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in Nichiren's Thought

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Offering bodily life for the Dharma's sake forms a recurrent theme in the *Lotus Sūtra*. In the "Devadatta" chapter, Śāriputra recalls how Śākyamuni Buddha, while still at the stage of practice, made this sacrifice repeatedly: "When I observe the trichiliocosm, there is no place, not even the size of a mustard seed, where the bodhisattva did not cast away body and life for the beings' sake."⁽¹⁾ In the "Fortitude" chapter, myriads of bodhisattvas vow to bear countless harsh trials to in order to uphold the sūtra in the evil age after the Buddha's nirvāṇa and pledge: "We do not value bodily life; we cherish only the unexcelled Way."⁽²⁾ In the "Fathoming the Lifespan" chapter, where Śākyamuni Buddha reveals his original awakening in the remote past and his constant abiding in the Sahā world, he explains that, although the deluded do not see him, he will appear to those beings who "in their single-minded desire to see the Buddha, do not begrudge their bodily life."⁽³⁾ And the "Bodhisattva Medicine King" chapter provides the *locus classicus* for the practice of self-immolation by recounting how a bodhisattva called Beheld with Joy by All Living Beings (Skt. Sarvasattvapriyadarśana, Jpn. Issai Shujō Kiken), who later became Bodhisattva Medicine King (Bhaiṣajyarāja, Yakuō), once burnt his own body as an offering to the Buddha and the *Lotus Sūtra* and was praised by the buddhas of the universe, who proclaimed, "Well done, well done! Good son, this is true zeal! This is called a true Dharma offering to the Tathāgata ... Among the various gifts, it is the most honorable, the supreme."⁽⁴⁾ In his next life, the bodhisattva made yet another bodily offering by burning his forearms for seventy-two thousand years.

Relinquishing the body (Jpn. *shashin*, *ishin*, *bōshin*) is by no means a theme confined to the *Lotus Sūtra* but occurs throughout Buddhist literature. The "gift of the body" is especially associated with the *jātakas* or tales of the Buddha's practice as a bodhisattva in his prior lifetimes, when he repeatedly offered up his body to seek the Dharma or to benefit living beings.⁽⁵⁾ In the history of Buddhist traditions, such scriptural accounts of self-sacrifice by the Buddha-to-be or other great bodhisattvas have been variously interpreted and were often the focus of controversy. Some commentators have seen these acts of bodily

sacrifice as inimitable markers of the superior attainments that distinguish the Buddha or other Buddhist saints and heroes from mere ordinary practitioners and thus establish their religious authority. Others, however, have taken “gift of the body” stories as models for actual conduct that committed Buddhists might and perhaps even should emulate. Hagiographies from multiple Buddhist cultures celebrate those monks, nuns, and occasionally lay people who burnt fingers and toes, mutilated their bodies, immolated or drowned themselves, or otherwise sacrificed their lives for a range of recorded motives — as a Dharma offering; in imitation of bodhisattvas in the scriptures; to achieve birth in a pure land; to demonstrate non-attachment to self; to benefit others; to repay indebtedness to the Buddha; or as an act of protest when Buddhist institutions have been persecuted by the secular authorities.⁽⁶⁾ The ambivalent status of saints or other religious *virtuosi* — who are holy precisely because they make sacrifices beyond imitation by ordinary devotees and yet at the same time serve as models to be emulated — is not limited to Buddhism but occurs in other traditions as well.⁽⁷⁾

In the *Lotus Sūtra*, the theme of “relinquishing the body” or “not begrudging one’s bodily life” (*fujishaku shinmyō*) is treated less in the abstract than as giving one’s life *for the sūtra itself*, whether as an offering (as in the case of Bodhisattva Medicine King) or as enduring abuse in order to uphold and spread the sūtra in an evil age after the Buddha’s nirvāṇa (as in the “Fortitude” chapter). We might expect, then, that this theme would have held particular relevance for someone like the medieval Japanese Buddhist teacher Nichiren (1222-1282), who revered the *Lotus Sūtra* as the Buddha’s ultimate teaching. This essay will briefly examine the meaning “giving one’s life for the *Lotus Sūtra*” in Nichiren’s thought, in terms of both his own self-understanding as the practitioner or votary of the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Hokekyō no gyōja*) who upholds and spreads it in the latter age, and in the practice of ordinary devotees. It will also consider Nichiren’s treatment of “gift of the body” stories from the Buddhist canon, with attention to their ambivalent status as both inimitable ideals and as standards for religious conduct.

A Soteriology of Meeting Persecution

Buddhist ascetic suicide in connection with the *Lotus Sūtra*, especially with the story of Bodhisattva Medicine King, was known in premodern Japan, as on the Asian continent. The very first case of self-immolation in Japan is said to have been that of a *jikyōsha* or

Lotus Sūtra devotee called Ōshō who, in imitation of the bodhisattva, burned his body as an offering to the sūtra and the buddhas of the ten directions.⁽⁸⁾ In 1026, a nun immolated herself at Toribeno outside the Heian capital and was called "the nun of the Medicine King chapter."⁽⁹⁾ Yet Nichiren's Buddhism, the Hokkeshū or Nichirenshū, which takes the *Lotus Sūtra* as its foundation, has no tradition of ascetic self-mutilation or religious suicide. While it can claim its share of ascetic *virtuosi*, such as the famed adepts of the Nakayama lineage who practiced fasting and cold-water austerities to acquire powers of healing and exorcism, it has no examples of practitioners who leapt from cliffs, walked into the sea, immolated their bodies, burned off fingers and toes, or performed any of the other literal modes of "relinquishing the body" attested in other Buddhist traditions. In part this may be because, in Japan, such acts were frequently connected with aspirations for birth in the pure land of the Buddha Amida; for Nichiren, who rejected Pure Land teachings, the realm of the constantly abiding Śākyamuni Buddha is attainable in this world, so there is no point in casting off one's present body to achieve it. Nichiren himself wrote that a single day of life is more valuable than all the wealth of the trichilocosm, because it affords an opportunity to cultivate that much more merit.⁽¹⁰⁾ Ascetic suicide was not what epitomized for him the Buddhist ideal of selfless non-attachment.

Nonetheless, we do find an equivalent to "relinquishing the body" in his teaching, in his stress on the soteriological value of meeting persecution (*hōnan*) for the *Lotus Sūtra's* sake, especially at the hands of worldly authorities. Nichiren emerged from the Tendai Buddhist tradition, which reveres the *Lotus Sūtra* as supreme among the teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha; where other teachings are seen as "provisional" (*gon*), the *Lotus Sūtra* is "true" (*jitsu*). Moreover, Nichiren preached exclusive devotion to the *Lotus Sūtra*, embodied in the single practice of chanting its title or *daimoku*, *Namu-myōhō-renge-kyō*. In his understanding, only the *Lotus Sūtra* leads to enlightenment now in the Final Dharma age (*mappō*), in which he and his contemporaries believed themselves to be living. In prior ages, other, provisional Buddhist teachings had served to bring people to liberation. But, like medicine that sits too long on the shelf and turns poisonous, in this age, they no longer led to buddhahood but rather exerted a harmful influence in drawing people away from the *Lotus Sūtra*. Not only individual sufferings, but the problems besetting Japan in his age — famine, epidemics, political unrest, and the threat of Mongol invasion — were in his eyes ultimately attributable to the fundamental error of "Dharma slander" (*hōbō*) — rejection of the *Lotus Sūtra* in favor of "inferior," provisional teachings. Eventually

Nichiren would become critical of all other forms of Buddhism current in his day: both recent developments, including the exclusive *nenbutsu* movement of the Pure Land teacher Hōnen (1133-1212) and his followers, the *vinaya* revival moment of Eizon (1201-1290) and Ninshō (1217-1303), and the newly imported teachings of Song-style Zen, as well as the exoteric and esoteric teachings of the Tendai, Shingon, and the Nara schools that represented the older Buddhist establishment. His criticisms of the doctrines espoused by leading figures in the religious world — and of Bakufu or shogunal officials for supporting them — incurred repeated sanctions from the authorities. Nichiren numbered four in particular among his worst tribulations: exile to the Izu peninsula (1261-1263); an armed attack on his traveling party at Komatsubara (1264), in which he was seriously wounded; an attempt to have him beheaded (1271); and his second exile, to the bleak island of Sado (1271-1274). “In addition,” he wrote, “many among my disciples have been killed, wounded, banished, or punitively fined.”⁽¹¹⁾

Out of repeated experiences of this kind, Nichiren formulated what might be termed a “soteriology of meeting persecution” that defined, for him, what it meant to “give one’s life for the *Lotus Sūtra*.” This soteriology has two inseparable aspects — declaring the unique efficacy of the *Lotus Sūtra* and incurring hostility in consequence — and unites several interrelated themes. Since, in his understanding, only the *Lotus Sūtra* leads to liberation in the Final Dharma age, advocating exclusive devotion to the *Lotus* was for Nichiren not dogmatic self-assertion but the most profoundly compassionate act, corresponding to bodhisattva practice. Whether others accepted or rejected it, hearing the teaching of the *Lotus* would enable them to form a karmic connection with the sūtra that would eventually lead them to Buddhahood. This reasoning underlay his choice of *shakubuku*, the “harsh method” of Dharma preaching by explicitly rebuking “wrong views,” or attachment to provisional teachings. At the same time, he found profound soteriological value in enduring the hostility that was likely to result. First, he suggests that meeting persecution for the *Lotus Sūtra*’s sake enables one to repay one’s indebtedness — to one’s parents, to the ruler, to the three treasures of Buddhism, and to all living beings. Recalling his emotions on the eve of his second arrest and near execution, he wrote, “I was born a poor person, with no power to requite my filial obligations or to repay my debt to the country. Now I will offer my severed head to the *Lotus Sūtra* and transfer the resulting merit to my father and mother, and the remainder to my disciples and lay devotees.”⁽¹²⁾ Second, by enduring opposition for the sūtra’s sake, one is able to expiate the sins of one’s prior lifetimes, especially

the most fundamental evil of slanders committed against the *Lotus Sūtra*. By rebuking enemies of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the retribution for one's past slanders, which would otherwise trouble one over many lifetimes, is drawn into the present life and eradicated. As Nichiren wrote from Sado: "Iron, when heated in the flames and pounded, becomes a fine sword. Worthies and sages are tested by abuse. My present exile is not due to any worldly offense. It is solely that I may expiate in this lifetime my past grave offenses and escape [rebirth in] the three evil paths in the next."⁽⁴³⁾

Third, since the *Lotus Sūtra* itself says that its devotees in the evil age after the Buddha's nirvāṇa will encounter severe trials, meeting hardships in upholding and spreading the *Lotus* constitutes a "proof," both of the truth of the sūtra and of the validity of one's own faith and practice. The seeming fulfillment of the sūtra's prophecies in his own experience of abuse and hardship played a crucial role in engendering Nichiren's self-understanding as the votary of the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Hokekyō no gyōja*) who spreads its teachings in the Final Dharma age. "The sūtra says, 'There will be many ignorant people who will curse and speak ill of us and will attack us with swords and staves, with tiles and rocks,'" he noted. "Look around you in the world today — are there any monks other than myself who are cursed and vilified on account of the *Lotus Sūtra* or who are attacked with swords and staves? If it were not for Nichiren, the prophecy made in this verse of the sūtra would have been sheer falsehood."⁽⁴⁴⁾ Spreading the sūtra in the Final Dharma age and encountering the very hardships it predicts comprised what Nichiren called "reading [the *Lotus*] with one's body" (*shikidoku*) — a circular or mirror hermeneutic in which sūtra and practitioner simultaneously reflect, validate, and bear witness to one another.⁽⁴⁵⁾ And lastly, Nichiren held "giving one's life for the *Lotus Sūtra*" to be the fundamental cause for attaining buddhahood. "You must each be resolved," he told his disciples. "Offering your life to the *Lotus Sūtra* is like exchanging rocks for gold or dung for rice."⁽⁴⁶⁾ Like the bodhisattva's gift of his body in *jātaka* tales, meeting persecution for the *Lotus Sūtra*'s sake in Nichiren's thought paradoxically unites both selfless sacrifice and self-beneficial exchange: it is at once an act of ultimate non-attachment, placing the Dharma above one's bodily life, but also a transaction, by which one surrenders the body of an ordinary worldling to acquire the adamant body of a buddha.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Hagiographies of the later Nichiren Hokkeshū celebrate those individuals who, in imitation of Nichiren himself, risked or underwent arrest, imprisonment, torture, and exile, or were even put to death, in consequence of their faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*. Special

honor is accorded those who — again, like Nichiren — took it upon themselves to “admonish the state” (*kokka kangyō*), memorializing the emperor, the shogun, or local officials to endorse faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* alone for the country's welfare. Meeting persecution from worldly authorities for the *Lotus Sūtra*'s sake has served as a powerful source of legitimation for lineage founders, reformers, and charismatic leaders within the Nichiren tradition. The more famous examples include Kuonjōin Nisshin (1407-1488), who was imprisoned when he repeatedly admonished the shogun Ashikaga Yoshinori, and Busshōin Nichiō (1565-1630), leader of the *fuju fuse* movement, who defied both Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu in refusing to accept donations from, or perform ritual services for, a ruler who was not a believer in the *Lotus Sūtra*.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Those Nichiren Buddhist devotees, usually monks but occasionally lay people, who incurred official sanctions on account of their faith are typically referred to as “martyrs” (*junkyōsha*), and the “history of martyrs” or *junkyōshi* represents a minor genre within the tradition.⁽⁴⁹⁾ While further research would be necessary to establish the point, one suspects that this usage was adopted rather recently, from the terminology employed since the Meiji period to refer to those Japanese Christians who were tortured and died for their faith in late medieval and early modern times. To be sure, one finds much in common between Nichiren Hokkeshū followers who were persecuted by the authorities and Christian martyrs, elements that would provide grounds for comparative study: both bore “witness” to a truth seen as transcending worldly authority and sometimes gave their lives rather than recant. However, it is also appropriate to consider Nichiren's soteriology of meeting persecution for the *Lotus Sūtra*'s sake, not as a Buddhist equivalent of Christian martyrdom, but within the traditional Buddhist category of “relinquishing the body.” Indeed, Nichiren himself appears to have understood it in this way, and this perspective does much to illuminate continuities and differences between his teaching and the larger Buddhist tradition.

“Relinquishing the Body” and the Votary of the *Lotus Sūtra*

First, let us consider how the theme of “relinquishing the body” figures in Nichiren's self-definition as the *gyōja* or votary of the *Lotus Sūtra* in the Final Dharma age. It need hardly be said that his sense of mission to uphold and spread the *Lotus* drew inspiration from two figures in the sūtra itself: Bodhisattva Superior Conduct (Skt. *Viśiṣṭacāritra*,

Jpn. Jōgyō), the leader of the bodhisattvas who emerged from beneath the earth — the original disciples of Śākyamuni Buddha since his awakening in the far distant past, to whom he transfers the *Lotus Sūtra* for propagation in the latter age — and Bodhisattva Never Despising (Sadāparibhūta, Jōfukyō), who paid honor to everyone he met as a future buddha and was scorned and reviled in consequence but eventually led his tormentors to enlightenment. These two figures may be seen as representing the two interrelated aspects of Nichiren's understanding of his religious task: assuming leadership in spreading faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* as a forerunner of Superior Conduct, and enduring abuse with forbearance, following the model of Never Despising. But Nichiren also employed stories of Śākyamuni Buddha's practice in his prior lifetimes, or of other great bodhisattvas and ascetics who offered their bodies, as reference points in delineating his own practice. An early reference of this kind occurs in a letter to a lay follower written during his first, Izu exile:

One must repay one's indebtedness to the three treasures [Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha]. Among the saints of antiquity, the youth of the Snow Mountains (Jpn. Sessen Dōji), the bodhisattva Ever Weeping (Jōtai), the hero Medicine King, and King Universal Light (Skt. Śrutasoma, Jpn. Fumyō) [all offered their lives to repay this debt]. The first offered his body to feed a demon [in order to learn the Dharma in exchange], and the second sold his own blood and marrow [for the same purpose]. The third burned his arms [in offering], and the fourth offered his head. But ordinary worldlings in this latter age, though receiving the blessings of the three treasures, make no attempt to repay them. How then can they attain the Buddha way?...I am but a foolish ordinary worldling with a body of flesh and blood. I have not uprooted even a single part of the three types of delusion. But for *Lotus Sūtra's* sake I have been reviled and slandered, struck with swords and staves, and sent into exile. In this light, I believe I may be comparable to those great saints who burned their arms, broke their [bones to extract] marrow, or offered up their heads [as sacrifice].⁽²⁰⁾

In this way, Nichiren — self-described as a deluded, ordinary worldling — saw the trials he endured on account of the *Lotus Sūtra* as elevating him to a status comparable to those ascetic *virtuosi* of the scriptural tradition who had sacrificed their bodies for the Dharma's sake, enabling him to requite an indebtedness that otherwise only great saints could fully repay. Here for the first time he explicitly equates the two major meanings of "giving one's life for the *Lotus Sūtra*" found in the sūtra itself: bodily sacrifice and meeting trials for the sūtra's sake.

Following reprieve from his sentence of exile in 1263, Nichiren continued his preaching activities in the eastern provinces and in Kamakura. Pressure from the authorities increased when he began to insist that the threat of impending Mongol invasion represented retribution for people's slander of the *Lotus Sūtra* and sent letters of remonstrance to that effect to Bakufu officials and religious leaders. In 1271, he was again arrested and exiled, this time to Sado. At this point, "gift of the body" stories assume heightened significance in his writings. First, he links the great bodhisattvas and ascetics who relinquished their bodies with other figures from the sūtras whose practice more closely resembled his own, as in this letter written shortly before his arrest:

This time I am certain to be exiled or put to death ... This body, which would otherwise be abandoned to no purpose in a field, I will offer for the sake of the *Lotus Sūtra*. My hope is to follow in the path of the youth of the Snow Mountains and Bodhisattva Medicine King, to be like [the kings] Sen'yo and Possessing Virtue (Jpn. Utoku) who left their names to later ages⁽²¹⁾

The youth of the Snow Mountains, who pledged his flesh to a demon in order to hear the Dharma, and Bodhisattva Medicine King are both examples of ascetic *virtuosi* who offered their bodies in sacrifice.⁽²²⁾ The other two figures, the kings Sen'yo and Possessing Virtue, both prior births of Śākyamuni Buddha whose stories appear in the *Nirvāṇa sūtra*, represent exemplars of a different stamp: Sen'yo put to death Brahmans in his kingdom who slandered the Mahāyāna (an act treated in the sūtra as meritorious), and Possessing Virtue died of wounds sustained while safeguarding a pure monk from the vicious attack of depraved clerics. Together they would seem to represent the virtues of rebuking Dharma slander and protecting the Dharma even at the cost of one's life, both of which resonated with Nichiren's own efforts. Thus they become bridge figures, linking Nichiren's practice with the bodily sacrifice offered by ascetic heroes, such as the youth of the Snow Mountains and Bodhisattva Medicine King, and underscoring the equivalence between them.

On the eve of his departure for Sado, Nichiren expands his list of such figures to include historical personages:

In India, a man called Āryasiṃha was beheaded by King Danmira, and Āryadeva was murdered by a heretic. In China, the monk Zhu Daosheng was banished to a mountain in Suzhou, and the tripiṭaka master Fadao was branded on the face and exiled south of the Yangzi River. All these [men offered their lives] because of the virtue of the *Lotus Sūtra* and for the sake of the Buddha-Dharma.⁽²³⁾

While the ordeals undergone by these figures had little if any connection to the *Lotus Sūtra*, by framing them in this way, Nichiren in effect normalizes the trials he and his disciples face by showing that devotion to the *Lotus* inevitably calls forth hardship, which is to be both anticipated and welcomed. By the time of his major treatise *Kaimoku shō* (Opening of the eyes), written in the first winter of his exile, Nichiren's list of predecessors expands into a veritable catalogue:

Śākyamuni, the master of teachings, was reviled by all heretics as a great evildoer; the Great Teacher Tiantai [Zhiyi, 538-597] was censured by the schools of the North and South [in China] and by Tokuitsu [in Japan] as one who destroys his own five-foot body with his three-inch tongue [by slandering the Buddha's teaching]; and the Great Teacher Dengyō [Saichō, 767-822] was criticized by the monks of the Nara schools, who said of him that "Saichō has yet to see the Tang capital!" All these [hardships were encountered] for the sake of the *Lotus Sūtra* and thus carried no shame ... Śākyamuni entered the [defiled] *Sahā* world; Kumārajīva journeyed to Qin [China]; Dengyō also traveled to China; Āryadeva and Āryasimha relinquished their bodies; Medicine King burned his arms; Jōgū [Prince Shōtoku] stripped off the skin of his hand [in order to copy a sūtra title]; Śākyamuni, while still a bodhisattva, sold his flesh [in exchange for the Dharma]; and [the ascetic] Delight in Dharma [Gyōbō Bonji] made a pen of his bones. Tiantai has said that [the method of Dharma teaching] should befit the times."⁽²⁴⁾

Here, scriptural examples of ascetics who "relinquished the body" as an offering or in quest of the Dharma are juxtaposed with historical figures who braved physical danger to spread the Buddhist teachings, met with opprobrium from rival teachers of other Buddhist schools, or were killed by persons hostile to Buddhism. Despite marked differences in the degree, kind, and circumstances of the hardships encountered, Nichiren assimilates them collectively to sufferings endured "for the sake of the *Lotus Sūtra*" or to "practice befitting the time," juxtaposing them to create a grand lineage in the soteriology of meeting persecution, of which he is the present heir. Thus they serve to legitimate both the path that Nichiren has taken and the liberative value of his sufferings as the votary of the *Lotus Sūtra* who upholds their tradition in the current age.

Characterizing the bodily sacrifices of great bodhisattvas and heroes of the past as "practice befitting the time" works to establish an equivalence between their practice and Nichiren's own, in that both are defined as suited to their respective ages. At the same

time, however, it shows Nichiren's practice to be superior in the sense that it is the practice befitting *this* time. The criterion of the time, in Nichiren's thought, dictated not only the exclusive choice of the *Lotus Sūtra* as the sole vehicle of liberation in the Final Dharma age but also the method for spreading it, that is, *shakubuku*, the direct repudiation of provisional teachings. Given the hostility provoked by Nichiren's attacks on other Buddhist forms, some among his followers questioned why he persisted in his criticisms, rather than adopting a milder approach. Nichiren's response was that in an age when Dharma slander — willful disbelief in the *Lotus Sūtra* — prevails, direct attack was in fact the compassionate course. "If someone is about to kill your mother and father," he wrote, "shouldn't you try to warn them?...If some evil person is about to set fire to temples and stūpas, shouldn't you try to stop him? If your only child is gravely ill, shouldn't you try to cure him with moxibustion treatment, [painful as it may be] ? ... [As Zhanran has written,] 'If one befriends another but lacks the compassion to correct him, one is in fact his enemy.'"⁽²⁵⁾ A recurring theme of Nichiren's Sado writings is the defense of *shakubuku* as the method of practicing the *Lotus Sūtra* that accords with the time.⁽²⁶⁾ And in this connection, he invokes those Buddhist saints who gave up their bodies for the Dharma's sake as examples, contrasting with his own, of a mode of practice that no longer suits the era. "The great saints of antiquity practiced the Dharma in accordance with the time. The youth of the Snow Mountains offered his body in order to be taught the Dharma. Prince Sattva gave up his life to fulfill his bodhisattva practice. But should one sacrifice one's body when one's flesh is not required?⁽²⁷⁾ Or, "Were there no paper in Japan, you should peel off your skin [to record sūtras].... Were there no oil, you should burn your arms. But of what use is it to peel off our skin when the country has plenty of good writing paper?"⁽²⁸⁾ The sūtra narratives in which these "gift of the body" stories appear give no indication that Bodhisattva Medicine King burned his arms because there was no oil for offering, or that the ascetic Delight in Dharma peeled off his skin because paper was unavailable. Rather, these were acts of ascetic self-sacrifice, not dictated by utilitarian concerns. By reading them as the forms of practice required by the circumstances of their time, Nichiren is able to represent them as surpassed in *this* time by practicing *shakubuku* and enduring persecution for the *Lotus Sūtra* as the appropriate "offering of one's life." This conclusion is summed up in his treatise *Senji shō* (The selection of the time) :

When I first began my Buddhist practice, I thought that "not cherishing bodily life" meant receiving the imperial command and making the [dangerous] crossing to

China, as did Dengyō, Kōbō [Kūkai, 774-835], Jikaku [Ennin, 794-864], and Chishō [Enchin, 814-891]; or that perhaps it meant setting out from China to go to India, as did the tripiṭaka master Xuanzang [602-664], dying and being reborn six times in the attempt; or that it was like the youth of the Snow Mountains discarding his body to learn half a verse [of a Buddhist teaching] or Bodhisattva Medicine King burning his arms for seventy-two thousand years. But if we go by the sūtra text, this is not what is meant At a time when the country is filled with respected persons who declare that there are other sūtras that surpass the *Lotus Sūtra*, and when such persons are revered by the ruler and his ministers while the practitioner of the *Lotus Sūtra*, being poor and humble, is despised by the entire country, and if he persists in his assertions as did [the bodhisattva] Never Disparaging or the scholar Bhadrharuchi, it may well cost his life. [To practice with such resolve at such a time] is the most important thing of all.⁽²⁹⁾

Nichiren's understanding of "giving one's life for the *Lotus Sūtra*" would seem to differ from the literal "gift of the body" in several respects. It is not strictly speaking an ascetic act; unlike the offering of body parts or self-immolation, the practitioner is not the direct agent of his or her own sacrifice. Thus it requires for its fulfillment the presence of persons inimical to *Lotus Sūtra* practitioners and in this respect more closely resembles the category of martyrdom than it does ascetic self-sacrifice. And because the nature and severity of the hostility to be endured are similarly determined, not by oneself but by others, "giving one's life for the *Lotus Sūtra*" entails, not a specific act of self-sacrifice but rather the cultivation of an attitude of readiness to endure whatever trial one's advocacy of the sūtra might incur, not knowing in advance what form it might take. Nonetheless, in Nichiren's reading, the bodhisattva's ascetic sacrifice of his body in ages past, and the ordinary worldling's meeting with persecution to spread the *Lotus Sūtra* in the present, are rendered equivalent as "practices befitting the time." While Nichiren never claimed an enlightenment equal to the great bodhisattvas in the scriptures, these interpretive moves at once place him within the lineage of these holy persons and at the same time invert the hierarchy between them: because Nichiren's is the practice that befits *this* time, his endurance of persecution surpasses the gift of the body made by the saints of prior ages.

"Giving One's Life" and the Practice of Ordinary Followers

As the leader of a new religious movement self-defined in opposition to the Buddhist establishment, Nichiren was himself the major target of the Bakufu's suppression. Although his followers were also affected, sometimes gravely so, not all of them were in a position to risk their lives directly as he did. Especially where lay devotees were concerned, Nichiren often advised them to be circumspect and not needlessly court the wrath of the authorities. But if "giving one's life for the *Lotus Sūtra*" is the cause for attaining buddhahood, how can ordinary practitioners achieve it? Let us examine this issue in three of Nichiren's personal letters, with attention to his treatment of "gift of the body" stories from the sūtras and their ambiguous status as both inimitable ideal and model for actual practice.

(a) "Myōichi-ama gozen goshōsoku" (1275)

In this letter to a disciple, the lay nun Myōichi-ama, expressing sympathy on the death of her husband, Nichiren wrote:

Your late husband gave his life for the *Lotus Sūtra*. His small estate that barely sustained him was confiscated on account of [his faith in] the *Lotus Sūtra*. Surely that equalled giving his life! The youth of the Snow Mountains offered his body for half a verse [of a Buddhist teaching], and Bodhisattva Medicine King burned his arms [in offering to the Buddha]. They were saints, [and such acts were for them] like water poured on fire. But your husband was an ordinary worldling, [and so for him, this sacrifice was] like paper placed in fire. When we take this into consideration, his merit must be equivalent to theirs.⁽³⁰⁾

To have one's property seized because of one's religious commitment is a hardship by any reckoning, but it is neither as direct nor heroic as the self-sacrifice offered by the youth of the Snow Mountains or Bodhisattva Medicine King. Here the inimitable quality of the saint's "gift of the body" is maintained; it is not something unenlightened persons can emulate. At the same time, however, Nichiren asserts both a moral and functional equivalence between the two. Judged against their relative spiritual attainments, the ordinary practitioner's forfeiture of his land becomes a sacrifice comparable to the bodhisattva's gift of the body and yields identical merit.

(b) "Nichimyō Shōnin gosho" (1272)

A more detailed, doctrinally grounded treatment of "giving one's life" occurs in a letter to a young devotee who had made the hazardous journey from Kamakura to Sado, accompanied only by her infant daughter, to visit Nichiren during his exile there. Nichiren was so moved by this young woman's demonstration of faith that he gave her the Buddhist name Nichimyō Shōnin, taking the character *nichi* from his own name and *myō* from the title of the *Lotus Sūtra*. In a letter praising her devotion, he relates in detail the stories of the ascetic Delight in Dharma, who peeled off his skin on which to inscribe a Buddhist teaching, and the youth of the Snow Mountains, who offered his body to a demon in exchange for the Dharma, as well as other heroic "gifts of the body" described in the sūtras. However, he continues, the practice for attaining buddhahood depends upon the time, and such acts are no longer appropriate. "How then," he asks, "can we obtain this benefit?" In answer, he explains that the character *myō* of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s title contains within itself all the merit that Śākyamuni Buddha amassed over countless lifetimes by cultivating the six *pāramitās* or bodhisattva perfections, in particular, the merits of his acts of bodily self-sacrifice related in the *jātaka* tales:

... the merit obtained by Śākyamuni Tathāgata in his perfection of giving, when in the past [as Prince Mahāsattva] he fed his body to a starving tigress and gave his flesh [as King Śibi] to ransom a dove; the merit of his perfection of the precepts, when, as King Śrutasoma, he would not lie [though it meant his death]; the merit he acquired as the ascetic Forbearance (Skt. Kṣāntivādīn ṛṣi, Jpn. Ninniku Sennin), when he entrusted his person to King Kali [and was tortured, etc.] Thus even though we persons of this evil latter age have not cultivated even a single good, [by bestowing upon us the character *myō* of the *Lotus Sūtra*], Śākyamuni has conferred on us the same merit as if we ourselves had fulfilled the six perfections and countless other practices.⁽³¹⁾

This represents in embryonic form the central argument of Nichiren's major treatise *Kanjin honzon shō* (On the contemplation of the mind and the object of worship), in which we find the passage: "The *Sūtra of Unfathomable Meanings* states, 'Even if one is not able to practice the six *pāramitās*, the six *pāramitās* will naturally be present.'...Śākyamuni's causal practices (*ingyō*) and their resulting merits (*katoku*) are inherent in the five characters *myō-hō-ren-ge-kyō*. When we embrace these five characters, he will naturally transfer

to us the merits of his causes and effects."⁽³²⁾ In other words, all the virtues and merits attained by Śākyamuni are perfectly contained within the *Lotus Sūtra's* title or *daimoku* and can at once be accessed in chanting it.

In her study of "gift of the body" stories in Indian Buddhist literature, Reiko Ohnuma notes that such stories entail "a complex mixture of otherness and imitability."⁽³³⁾ On the one hand, they set the practice of great Buddhist saints of the scriptures, especially the Buddha's past acts of offering his body while engaged in bodhisattva practice, apart from the routine ritual or devotional acts of which ordinary practitioners are capable. Yet those same extraordinary sacrifices that set the Buddha apart from ordinary practitioners also produced the merit field — namely, the Buddhist religion, consisting of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha — that enables ordinary practitioners eventually to achieve the same stature as the Buddha himself. Here a similar logic is assimilated to Nichiren's claim for the exclusive efficacy of the *Lotus Sūtra*: because all Śākyamuni Buddha's practices and resulting virtues are contained in the sūtra's title, by embracing the *daimoku*, the ordinary devotee can receive the merits of Śākyamuni's countless acts of bodily offering without having to reenact them. Nichiren thus suggests that Nichimyo's devotion to *Lotus Sūtra*, expressed in her braving the journey visit to him, encompasses the bodhisattva's gift of his body and is sure to result in the same blessing, buddhahood itself.

(c) "Jiri kuyō goshō" ("Offerings in actuality and principle," 1276?)

This letter, written from Nichiren's retreat at Mount Minobu expressing gratitude for a donation of polished rice, may represent his most detailed treatment of what "giving one's life" might mean for ordinary practitioners. The last portion of the manuscript is missing, so the date and recipient are unknown, but an internal reference to Nichiren's intense suffering from hunger would seem to suggest that it dates from an early period in his residence at Minobu, before an active community of disciples had established itself there around him. Those born in the human realm, Nichiren begins, have two treasures: clothing and food. These are valuable precisely in that they sustain life, the greatest treasure of all. Because nothing surpasses the value of life itself, the saints and worthies of ancient times offered their lives to the Buddha and were thus able to attain buddhahood. Here again Nichiren cites graphic examples of ascetics and seekers from the scriptures and historical tradition said to have given their flesh or other bodily parts as votive offerings to the Buddha-Dharma. These literal "gifts of the body" constitute "offering in actuality" (*ji*

kuyō). However, as Nichiren acknowledges, "it is hard for us to equal them." If the offering of one's life is the cause that leads to buddhahood, then how can ordinary people hope to attain it? In explanation, he says:

Ordinary worldlings can become buddhas if we bear in mind the single word "resolve" (*kokorozashi*). As for the meaning of "resolve": When we consider it carefully, it comes down to the doctrine of "observing the mind." And when we inquire into what is meant by the doctrine of "observing the mind," it means that offering one's only robe to the *Lotus Sūtra* is in fact peeling off the skin of one's body, and that, in an age when hunger prevails, offering the Buddha one's sole portion of food, without which one cannot sustain oneself another day, is offering one's life to the Buddha. Such acts bring merit fully equal to that of [Bodhisattva] Medicine King burning his arms or the youth of the Snow Mountains offering his life to a demon. For sages, there is offering in actuality (*ji kuyō*), and for ordinary worldlings, there is offering in principle (*ri kuyō*).⁽³⁴⁾

Here, the offering of one's last portion of food to the Buddha is presented as the moral equivalent of the saint's gift of the body; this is similar to the logic found in the letter to Myōichi-ama discussed above. In this letter, however, Nichiren explains their equivalence in terms of the "observation of the mind" (*kanjin*). This term has multiple meanings: in Tendai thought, it refers both to meditative practice and to a particular scriptural hermeneutic that reads the sūtra in terms of the practitioner's own contemplative insight; in Nichiren's teaching, as explained in his *Kanjin honzon shō*, *kanjin* means to access one's innate buddhahood by chanting the *daimoku* of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Here Nichiren equates "observing the mind" with the act of offering by drawing on a distinction between actuality and principle in the perfection of giving set forth the meditation treatise *Mohezhi-guan* (Great calming and discernment) by the Tiantai founder Zhiyi. According to Zhiyi, giving "in actuality" is to destroy greed for specific things and thus cast off attachment to wealth, while giving "in principle," based on the discernment of emptiness and nonduality, is to destroy the very mind of greed and cast off attachments altogether; in the perfection of giving, the two are inseparable.⁽³⁵⁾ Nichiren borrows this distinction between offerings in actuality and principle; equates it to the distinction between saints and ordinary worldlings; and grounds their ultimate identification in the *Lotus Sūtra*, which in his reading alone embodies the full truth of nonduality:

The sūtras preached before the *Lotus Sūtra* hold in essence that all dharmas are

produced from the mind.... The earlier sūtras teach that clarity of mind is like the moon and that purity of mind is like a flower. Not so with the *Lotus Sūtra*. It represents the doctrine that the moon *is* the mind, the flower *is* the mind. From this we must know that polished rice is not polished rice, but precisely life itself.⁽³⁶⁾

In the "observation of the mind," one accesses that nondual realm — grounded, in Nichiren's view, in the *Lotus Sūtra* alone — wherein all things interpenetrate and the mind cannot be separated from the world's visible forms, where principle (*ri*) and concrete actuality (*ji*) are identified, where the practice of ordinary worldlings merges with the self-sacrifice of Buddhist saints, and rice donated is none other than the life of its donor. Thus, not only as a matter of moral equivalence but ontologically as well, the act of dedication of which one is capable, based on one's earnest resolve, becomes the "offering of one's life" and thus the cause for buddhahood.

Summation

Of the two meanings of "giving one's life for the *Lotus Sūtra*" suggested in the *Lotus* itself — as bodily sacrifice made in offering to the sūtra and as enduring hardships to uphold and spread the sūtra after the Buddha's nirvāṇa — Nichiren took the second as preeminent. It forms the basis of his "soteriology of meeting persecution," in which declaring the unique truth of the *Lotus* and incurring great hardships in consequence represents the sole path of liberation for both self and others in the Final Dharma age. Nonetheless, the notion of bodily sacrifice and scriptural "gift of the body" stories served him as reference points in defining and legitimating his perceived task as the votary of the *Lotus Sūtra* in the Final Dharma age and in advancing his claims for the sūtra's exclusive efficacy. In his soteriology, meeting hostility or persecution can be equated with the acts of bodily self-sacrifice performed by great bodhisattvas and ascetic heroes of the Buddhist scriptures precisely because such trials are met for the *Lotus Sūtra's* sake. This logic enabled Nichiren to position himself as heir to a long tradition of persons, scriptural and historical, who in one form or another had "offered their lives," thus lending authority to the course he had chosen. And by grouping together all such instances as "practice befitting the times," he in effect elevated his practice above theirs, as the practice befitting *this* time.

Nichiren also assimilated the ideal of offering one's body to his claims for the absolute status of the *daimoku* as a single practice. The "gift of the body" in a literal sense, such as

the ascetic self-sacrifices performed by Śākyamuni Buddha while still a bodhisattva, are beyond the capability of ordinary devotees, but because the merits of all those acts are inherent in the *daimoku* of the *Lotus Sūtra*, ordinary devotees can achieve the same merit as Śākyamuni without undertaking his harsh austerities. Ultimately, in Nichiren's thought, the tension between the "gift of the body" as the inimitable mark of enlightened beings, setting them apart from ordinary practitioners, and as a model to be emulated, is mediated by, and in the service of, the absolute status he accords the *Lotus Sūtra*. Precisely because the *Lotus* is supreme, ordinary persons who embrace it can attain what otherwise only holy beings could accomplish, and the heroic sacrifice of bodhisattvas in the past is superceded by the devotion of common practitioners in the present. The idea that the merit of relinquishing the body — i.e., buddhahood — can be achieved without literal self-sacrifice also opens the way to understanding what Nichiren's ideal of "offering one's life" might mean under circumstances where no persecution or hostility threatens, suggesting that, depending upon the times, "giving one's life for the *Lotus Sūtra*" could mean, not risking death for its sake, but living it to the best of one's ability.

Notes:

- (1) *Miaofa lianhua jing* 4, T no. 262, 9:35b; trans. Leon Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 200, slightly modified.
- (2) *Miaofa lianhua jing* 4, T 9:36c.
- (3) *Miaofa lianhua jing* 5, T 9:43b.
- (4) *Miaofa lianhua jing* 6, T 9:53b; Hurvitz, *Fine Dharma*, 295, slightly modified.
- (5) The theme of bodily sacrifice in Indian Buddhist literature, especially *jātaka* tales, has been fruitfully analyzed by Reiko Ohnuma in her *Head, Eyes, Flesh, and Blood: Giving Away the Body in Indian Buddhist Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). "Gift of the body" is Ohnuma's phrase, which I have borrowed here.
- (6) There now exists a considerable body of scholarship on Buddhist practices of relinquishing the body. See for example Jacques Gernet, "Les suicides par le feu chez les bouddhistes chinois de V^e au X^e siècle," *Mélanges publiés par l'Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises* 2 (Paris, 1960) : 527-58; Jan Yün-hua, "Buddhist Self-Immolation in Medieval China," *History of Religions* 4, no. 2 (1965) : 243-65; Ichiro Hori, "Self-

- Mummified Buddhas in Japan: An Aspect of the Shugen-dō Sect," *History of Religions* 1, no. 2 (1962) : 222-42; Yoshida Yasuo, "Shashingyō no tenkai to sono shisō," in his *Nihon kodai no bosatsu to minshū* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1988), 187-222; James A. Benn, "Where Text Meets Flesh: Burning the Body as an Apocryphal Practice in Chinese Buddhism," *History of Religions* 37, no. 4 (1998) : 295-322, and "Fire and the Sword: Some Connections Between Self-immolation and Religious Persecution in the History of Chinese Buddhism," in *The Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses, Representations*, ed. Bryan J. Cuevas and Jacqueline Stone (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, forthcoming 2007) ; Funayama Tōru, "Shashin no shisō: Rikuchō bukkyōshi no ichi danmen," *Tōhō gaku* 74 (2002) : 358-11 (reverse pagination) ; and Liz Wilson, "Human Torches of Enlightenment: Autocremation and Spontaneous Combustion as Marks of Sanctity in South Asian Buddhism," in *The Living and the Dead: Social Dimensions of Death in South Asian Religions*, ed. Liz Wilson (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2003), 29-50.
- (7) See for example Peter Brown, "Enjoying the Saints in Late Antiquity," *Early Medieval Europe* 9 (2000), no. 1:1-24, and Richard Kieckhefer and George D. Bond, eds., *Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), vii-ix. Ohnuma explores this tension between the "otherness" and "imitability" of holy figures in Indian Buddhism in *Head, Eyes, Flesh, and Blood*.
- (8) *Hokke genki* I:9. The exact date of Ōshō's act is not supplied, but it would have to have been prior to the Chōkyū era (1040-1044), when the *Hokke genki* was compiled.
- (9) *Sakeiki*, Manju 3 (1026), 7/15.
- (10) "Kaen jōgō gosho," *Shōwa teihon Nichiren Shōnin ibun* (hereafter *Teihon*), ed. Risshō Daigaku Nichirenshū Kyōgaku Kenkyūjo, 4 vols. (Minobu-chō, Yamanashi: Minobusan Kuonji, 1952-59, rev. 1988), no. 163, 1:863-64.
- (11) "Shōnin gonanji," *Teihon* no. 343, 2:1673.
- (12) *Shuju onfurumai gosho*, *Teihon* no. 176, 2:966-67.
- (13) "Sado gosho," *Teihon* no. 100, 1:614; trans. Burton Watson and others, *Letters of Nichiren*, ed. Philip B. Yampolsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 57, slightly modified.
- (14) *Kaimoku shō*, *Teihon* no. 98, 1:559; trans. Burton Watson and others, *Selected Writings of Nichiren*, ed. Philip B. Yampolsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 83, slightly modified. The sūtra quote is at *Miaofa lianhua jing* 4, T 9:36b. "Tiles

and rocks" is an interpolation taken from 50c in the "Bodhisattva Never Despising" chapter.

- (15) On *shikidoku*, see Ruben L.F. Habito, "Bodily Reading of the *Lotus Sūtra*: Understanding Nichiren's Buddhism," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 26, nos. 3-4 (1999) : 281-306.
- (16) *Shuju onfurumai goshō*, *Teihon* 2:961-62.
- (17) On the bodhisattva's gift as both sacrifice and exchange, see Reiko Ohnuma, "Gift," in *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 103-123.
- (18) For a recent study of these figures, see Terao Eichi and Kitamura Gyōon, *Hankotsu no dōshi: Nisshin, Nichiō* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2004).
- (19) See for example Inoue Ekō, *Nichiren monka no junkyōshi* (Tokyo: Dairinkaku, 1931), and Miyazaki Eishū, *Hokke no junkyōshatachi* (Kyoto: Heirakuji Shoten, 1966).
- (20) "Shion shō," *Teihon* no. 28, 1:239-40; trans. Watson, *Letters of Nichiren*, 111-12, modified. Sessen Dōji appears in *Da banniepan jing* (*Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*) 14, *T* no. 374, 12:449b-451b; Jōtai, in *Da bore poluomi jing* 398, *T* no. 220, 6:1059a-1063c, and *Dazhi du lun* 96, *T* no. 1509, 25:732a-b; and Fumyō, in the *Xianyu jing* 11, *T* no. 202, 4:425a-427a, *Renwang jing* 2, *T* no. 245, 8:830a-b, and *Dazhi du lun* 4, *T* 25:88c-89b.
- (21) "Kingo-dono gohenji," *Teihon*, no. 73, 1:458-59. Sen'yo and Possessing Virtue appear in *Da banniepan jing* 12 and 3, respectively (*T* 12:434c, 383c-384a).
- (22) The youth of the Snow Mountains huris himself toward the mouth of the demon who has demanded his flesh in exchange for a verse of Dharma, but the sacrifice is ultimately not carried through; the demon proves to be the god Śakra, who has disguised himself in order to test the ascetic's resolve. However, Nichiren tends to conflate "gift of the body" stories in which a bodhisattva's resolve is merely tested with those in which he literally sacrifices his life. The resolve must clearly be the same in either case, and the distinction can be made only in retrospect.
- (23) "Sado gokanki shō," *Teihon* no. 91, 1:511.
- (24) *Teihon* no. 98, 1:608-609; trans. Watson, *Selected Writings of Nichiren*, 147, modified. Gyōbō Bonji appears in *Dazhi du lun* 49, *T* 25:412a. The quotation from Tiantai Zhiyi occurs at *Fahua wenju* 8b, *T* no. 1718, 34:118c.
- (25) *Kaimoku shō*, 1:608; trans. Watson, *Selected Writings of Nichiren*, 146, modified. The quotation from Zhanran is at *Da banniepan jing shu* 7, *T* no. 1767, 38:80b.

- (26) See for example *Kaimoku shō*, *Teihon* 1:605-607, and *Nyosetsu shugyō*, no. 124, 1:735-36.
- (27) "Sado gosho," *Teihon* no. 100, 1:611-12. Prince Sattva or Mahāsattva appears in *Jinguanming jing* 4, *T* no. 663, 16:354a-b, and *Jinguanming zuishengwang jing* 10, *T* no. 665, 16:451b-454b.
- (28) "Nichimyō Shōnin gosho," *Teihon* no. 107, 1:645-46.
- (29) *Senji shō*, *Teihon* no. 181, 2:1059-60.
- (30) *Teihon* no. 180, 2:1001.
- (31) *Teihon* 1:644. King Śibi appears in *Pusa benshengman lun* 1, *T* no. 160, 3:333b-334a, and *Dazhi du lun* 4 and 34, *T* 25: 87c-88c and 314c, and the ascetic Forbearance, in *Xianyu jing* 2, *T* 4:359c-360a, *Dazhi du lun* 14, *T* 25:166c, and *Fayuan zhulin* 82, *T* no. 2122, 53:896a.
- (32) *Teihon* no. 118, 1:711. The sūtra quote is at *Wuliangyi jing*, *T* no. 276, 9:388b.
- (33) *Head, Eyes, Flesh, and Blood*, 71; see also 59 n. 45.
- (34) *Teihon* no. 230, 2:1262-63. The word *kokorozashi*, with its layered meanings of "sincerity," "resolve," and "gift," is particularly apt here.
- (35) *T* no. 1911, 46:95c.
- (36) *Teihon* 2:1263.