to banish demons from ritual sites. While they could not kill, they could certainly cause pain and terrify. Even if the prisoners had been guilty as charged, this sort of abuse, and especially the beheading of the three leaders among those arrested, represented by the standards of the day an extreme punishment for the offense of stealing grain (see TAKAGI 1965, 220, note 23 for comparison with two other, roughly contemporaneous cases). This harsh reprisal would lend credence to Nichiren's reading of events as a deliberate strike against his followers.

The Nichiren tradition reads the Atsuhara persecution as epitomizing the inevitable conflict between devotees of the *Lotus Sutra* and those who oppose them out of deluded attachment to provisional teachings, and the conduct of those arrested, as exemplifying the ideal stance of "not begrudging bodily life" for the sutra's sake. Modern scholars, in contrast, have tended to see these events in terms of heroic peasant resistance to oppressive authority, expressed in terms of devotion to a truth transcending worldly power and class distinctions (see TAKAGI 1965, 218; SATŌ 1994, 189–211, and 2003, 300–309). However, we have no sources that would offer insight into the thoughts of the Atsuhara martyrs themselves. Most martyrs in the later medieval Nichiren tradition would be monks who voluntarily sought public debate with eminent clerics of other schools or who set out of their own initiative to admonish the emperor, shogun, or local officials, fully understanding the risks involved. In the case of the three Atsuhara believers who were beheaded, one cannot help but think that they may simply have been caught up in events and paid the ultimate price for a conflict not of their making. Yet if the interrogation took place as Nikkō describes, they were repeatedly offered a choice, and, although they had been Nichiren's followers only since the previous year, they steadfastly refused to recant and instead gave up their lives. This brief passage in Nikkō's record suggests that the resolve to die if need be to uphold one's faith in the *Lotus Sutra* was not confined to Nichiren and the educated monks who were his close disciples but was indeed shared by some of his humblest followers.

Aftermath of the Persecution

For a while, Nichiren seems to have expected that the Atsuhara affair presaged an attack on his followers at large. To the lay nun Jimyō-ama 持妙尼, the widow of

of Atsuhara village in the lower Fuji district of Suruga province became a follower of the *Lotus Sūtra*; he was one of three people beheaded by Hei no Saemon-no-jō [Yoritsuna]. Fourteen years after cutting off the heads of *Lotus* devotees, Hei no Saemon Nyūdō plotted rebellion and was destroyed, and his descendants perished without a trace" (*Shiryō ruiju* 資料類聚 1, FSY 8: 217; see also *Fuji monkachū kenmon* 富士門家中見聞 1, 5: 152, and *Shiryō ruiju* 2, 9: 258).

Takahashi Nyūdō, he wrote, “As for the business in Atsuhara, you should be prepared for what may happen,” and warned that lesser-ranking officials might have forged orders from the regent in order to harass his followers (“Kubo-no-ama gozen gohenji,” *Teihon* 2: 1502–1503).¹⁵ While his fears about full-scale persecution did not materialize, the situation in the Fuji district remained precarious. Nichiren arranged for Nisshū and Nichiben to leave Suruga and stay in safety with his disciple Iyo-bō 伊予房—later known as Nitchō 日頂—in Shimōsa.¹⁶ Lay believers in the Atsuhara area were evidently hunted by the authorities for some time. A letter from Nichiren to Nanjō Tokimitsu dated 7/2/1280, nearly a year after the arrests, thanks him for hiding lay followers, including a certain shrine priest who was Nisshū’s disciple. “If it becomes difficult to keep them there, you can send the shrine priest and the others here [to Minobu],” he wrote. “But even if his wife and children remain there, no one will be looking for them, so I think it would be best if you could keep them until things quiet down” (“Ueno-dono gohenji,” *Teihon* 2: 1766–67).¹⁷ Bakufu authorities were not slow to note that Tokimitsu had used his influence as steward to shelter individuals wanted by the law. Another letter from Nichiren, written in the winter of 1280, suggests that they retaliated with economic sanctions:

Because you protected the Atsuhara people, the people of this country look upon you as [a traitor, like the rebels Taira no] Masakado 将門 of the Jōhei era (931–38) or [Abe no] Sadatō 貞任 of the Tengi era (1053–58). This is solely because you have offered your life for the *Lotus Sutra*. Heaven in no way regards you as a man who has betrayed his sovereign. In addition, your small estate has been drained by repeated demands for corvée labor, to the point where you yourself cannot keep a horse, and your wife and children lack necessary clothing. (“Ueno-dono gohenji,” *Teihon* 2: 1829–30)

15. Opinion differs as to the year of this letter, which is dated only “fifth month, third day.” *Teihon* assigns it to 1278, before the Atsuhara persecution had properly begun. *Ibun jiten* suggests that 1280 is more likely (282c–d), while TAKAGI proposes 1279, right after the “son of Shirō” was wounded at the Asama Shrine festival (1965, 220, note 26). Jimyō-ama, also known as Kubo-no-ama, was Nikkō’s aunt.

16. Nichiren mentions this in a letter dated Kōan 2 (1279), 11/25, to the wife of his follower Toki Jōnin 富木常忍, thought to have been Iyo-bō’s mother: “I am sending the monks known as Echigō-bō and Shimotsuke-bō to Iyo-dono. Please ask Lord Toki to take care of them for a while” (“Toki-dono nyōbō-ama gozen gosho” 富城[木]殿女房尼御前御書, *Teihon* 2: 1711).

17. This is probably the same “shrine priest of Shinfuchi” (*Shinfuchi no kōnushi* 新福地の神主) mentioned in Nikkō’s *Honzon bun’yo chō* as someone who received a mandala *honzon* inscribed by Nichiren (NSZ 2: 117; HORI Nichikō 1974, 1: 158). Other letters from Nichiren to Tokimitsu during this time point to the latter’s efforts in protecting followers in the area. One, written toward the end of 1279, contains the postscript, “I write in appreciation for all you have done in regard to the Atsuhara affair” (“Ueno-dono gohenji,” *Teihon* 2: 1709).

Despite the threat of continued harassment, no mass defection from Nichiren's following seems to have occurred in the wake of the Atsuhara persecution, such as he describes following his exile to Sado eight years earlier. By this point, his community of *Lotus* devotees was more effectively organized, and Nichiren was more readily able to communicate with them than had been the case during the Sado exile; in addition, this time the bakufu had not targeted Nichiren himself and in the end evidently took no action against believers outside the Fuji area. Nonetheless, for those involved, it was ordeal enough, and Nichiren's writings relevant to the affair express what he thought essential to convey at a moment of utmost urgency about the meaning of encountering great trials for the *Lotus Sutra's* sake. His writings at the time, touched on above, both developed themes in his earlier work and helped to establish a model for how followers of the *Lotus* should meet tests of their faith. It is to those themes that we now turn.

Analysis of the Atsuhara Affair

As outlined above, several interrelated tensions and conflicting interests contributed to the violence against Nichiren's following in Atsuhara: between Gyōchi, the Ryūsenji deputy administrator, and the monks who had become Nichiren's followers; between local officials of the bakufu with whom Gyōchi was allied and the peasants who were lay supporters of Nichiren's disciples; and, in the background, between representatives of the *tokusō* government, expanding their influence in conjunction with defense operations against the Mongols, and the direct vassals of the shogun, some of whom, in Suruga, were followers of Nichiren (TAKAGI 1965, 217). The bakufu's defense efforts also included the subduing of disruptive elements within its sphere of influence, and Nichiren and his following—vocal in their criticisms of other teachings and of the eminent monks who upheld them and their patrons among bakufu officials—had long since been identified as a potentially troublesome group. If Hei no Yoritsuna did indeed take charge of interrogating the prisoners as Nikkō describes, personal animus on his part toward Nichiren may also have been involved. Due to source limitations, it is difficult to know the historical facts of the Atsuhara persecution in any detail. What we can know, however, is how Nichiren understood the religious meaning of the affair.

The second part of this article will discuss themes that emerge in Nichiren and Nikkō's writings in connection with the persecution and how they develop Nichiren's lifelong teaching about the importance of being ready to give one's life for the *Lotus Sutra*. It will also touch briefly on how their references to the Atsuhara affair contributed to a normative model of faith and practice for the later Nichiren tradition.

Risshō Ankoku and the Mongol Threat

In their petitions to the bakufu protesting the harassment of disciples in the Fuji district, Nichiren and Nikkō both took the opportunity of addressing government officials to reassert Nichiren's teaching that establishing the true Dharma would bring peace to the country (*risshō ankoku* 立正安国). This principle is best known from the *Risshō ankoku ron*, Nichiren's admonitory treatise submitted to the influential former regent Hōjō Tokiyori in 1260. In this work, drawing on "nation-protecting" sutras detailing the calamities that will befall a country where the true Dharma is not upheld, Nichiren argued that Japan was beset by famine, disease, earthquakes, and other disasters because the people as a whole had turned away from the "single good of the true vehicle" (*jitsujō no ichizen* 実乗之一善) and instead come to rely on the "inferior" teaching of the exclusive nenbutsu. Were his warnings not heeded, he wrote, two further disasters—rebellion within the country and invasion from abroad—would surely occur. The submission of the *Risshō ankoku ron* is known in the Nichiren tradition as Nichiren's first act of "admonishing the state" (*kokka kangyō* 国家諫暁) to cease patronage of monks devoted to other teachings and support faith in the *Lotus* alone. Nichiren also "admonished the state" on two further occasions: at the time of his confrontation with Hei no Yoritsuna in 1271, when the latter had him interrogated and then arrested and exiled; and again in 1274, after he had been pardoned from exile to Sado and returned to Kamakura, when, by Nichiren's own account, Yoritsuna summoned him to ask his views on when the Mongols would attack. Because both the *Shijukuin mōshijō* and *Ryūsenji mōshijō* were submitted to the bakufu and both explicitly reassert the *risshō ankoku* principle, they might together be considered a fourth act of "admonishing the state," although the tradition does not speak of them in this way. Yet undoubtedly they helped set the precedent for later medieval *mōshijō* or admonitory petitions submitted by Hokkeshū monks to the emperor, the shogun, or lesser officials, almost all of which restated the argument of the *Risshō ankoku ron* or even appended a copy of it (WATANABE 1976, 135–40; STONE 2002, 274–79). Below we will consider some key passages from both petitions.

In the 1279 *Ryūsenji* petition, writing under the names of Nisshū and Nichiben, Nichiren immediately establishes his own interpretive context for the events at Atsuhara, quite different from that of local authorities or of the bakufu. In his representation, the issue at stake is nothing less than a choice between embracing true or false teachings, on which the survival of the country depends:

In his suit, [Gyōchi] says in essence that we, Nisshū and Nichiben, calling ourselves disciples of the monk Nichiren, assert that [devotion to] sutras other than the *Lotus Sutra* and the [rites performed by] Esoteric (*shingon*) adepts will not be efficacious, whether in this life or the next. Concerning this charge,

[we say]: Our teacher Nichiren Shōnin [whose teaching Gyōchi disparages] has since the Shōka era (1257–1259) observed the great comets, earthquakes, and other signs and, pondering them in light of the sutras, concluded that, in the country of Japan today, people remain attached to provisional, inferior [teachings] while the sutra of the true teaching has become lost and obscured; therefore two disasters unprecedented in prior ages were bound to arise: the disaster of revolt within one's own domain and the disaster of attack by a foreign country. Thinking of how to bring order to the country and counter these great calamities, in the Bunnō era (1260), he submitted to the authorities a work in one fascicle called *Risshō ankoku ron*. What he foretold in that treatise has all come true, just like a prophecy from the Buddha's golden mouth.... The presence in the country of a sage [like Nichiren] is a great joy for Japan, a great grief for the Mongols. He can summon the dragons and have them sink the enemy ships beneath the sea; he can command Brahmā and Indra to subdue the Mongol king. If the ruler is indeed a wise man, why does he not make use of this sage, rather than lament in vain at the threat of a foreign country?... Now we, Nisshū and others, set aside lesser sutras and recite the *Lotus Sutra*, promoting it throughout the Dharma realm, and chant *Namu-myōhō-rengēkyō*. Is this not [conduct demonstrating] exceptional loyalty? Should questions remain about the details of this affair, then surely eminent monks should be summoned [to debate with us] and the rights and wrongs of the matter determined!

(Teihon 2: 1677–78, 1680)

Nikkō's *Shijukuin* petition, written in 1278, the year before, similarly asserts:

The teachers of Esoteric Buddhism (*shingon*) and the other schools fail to distinguish between Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna, shallow and profound, ignorant of the confusion between true and provisional teachings.... In vain they trust in their master-disciple oral transmissions and perform their secret rites, but these produce no real effect. Thus heaven and earth manifest strange signs, and numerous calamities break out in the country. This is because no one investigates and establishes right and wrong in the realm of Buddhism or distinguishes between worthy and ignorant monks. The Buddhist law (*buppō* 仏法) increases its authority by the majesty of the sovereign's law (*ōbō* 王法), while the sovereign's law endures and flourishes by the protection of the Buddhist law. How could there be any truth to the charge that those who uphold the true Dharma are heretics?... We ask that the Vinaya master Gon'yo be quickly summoned to debate with us and the truth of the matter investigated!

(NSZ 2: 93–94)

By this point, “attack by a foreign country” was no mere abstraction, as it had been when Nichiren submitted the *Risshō ankoku ron* to the bakufu in 1260, but had already materialized in the 1274 Mongol invasion attempt. The bakufu was now building coastal defenses and mobilizing men against a second assault

that was anticipated at any time. Both petitions argue that this state of crisis has resulted from widespread neglect of the *Lotus Sutra*, and that Nichiren's teaching, which the local temple administrators Gon'yo and Gyōchi condemn as heterodox, offers the only hope for saving the country. This is essentially the same argument put forth years previously in Nichiren's *Risshō ankoku ron* but with two notable differences. First, the polemical target has shifted. Where the *Risshō ankoku ron* had attacked the exclusive nenbutsu teaching of Hōnen (1133–1212), the primary focus of criticism in these two petitions is the prayer rituals of *shingon*, by which term Nichiren designated both Taimitsu and Tōmitsu Esoteric lineages. During his years on Mt. Minobu (1274–1282), Nichiren's criticisms were increasingly directed against Esoteric Buddhism, largely in connection with the fact that the bakufu was commissioning Esoteric ritualists to pray for a Mongol defeat (KAWAZOE 1957).¹⁸ In 1278, the year before the Atsuhara persecution, Nichiren had in fact produced an "expanded text" (*kōhon* 広本) of the *Risshō ankoku ron*, which includes criticisms of *shingon* (*Teihon* 2: 1455–78).

Second, the specific content of the "true Dharma" has become more focused, in accord with the development of Nichiren's thinking over the course of nearly two decades. No longer is it the broadly defined "single good of the true vehicle," advocated in the *Risshō ankoku ron*, which included the *Lotus* and *Nirvāṇa* sutras along with the Esoteric teachings, but rather the heart of the "origin teaching" (*honmon* 本門) of the *Lotus Sutra* alone, hidden in the depths of "The Life Span of the Tathāgata" chapter and given concrete form as Nichiren's all-inclusive practice of chanting the sutra's *daimoku* or title (STONE 1999a, 260, 268–70). Nichiren's emphasis on the *daimoku* as the heart of the *honmon* section, or latter fourteen chapters of the *Lotus Sutra*, represents a key development of his thought during and after his exile to Sado (1271–1274). This doctrine, Nichiren says, has never before been revealed but was intended by the Buddha solely for the beginning of the Final Dharma Age. Both the 1278 and 1279 petitions refer to it:

Now the supremely awakened world-honored one [Śākyamuni Buddha], thinking far in advance of the time of strife at the beginning of the Final Dharma Age, expounded and left behind a secret art for countering such great disasters.
(*Ryūsenji mōshijō*, *Teihon* 2: 1678)

This third secret Dharma [*daisan no hihō* 第三秘法, that is, Nichiren's teaching, the heart of the *honmon* section of the *Lotus Sutra*] is all that remains [to be revealed]. It is a Dharma intended solely for the time of strife at the beginning of the Final Dharma Age, for the hour of the calamity of attack by a foreign

18. Nichiren's criticism of Esoteric Buddhism does not mean that he rejected Esoteric elements. For Nichiren's appropriation of Esoteric hermeneutical assumptions and forms of practice, see DOLCE 1999 and 2002.

country, when a great war will break out in the world. It is the secret art by which the ruler can emerge victorious in armed conflict.

(*Shijukuin mōshijō*, NSZ 2: 94)¹⁹

Both petitions thus represent the impending Mongol attack, not just as karmic retribution for neglect of the *Lotus Sutra*, but as a sign heralding the revelation of the Buddha's ultimate teaching. The effect of this rhetorical strategy is to define the present moment as the culmination of the ages-long unfolding of the Buddha Dharma, and Nichiren and his disciples, as its agents, placing them at the center of events. In this way, as Lucia DOLCE has observed, Nichiren "transformed history—always the time of those who are in power—into his own time" (1992, 83). One can imagine that the sense of inhabiting—indeed, playing a key role in—a juncture of overwhelming soteriological significance inspired Nichiren's followers with the courage to withstand opposition.²⁰

Nichiren's personal letters and other writings to his followers from the later years of his life generally suggest that, by the time he left Kamakura in 1274 and settled at Minobu, he had abandoned all effort to convince the authorities of his perspective and now regarded the impending Mongol invasion as an evil necessary to awaken the Japanese from the sin of "slandering the Dharma." He even said that, in attacking Japan, the Mongol nation acted as an envoy of the heavenly deities, sent to chastise those hostile to practitioners of the *Lotus Sutra* (for example, in "Itai dōshin no koto" 異体同心事, *Teihon* 1: 830). The same letter states:

The destruction of our country would be pitiable. But if [the invasion] fails to materialize, the people of Japan will slander the *Lotus Sutra* more and more, and they will all fall into the Hell without Respite. As the opponent is powerful, the country may be destroyed, but slander of the Dharma will be greatly

19. Nichiren began to stress the Dharma "hidden in the depths of the origin teaching" from the time of his exile to Sado island. However, his reference to it as the "third doctrine" does not appear until a letter dated 10/1, thought to have been written between 1277 and 1279, right around the time of the Atsuhara persecution ("Toki Nyūdō-dono gohenji," *Teihon* 2: 1589). The term "third doctrine" derives from three levels of comparison between the *Lotus Sutra* and other teachings; some differences of interpretation exist among Nichiren lineages (s.v. "daisan hōmon," NJ 254b–c).

20. Similarly, in his 1278 letter to Buzen-kō, mentioned above, Nichiren places the local conflicts at Jissōji and Shijukuin within the context of a larger drama in the struggle of true versus false in the realm of Buddhism. That the monks and administrators of these temples oppose his followers, he writes, is "a sign presaging the imminent decline of their false Dharma. 'When the roots are exposed, the branches wither; when the source dries up, the streams are exhausted' is surely no empty saying. The roots of the grave offense committed by the three great teachers, Kōbō [Kūkai], Jikaku [Ennin], and Chishō [Enchin] in slandering the *Lotus Sutra* have remained hidden for more than four hundred years, but once exposed, its branches will wither. This is the point of my present criticisms" ("Jissōji gosho," *Teihon* 2: 1435).

lessened. Thus [an invasion] will be like moxibustion used to treat illness or acupuncture that cures people of disease.

(“Itai dōshin no koto” 異体同心事, *Teihon* 1: 830)

The *Ryūsenji* and *Shijukuin* petitions contrast strikingly with the tone of these personal letters, showing Nichiren as still eager to win a public forum for his teaching through an officially sponsored debate with clerics of other schools and to obtain bakufu support. Significantly, both petitions speak of Nichiren’s teaching as a “secret art” for subduing conflict, analogous to but far more efficacious than the Esoteric rites being commissioned by the bakufu, and the *Ryūsenji* petition refers to Nichiren as someone who can “summon the dragons and have them sink the enemy ships” (*Teihon* 2: 1678), a clear reference to the destruction of the first invading fleet by a typhoon in 1274.²¹ It also says that, in expelling Nisshū and Nichiben from Ryūsenji, Gyōchi has put an end to their rites of prayer (*gokitō* 御祈祷) that heaven and earth might long endure (*Teihon* 2: 1681). Nikkō’s petition similarly says that the expulsion of Nichiren’s followers has cut off such prayers at Shijukuin (*Shijukuin mōshijō*, *NSZ* 2: 93). Rather than the Esoteric prayer rituals currently being sponsored for the defeat of the Mongols, the rites of Nichiren and his disciples, based on the *Lotus Sutra*, are here presented as those with the real power to save the country.

The difference in attitude between Nichiren’s personal letters at this time and the two petitions to the bakufu is most likely one of audience: as long as the authorities rejected his admonitions, vis-à-vis his disciples Nichiren said only that the invasion was inevitable and represented shared retribution for disparaging the *Lotus Sutra*, an evil necessary to awaken the Japanese people from their collective slander of the Dharma. But given the opportunity to again address bakufu officials directly and to hope for a hearing, Nichiren and Nikkō reasserted their claim that support for Nichiren’s teaching could even now rescue the country from disaster (KAWAZOE 1984, 170–71).

Giving One’s Life for the Lotus Sutra

At the time of the Atsuhara affair in 1279, while proclaiming to the authorities the sole power of the *Lotus Sutra* to save the country, Nichiren stressed to his own followers the inevitability of meeting persecution and the importance of being ready to give up one’s life for the sutra’s sake. We have already cited his instructions for encouraging the prisoners from Atsuhara by telling them not to

21. Revisionist scholarship has called into question the historicity, or at least the severity, of the typhoon said to have driven back the 1274 invading fleet (KAWAZOE 1984, 161–74; CONLAN 2001, 266–67). KAWAZOE (1984, 170) notes this passage in the *Ryūsenji mōshijō* as a valuable contemporaneous reference to the role of the “divine winds” in the failure of the first Mongol attack.

entertain false hopes but to be prepared for the worst and maintain their faith throughout (“Shōnin gonanji,” *Teihon* 2: 1674–1675). He also admonished his followers in general that it is better to give up one’s life for the *Lotus Sutra* than to relinquish one’s faith in the hopes of placating those in power and avoiding persecution. Another passage of the same letter reads:

These days men are being sent to Tsukushi [to prepare for the Mongol attack]. Imagine yourselves in the place of those [warriors] who are en route, or who have already arrived. Thus far, none among us has faced this misfortune, but those men are now on the very scene. Should they be killed [in battle], they will be destined for the hells. But although we ourselves now face a comparably grave trial, we are sure to become buddhas in the next life. It is like moxa treatment, which hurts at the time but later brings relief.

(“Shōnin gonanji,” *Teihon* 2: 1674)

And another letter, written to Nanjō Tokimitsu on 11/6/1279, perhaps after the execution of the prisoners, follows in a similar vein:

What I ask is that my disciples make a great vow. We were fortunate enough not to number among those who died in the epidemics last year and the year before. But we can hardly count on escaping the Mongol attack that now threatens. Death is certain in any event, and the grief we will know then [if killed in the invasion] would be no different from that which we will experience [should persecution come upon us] now. Since [death] is the same in either case, you should be ready to give up your life for the *Lotus Sutra*. Think of it as dew rejoining the sea or dust returning to the earth.

(“Ueno-dono gohenji,” *Teihon* 2: 1709)

All these exhortations ask that practitioners abandon an attitude of desiring to avoid opposition and to seek security in this life and instead shift their perspective to encompass the life to come. Not only is death ultimately inescapable, but at this particular juncture, it is an imminent likelihood. Given the certainty of death and the impact of actions in this lifetime on one’s next existence, attempting to preserve one’s present life by recanting faith under pressure from the authorities would be shortsighted. Rather, by upholding the *Lotus Sutra* even at the cost of one’s life, one is assured of future Buddhahood. These 1279 writings vividly express Nichiren’s conviction in this regard. He seems to have anticipated that death might soon claim many of his followers, whether from persecution by the authorities or in the next Mongol attack, and he urged them to keep faith to the end.

Punishment in the Present Life

The inevitability of meeting harsh trials for the *Lotus Sutra*’s sake and the certainty of Buddhahood for those who nonetheless persevere were themes that

Nichiren had long considered and was by no means addressing for the first time. In particular, they emerge in the letters and other writings he produced amid the dangers and privations of his banishment to Sado. Still, on comparing Nichiren's writings from the Sado period (1271–1274) and his encouragement to his followers during the Atsuhara affair, one finds some notable differences.

During the bleak years of the Sado exile, Nichiren wrestled with the questions of why, when the *Lotus Sutra* promises “peace and security in the present life,” he should have to face persecution, and why, if he was indeed correctly practicing the *Lotus Sutra*, those who opposed him did not meet with karmic punishment. He addressed these questions in a deeply introspective mode, for example, in his famous treatise *Kaimoku shō* 開目抄 (Opening the eyes, 1272), where he suggests that he has encountered his present sufferings in order to expiate offenses he committed in prior lifetimes against the *Lotus Sutra* and its devotees, just as impurities are removed from iron by forging it in a fire. “Since the beginningless past, I must have been born countless times as an evil ruler who robbed devotees of the *Lotus Sutra* of clothing, food, and lands ... or I may have beheaded countless practitioners of the *Lotus Sutra*.... But now, when I have vigorously admonished slander of the Dharma in this country and encountered grave trials as a result, it must be that my acts of protecting the Dharma in this present life have summoned forth [the retribution for] my past heavy sins” (*Teihon* 1: 602, 603; see also HARA 1999 and STONE 2012, 137–40). In this context, Nichiren repeatedly quoted the six-fascicle *Nirvāṇa Sutra*: “By the power of the merit of protecting the Dharma, one receives lessened retribution [for past offenses] in the present life” (T 12: 877c). Reflecting on why his tormentors failed to experience karmic retribution for their acts against a practitioner of the *Lotus Sutra*, Nichiren simply noted that when a person's sins are so weighty as to condemn him to the Avīci Hell in the next existence, then there may be no sign of punishment in his present life (*Teihon* 1: 601). He also maintained that the protective deities, no longer able to hear the true Dharma, had abandoned Japan.

The theme of expiating past sins by meeting great suffering in the present did not disappear from Nichiren's post-Sado writings; one can find it, for example, in his encouragement to his followers Ikegami Munenaka 池上宗仲, whose father threatened to disinherit him if he did not abandon his exclusive *Lotus* devotion (“*Kyōdai shō*” 兄弟鈔, *Teihon* 1: 924–25), and Ōta Jōmyō 大田乗明, who was troubled by a painful illness (“Ōta Nyūdō-dono gohenji,” *Teihon* 2: 1117–18). “Never doubt that you slandered the Dharma in past lifetimes,” he wrote to Munenaka. “If you doubt it, you will not be able to endure the minor sufferings of this life [but will discard your faith in the *Lotus Sutra*]” (*Teihon* 1: 924). But in his comments on the persecution at Atsuhara, this emphasis on accepting present trials as the fruit of the devotee's own Dharma slander in prior lifetimes is muted. Rather, Nichiren instead stresses that those who act with hostility toward *Lotus* devotees

are “as if swallowing a sword or grasping fire with their hands” (“Kubo-no-ama gozen gohenji,” *Teihon* 2: 1503) and will receive punishment in this very lifetime.

The idea that those who malign the *Lotus Sutra* or oppress its followers will incur retribution in this life was by no means original to Nichiren. It is suggested in the *Lotus Sutra* itself, for example, in the vow of the ten female *raḥṣasa* demons to split into seven pieces the heads of anyone who torments a Dharma preacher (T 9. 59b). Early Japanese Buddhist didactic tales (*setsuwa*), such as the ninth-century *Nihon ryōiki* 日本霊異記 (Record of wondrous events in Japan), also contain examples of individuals visited with immediate punishment for mocking *Lotus* reciters (tales I: 19; II: 18; ENDŌ and KASUGA 1967, 116–19, 230–33; trans. NAKAMURA 1973, 130–31, 185). Nonetheless, the concept of retribution in this life seems to have acquired new force for Nichiren at this time, possibly because events now increasingly lent themselves to such a reading. On a broad scale, the imminent Mongol attack certainly seemed to bear out his earlier prediction of foreign invasion. More immediately, several persons among Nichiren’s followers who had turned against him shortly before the Atsuhara affair appear to have met sudden death under painful or mysterious circumstances. “Shōnin gonanji,” the letter Nichiren sent to his followers in Kamakura in the wake of the Atsuhara peasants’ arrest, contains this passage:

Ōta no Chikamasa 太田親昌, Nagasaki Jirō Hyōe no jō Tokitsuna 長崎次郎兵衛尉時綱, and Daishin-bō fell from their horses; this must be the punishment of the *Lotus Sutra*. As far as punishment goes, there are four kinds: general, specific, conspicuous, and inconspicuous. The grave epidemics, famines, rebellion, and attacks from a foreign country that have beset Japan are general punishments. The epidemics are inconspicuous punishments [*myōbachi* 冥罰]. What happened to Ōta and the others are conspicuous, individual punishments.

(*Teihon* 2: 1673)

Daishin-bō, as mentioned above, seems to have been a disciple who turned against Nichiren around the time of the Atsuhara persecution; Nichiren names him as one of the persons who, instigated by Gyōchi, was responsible for the attacks on his followers in Atsuhara (“Hōki-dono gohenji,” *Teihon* 2: 1676). Ōta no Chikamasa and Nagasaki Tokitsuna are mentioned only here in this passage and nowhere else in Nichiren’s writings. These three were thrown from their horses and presumably killed.²² It is not known exactly when these deaths occurred, possibly during the shrine festival when the lay devotee, the “son of Shirō” was wounded, or in a mêlée surrounding the arrest of the Atsu-

22. Other letters that Nichiren wrote around the same time mention Daishin-bō’s death; thus it would appear that his fall from horseback was fatal. See *Ibun jiten* entries for “Daishin Ajari,” “Daishin Ajari no bō,” and “Daishin-bō,” 685d–86d.

hara peasants (HORI Nichikō, 1974, 1: 133). “Shōnin gonanji” also mentions the inauspicious death of another disciple, the learned Sanmi-bō 三位房, who had also turned against Nichiren and died in some disturbing manner. “I am sure,” Nichiren wrote, “that those people [who oppose us] were secretly frightened by what happened to him” (*Teihon* 2: 1675; s.v. “Sanmi-bō,” *Ibun jiten*, 426–27).

It must have been a blow to Nichiren’s followers that some among them had not only dropped out but betrayed their former comrades in faith, siding with their persecutors in the Atsuhara affair. As three or four such individuals seem to have suffered strange or violent deaths soon thereafter this must have conveyed to Nichiren that karmic retribution for opposing the *Lotus Sutra* was real and frightful. In any event, he now clearly saw punishment in this lifetime as a fate that could be predicted with confidence for those who harassed his followers. Thus he tells Nikkō, Nisshū, and Nichiben:

Because the character *myō* is not empty, there is surely immediate reward and punishment. Hōki-bō [Nikkō] and the rest of you should understand this purport deeply and pursue the matter before the tribunal. Ask Hei no Kingo [Yoritsuna] if he has forgotten what I told him when he arrested me during the Bun’ei era [specifically, in 1271]. Finish by telling him that the calamities [I predicted at that time] are not yet over, and that he will further invite the punishment of the ten *rakṣasas*. (“Hendoku iyaku gosho,” *Teihon* 2: 1683)

Nichiren also refers to Daishin-bō’s fate as “heaven’s workings” to inspire fear in their enemies (“Hendoku iyaku gosho,” *Teihon* 2: 1684).

The Atsuhara Persecution and Later Hokkeshū Hagiography

While the Atsuhara persecution remained a local affair, long after the death of its principals, its memory remained. The three who were martyred have been honored especially within the Fuji lineage of the Nichiren Hokkeshū, which regards Nikkō as its founder.²³ At the same time, their story appears to have played a role,

23. Today the Fuji lineage is chiefly represented by Nichiren Shōshū 日蓮正宗, with which the large lay Buddhist organization Sōka Gakkai 創価学会 was formerly affiliated. Nichiren Shōshū’s head temple, Taisekiji 大石寺, is located not far from where the events occurred and houses a monument to the “three heroes of Atsuhara” (*Atsuhara no sanresshi* 熱原の三烈士). (A Sōka Gakkai song honoring the martyrs entitled *Atsuhara no sanresshi* was composed by “Yamamoto Shin’ichi” 山本伸一, nom de plume of the organization’s honorary president, Ikeda Daisaku 池田大作. (See <http://soka.jp-n.com/song1/atuhara.html>, accessed 9/28/2013.) Taisekiji tradition also links the martyrs’ sacrifice to its particular *honzon* or object of worship, a large calligraphic mandala incised on a block of camphorwood, which Nichiren himself is said to have designated as the “great object of worship bestowed upon all of Jambudvīpa [that is, the world]” (*ichienbudai sōyo no daigohonzon* 一閻浮提総与の大御本尊). Seeing that even unlettered peasants were willing to give their lives for the sake of the *Lotus Sutra*, Nichiren is said to have inscribed this mandala

if indirectly, in shaping a normative hagiographic tradition within the Hokkeshū as a whole.

Over the course of the medieval period, leaders within the various Hokkeshū lineages would from time to time take it upon themselves to “admonish the state,” remonstrating with government authorities as Nichiren had done to support faith in the *Lotus Sutra* alone in order to ensure the country’s welfare. Some were arrested in consequence and subjected to torture, exile, or other harsh treatment; these figures are celebrated as the martyrs of the tradition. Monks such as Kuonjōin Nisshin 久遠成院日親 (1407–1488), who admonished the Ashikaga shogunate, or Busshōin Nichiō 仏性院日奥 (1565–1630), who resisted the religious policies of the hegemony of Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu, clearly indicate in their own writings that they were modeling their conduct on Nichiren’s, whose actions thus became a template for how devotees opposed by worldly authority should behave. The correspondence between the acts of these later figures and Nichiren’s normative example is further heightened in the narrative literature of the Hokkeshū that recounts their deeds; all martyrs, in their acts of rebuking attachment to provisional teachings and “admonishing the state,” are represented as reenacting the paradigmatic behavior of the founder, Nichiren. Similarly, the story of the Atsuhara martyrs was itself later embellished to stress the similarity between their experience and Nichiren’s. The *Nichiren Shōnin nenpu* (Chronology of Saint Nichiren, 日蓮聖人年譜) of Nissei 日精 (1600–1683), for example, tells how Hei no Yoritsuna sent hundreds of warriors to arrest the Atsuhara peasants, confining them in an earthen prison (*tsuchirō* 土牢) as Nichirō and other disciples had been confined when Nichiren was arrested in 1271; Nisshū and Nichiben, it says, were on that occasion struck with staves (as happened to Nichiren) and pelted with tiles and rocks (FSY 5: 135, 151; 5: 152).²⁴ In the same way, the story of the Atsuhara believers, as reflected in Nichiren’s writings and especially in Nikkō’s brief historical note in his *Honzon bun’yo chō*, may have helped to shape the normative model of martyrs in later

on the twelfth day of the tenth month, 1279, in fulfillment of his ultimate purpose (MATSUMOTO 1968, 400; KAWAI 1978, 126–37). This tradition of the Taiseikiji mandala, however, is specific to Nichiren Shōshū and not shared by other schools of Nichiren Buddhism.

24. These accounts appear to have drawn for literary inspiration on elements in Nichiren’s autobiographical writings such as the *Shuju onfurumai gosho* (Teihon no. 176) and “Ueno-dono gohenji” (no. 330). For example, in an editorial note to Nissei’s account, Hori Nichikō says that the dispatch of several hundred warriors to arrest the peasants is “a groundless error” (FSY 5: 135, headnote); however, although historically indeed quite dubious, this detail may rather be seen as a deliberate literary shaping, for it replicates Nichiren’s account of his own arrest in 1271 (*Shuju onfurumai gosho*, Teihon 2: 963). The “pelted with tiles and rocks” no doubt similarly derives from the story of Bodhisattva Never Despising (Sadāparibhūta, Jōfukyō) in the *Lotus Sutra*, to whose tribulations Nichiren frequently likened his own (T 9. 50c; HURVITZ 1976, 281).

Hokkeshū hagiography. Three elements in the telling of their story invite particular attention in this regard.

First is the element of confrontation with worldly authority. A scene recurring throughout stories of the Nichiren tradition's martyrs is that of a face-to-face encounter between a Hokkeshū practitioner and a high official who persecutes him, threatening him with torture or death unless he recants his faith. Though the *Lotus* devotee is powerless in worldly terms, he holds the moral high ground and refuses to yield, thus embodying the spirit of "not begrudging bodily life" for the sutra's sake. This recurring tableau had its origins in Nichiren's accounts of his own experiences of face-to-face encounters with Hei no Yoritsuna, when he was summoned to appear before him to answer charges on 9/10/1271, and two days later, when he was arrested and sentenced to exile. In the literature of the Nichiren tradition, a similar scene plays out, for example, in the accounts of Nichinin 日仁 and Nichijitsu 日実, disciples of Genmyō Nichijū 玄妙日什 (1314–1392) arrested by the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu; or of Nisshin, imprisoned by Ashikaga Yoshinori; or of Nichiō, interrogated by Tokugawa Ieyasu. This confrontation scene is at once both history and hagiography. It has a factual basis in the actions of those Hokkeshū practitioners who did indeed admonish top officials to take faith in the *Lotus Sutra* and were sometimes punished in consequence. But at the same time, it is a literary topos, illustrating that worldly authority may temporarily prevail by force but is ultimately eclipsed by the moral authority of the *Lotus* practitioner, who will die before compromising his faith. This topos, I would suggest, derives not only from Nichiren's descriptions of his own encounters with bakufu authority in the person of the bakufu magistrate Hei no Yoritsuna but also from Nikkō's brief account of the confrontation between Yoritsuna and the Atsuhara peasants.

A second element deriving from Nichiren and Nikkō's references to the Atsuhara persecution that helped shape the conventions of later Hokkeshū hagiography was the prisoners' reported refusal to chant the nenbutsu, the name of Amida Buddha. As noted above, when Nikkō sent him word of their conduct, Nichiren praised the Atsuhara believers for chanting Namu-myōhō-rence-kyō during their interrogation. Nikkō's own statement in his *Honzon bun'yo chō* confirms that all twenty refused, even under torture, to chant the nenbutsu. We may also recall that the conflict in Atsuhara is said to have begun when Nisshū, Nichiben, and the other priests who were Nichiren's followers at Ryūsenji refused to abandon the *Lotus Sutra* and chant the nenbutsu in response to Gyōchi's demand.

By the time of the Atsuhara affair, Nichiren's criticisms of other Buddhist forms were not focused solely on Hōnen's Pure Land teaching, as they had been earlier in his career, but had expanded to encompass other teachings and prac-

tices. Yet “chanting the nenbutsu” may have still epitomized for his followers the betrayal of his exclusive *Lotus* devotion and thus carried a particularly negative symbolic value.²⁵ In the *Kaimoku shō*, written in 1272 during his first winter on Sado, Nichiren had employed the nenbutsu in this negative symbolic way when he wrote, “Whether prompted by good or evil motives, discarding the *Lotus Sutra* is the karmic act for falling into hell.... Even if I should be told that my parents will be beheaded if I refuse to say the nenbutsu or if I face other, comparable grave threats, unless my doctrine is overturned by persons of wisdom, I will not heed them” (*Teihon* 1: 601). *Lotus Sutra* devotion alone would not necessarily have set Nichiren’s followers apart from other Buddhists, as the *Lotus* was widely revered. What did distinguish them was their exclusive commitment to the *Lotus*, which allowed no room for other objects of devotion. Refusing to say the nenbutsu—an extremely common practice transcending all social and sectarian boundaries—would have served Nichiren’s followers as a marker that defined them over and against others and also as a norm of conduct, a boundary that could not be transgressed without compromising their religious identity as Nichiren’s disciples. It is for this reason, perhaps, that opponents such as Gyōchi and Yoritsuna made a point of attempting to coerce them into saying it. Refusal to say the nenbutsu, even under threat of torture and death, would become a recurrent theme in hagiographical accounts of the medieval martyrs of the Hokkeshū. For example, the *Monto koji* 門徒古事 of Nichiun 日運 (d. 1425) tells how Nichijū’s disciples, Nichinin and Nichijitsu, steadfastly refused to utter the nenbutsu even when subjected to horrific tortures (NSZ 5: 84–87). Similarly, the *Nisshin Shōnin tokugyō ki* 日親上人徳行記, a seventeenth-century hagiography recounting the ordeals that Nisshin endured at the hands of the shogun Ashikaga Yoshinori, reads in part:

[On one occasion,] Master Nisshin was taken out into the prison yard in the fierce heat of the summer sun. Firewood was piled up, and he was made to cross through the flames. Forced to confront the fire, he was admonished, “If you think the pain will be hard to bear, then quickly say the name of Amida.” Master Nisshin replied, “The heat is truly difficult to bear. However, when one commits the sin of slandering the Dharma, he will fall into the Avici Hell and be scorched in the flames of the Hell of Great Heat. Nothing could compare to the heat of those flames. How could I, because I shunned a brief spell of suffering from this [relatively minor] heat, plant the seeds for long ages of torment?” And he chanted the *daimoku* in a loud voice.

(KTBS, 5: 559; trans. STONE 1999b, 394, slightly modified)

25. Nichiren’s criticisms of this widespread practice have been summed up in the phrase “nenbutsu leads to the Avici Hell” (*nenbutsu muge* 念仏無間; s.v. “shika kakugen” [四箇格言], NJ, esp. 144a–c; see also STONE 2013).

Stories of how medieval martyrs refused to chant the nenbutsu even under torture may have their literary antecedent in Nikkō's account of the Atsuhara martyrs, who refused to chant the nenbutsu when tormented with *hikime* arrows by Yoritsuna.

A third theme of the Atsuhara story that appears to have been appropriated in later hagiographical accounts of Hokkeshū martyrs is that officials who harass *Lotus Sutra* devotees invariably meet with karmic retribution. According to the *Nisshin Shōnin tokugyō ki*, for example, the shogun Yoshinori's assassination in 1441 was punishment for his imprisonment and abuse of the monk Nisshin (KTBS 5: 563–65; STONE 1999b, 395–97). This theme of karmic retribution befalling officials who harm the sutra's devotees may have its antecedent in Nikkō's brief note recording the events of the Atsuhara persecution, where he observes,

Fourteen years later, Hei no Nyūdō and Hangan, father and son, plotted rebellion and were destroyed. That both father and son [met their end in this way] was no ordinary matter. They had incurred in this life the punishment of the *Lotus Sutra*.
(*Honzon bun'yo chō*, NSZ 2: 116)

An early biography of Nikkō even says that Yoritsuna and his son were executed in the very same garden where they had interrogated the Atsuhara peasants (*Sanshi goden* 三師御伝, NSZ 2: 248–49).

Yoritsuna eventually eliminated his chief political rival, Adachi Yasumori, and rose to great heights of power, dominating the bakufu. But in 1293 he was accused of plotting to have his son supplant Hōjō Sadatoki 北条貞時 as regent, and he and his family were destroyed by Sadatoki's men. These events had no connection historically to the Atsuhara affair or to Nichiren's community. But from Nikkō's perspective—perhaps influenced by Nichiren's own emphasis at the time of the persecution on “punishment in this lifetime”—the destruction of Yoritsuna and his son was a direct karmic consequence of their treatment of the Atsuhara prisoners. From then on, it would become a recurrent element in Hokkeshū historical accounts that powerful officials who torment *Lotus Sutra* devotees are ultimately destroyed by inexorable karmic law.

In concluding, we may note that the Atsuhara story not only seems to have influenced the writing of later accounts of Hokkeshū martyrs but also served as a model in its own right for the ideal attitude of *Lotus* devotees when faced with the hostility of those in power. Let us consider one example, which appears in the *Musaka shō* 穆作抄 of the monk Nikkyō 日教 (1428–c. 1489) in Nikkō's Fuji lineage. In discussing the topic of “Faith,” Nikkyō writes,

In a place called Atsuhara in the Fuji district, twenty-three followers of the Hokkeshū were arrested and taken to the execution grounds. Among them was one woman. All were Nisshū's converts. Two had their heads cut off. Before others could be beheaded, the woman was stifling tears. The warriors guarding

the prisoners laughed and said, “Women are worthless!” The woman replied, “It is not that I begrudge my life. But because I am a woman, I have not yet been beheaded, and thus my attainment of Buddhahood will be delayed. That is what I lament.” Because of her plea, [the executioners] were moved, and the remaining twenty-one persons were pardoned, all due to this single woman’s faith. (FSY 2: 265)

This passage represents a variation on the confrontation scene discussed above. It is not known whether or not there were any women among those arrested at Atsuhara. While the presence of women among the prisoners was by no means impossible, Nikkyō’s account, written some two hundred years after the fact, is hardly a historically reliable document. The power of his narrative lies less in its factual accuracy than in its dramatic expression of a normative ideal: believers in the *Lotus Sutra* do not cower before worldly authority but rejoice in the opportunity to give up their lives for their faith, convinced that their achievement of Buddhahood is thereby guaranteed. In Nikkyō’s telling, the female gender of this particular devotee works to underscore her lack of power vis-à-vis her captors in worldly terms and to heighten in contrast the transcendent power of faith in the *Lotus Sutra*.

Conclusion

Source limitations restrict what can be known with certainty about the facts of the Atsuhara persecution. No official records survive, and those taken prisoner, who were most closely affected, left no account of their actions or motives. Nichiren and Nikkō’s reports of the measures taken against their followers are unavoidably secondhand, and the only concrete reference to the disposition of the case, in Nikkō’s *Honzon bun’yo chō*, may also date from after the fact. Nonetheless, we can discern from Nikkō and especially Nichiren’s extant writings the immense importance of the affair, for Nichiren, as a renewed opportunity to gain a hearing from the authorities for his teaching, and for his followers, as a time when their individual faith and their unity as a community of devotees would be tested. The Atsuhara persecution also provided an occasion for Nichiren to distill and finalize his teachings on what it means to give one’s life for the *Lotus Sutra*. Those teachings, along with representations of the confrontation between the Atsuhara prisoners and their jailors in Nikkō’s record and in later Hokkeshū narrative accounts, played a significant role in shaping the tradition’s ideal of how a *Lotus* devotee should face opposition from those in power. The Atsuhara story both expressed the spirit of “not begrudging bodily life” for the *Lotus Sutra*’s sake and at the same time helped to establish it as an ideal of conduct for the later Nichiren tradition. Perhaps in the end it is as hagiography, rather than history, that its influence has most strongly endured.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- FSY *Fuji shūgaku yōshū* 富士宗学要集. 10 vols. Ed. Hori Nichikō 堀日享, Tokyo: Sōka Gakkai, 1974–1979.
- Ibun jiten* *Nichiren Shōnin ibun jiten* 日蓮聖人遺文辞典. Ed. Risshō Daigaku Nichiren Kyōgaku Kenkyūjo 立正大学日蓮教学研究所. Minobu-chō, Yamanashi: Minobusan Kuonji, 1985.
- KBTS *Kokubun tōhō bukkō sōsho* 国文東方仏教叢書. Series 1, vol. 5. Ed. Washio Junkyō 鷺尾順敬. Tokyo: Tōhō Shoin, 1925.
- NJ *Nichirenshū jiten* 日蓮宗事典. Ed. Nichirenshū Jiten Kankō Iinkai 日蓮宗事典刊行委員会. Tokyo: Nichirenshū Shūmuin, 1981.
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