

Buddhist Scriptures

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11, Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, Cnr Rosedale and Airborne Roads, Albany, Auckland, New Zealand

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

This collection first published 2004

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Set in 10.25/12.25 pt PostScript Adobe Sabon

Typeset by Rowland Phototypesetting Ltd, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk

Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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FINDING ENLIGHTENMENT IN THE FINAL AGE

As noted in Chapter 42, many monks in East Asia came to believe that they were living in a degenerate age, the final age of the dharma, a time so far removed from the time of the Buddha that the traditional path was no longer possible. Special modes of salvation were necessary. The Japanese monk Nichiren (1222–1282) emerged from the influential Tendai (Chinese: Tiantai) school and shared its reverence for the Lotus Sūtra as Śākyamuni Buddha's final and supreme teaching. Nichiren is known for his message of exclusive devotion to the sūtra as the only vehicle of salvation in the age of the final dharma and for his conviction that faith in the Lotus Sūtra can transform this world into the Buddha's pure land. Nichiren defied both religious and government authority and exhibited great fortitude in the face of the persecutions resulting from his exclusivist truth claim and his harsh criticisms of other forms of Buddhism. The Kanjin honzon shō, excerpts from which are translated here, was written in 1273 amid the privations of his exile to Sado Island. It is often considered his most important work, and about eighty commentaries have been written on it.

Its full title is Nyorai metsugo go gohyakusai shi kanjin honzon shō (The contemplation of the mind and the object of worship first revealed in the fifth of the five 500-year periods following the nirvāṇa of the Tathāgata). As its title suggests, it deals with the mode of contemplative practice and the object of worship intended for the final dharma age, said to begin two thousand years after Śākyamuni's passing, in which Nichiren and his contemporaries believed themselves to be living. It opens

with a quotation concerning the 'three thousand realms in one thought-moment' (ichinen sanzen) set forth by the Tiantai master Zhiyi (538–597). This complex concept holds that one's ordinary mind (single thought-moment) and all phenomena (three thousand realms) exist at each moment in a mutually inclusive relationship. As the text indicates, the figure 'three thousand' is the product of multiplying specific numerical dharma categories: the ten realms of sentient beings, their mutual inclusion, the ten suchnesses and the three realms. More importantly, however, ichinen sanzen represents a totalistic view of interdependent reality: the Buddha and ordinary worldlings, body and mind, cause and effect, subject and object, sentient and non-sentient are mutually encompassed in every moment of thought. The ichinen sanzen principle was important to Nichiren in that it established a theoretical basis for the achievement of buddhahood by ordinary worldlings and the realization of the buddha-land in this world, and also legitimized the use of a physical object of worship.

However, both the mode and object of contemplation set forth in the Kanjin honzon shō differ substantially from those put forth by Zhiyi and the subsequent Tiantai/Tendai traditions of China and Japan, which Nichiren saw as unsuited to ordinary worldlings of the last age. The first two sections of the Kanjin honzon shō deal, respectively, with contemplation and its object for the last age. As the text unfolds in question-and-answer form, a hypothetical interlocutor finds it 'hard to believe that our inferior minds are endowed with the Buddha dharma-realm'. This questioner may be thought to represent people of the final dharma age, who are not capable of practising introspection and discerning the identity of the mind with true reality. In this age, Nichiren says, 'contemplating the mind' is not a matter of mind discernment through introspection, but of embracing faith in the Lotus Sūtra and chanting its daimoku or title in the formula namu-myōhō-rence-kyō, 'Homage to the Lotus Sūtra'. He asserts that this title, the heart of the Lotus Sūtra and the seed of buddhahood, contains all the practices Śākyamuni undertook in the stages of cultivation and the merits he achieved in consequence: one who embraces the daimoku of

the Lotus Sūtra thereby naturally receives the merits of the Buddha and is able to realize buddhahood.

Similarly, as the text goes on to clarify, 'mind contemplation' – faith and chanting of the daimoku – in the last age takes as its object not the practitioner's own mind, as in traditional meditation, but the heart of the Lotus Sūtra, or the original buddha, the eternal Śākyamuni revealed in the origin teaching (honmon) or last fourteen chapters of the sūtra. These two, dharma and buddha, may be understood as two aspects of the same truth. The concrete form of this object of worship, in Nichiren's understanding, was indicated by the sūtra's description of the assembly in open space above the sacred Vulture Peak, where the core chapters of the origin teaching were preached. In the Nichiren Buddhist tradition, this object of worship is embodied as a calligraphic maṇḍala devised by Nichiren, in which the central inscription namu-myōhō-rence-kyō is flanked by the characters for the buddhas Śākyamuni and Many Jewels (Prabhūtaratna, see Chapter 7), as well as other figures representing beings of all ten dharma-realms present in the Lotus Sūtra's assembly. Alternatively, an image of Śākyamuni is used, flanked by images of the four leaders of the bodhisattvas from beneath the earth, who are his original disciples and whose presence shows him to be the eternal buddha. For Nichiren, the daimoku and the object of worship together comprise 'ichinen sanzen in actuality', as opposed to the abstract 'ichinen sanzen in principle' taught by Zhiyi.

The third section of the text deals with the transmission of the daimoku and the object of worship in the last age. It says that the Buddha transmitted them only to his original disciples, the bodhisattvas 'dwelling beneath the earth', whom he summons in the latter part of the Lotus Sūtra and entrusts with its propagation after his nirvāṇa. Nichiren identified his own proselytizing efforts with the mission of these bodhisattvas.

Volume five of the *Great Calming and Contemplation* [Mohe zhiguan, of Zhiyi] states: 'Now the mind at each moment comprises ten dharma-realms [from hell to the buddha-realm]. Each dharma-realm also comprises ten dharma-realms, giving a hun-

dred dharma-realms. One realm comprises thirty kinds of realms, so a hundred *dharma*-realms comprise three thousand kinds of realms. These three thousand realms reside within the mind in a single thought-moment. Where there is no mind, that is the end of the matter, but if there is even the slightest bit of mind, it immediately contains the three thousand realms. . . . This is what is meant by the term "inconceivable object" [of contemplation]. . . .

Question: What is the distinction between the hundred realms and thousand suchnesses, and the three thousand realms in one thought-moment?

Answer: The hundred realms and thousand suchnesses pertain only to the realm of sentient beings. The three thousand realms in one thought-moment include both sentient and non-sentient.

Question: But if non-sentient beings also have the ten suchnesses, then do grasses and trees have minds, and can they realize buddhahood like sentient beings?

Answer: This is something 'hard to believe and hard to understand'. Tiantai [Zhiyi] identifies two aspects of [the *Lotus Sūtra*'s claim that it is] 'hard to believe and hard to understand', one pertaining to doctrinal understanding and the other to contemplative practice. As for the first, within the teachings of the same buddha, those *sūtras* preached before the *Lotus* say that persons of the two vehicles and *icchantika* will never achieve buddhahood and that the Lord Śākyamuni first realized awakening in this lifetime, but when it comes to the *Lotus Sūtra*, these two statements are repudiated in [its two exegetical divisions,] the trace and origin teachings [respectively]. Who could believe a buddha who says two things as different as water and fire? This is the matter 'hard to believe and hard to understand' with respect to the doctrinal teachings. That pertaining to contemplative practice concerns the hundred realms and thousand suchnesses and [especially] the three thousand realms in one thought-moment, which clarifies that even non-sentient beings have the ten suchnesses and, thus, both physical and mental aspects. Both inner and outer writings permit the use of wooden and painted images as objects of worship, but the reason for

this has emerged solely from the Tiantai school. If plants and trees did not possess both physical and mental aspects as well as cause and effect, it would be useless to rely on wooden and painted images as objects of worship. . . .

Question: Now that I have learned the source of this doctrine [of three thousand realms in one thought-moment], what is meant by 'contemplating the mind' (*kanjin*)?

Answer: 'Contemplating the mind' means to observe our mind and see the ten *dharma*-realms within it. To illustrate, though we can see the six sense organs in other people, we cannot see them in our own face and do not know that we possess them. Only when we look into a bright mirror do we see that we ourselves have the six sense organs. Similarly, the various *sūtras* may refer here and there to the six paths and four noble realms, but until we look into the bright mirror of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the great teacher Tiantai's *Great Calming and Contemplation*, we do not know that we ourselves possess the ten realms, hundred realms, thousand suchnesses and three thousand realms in one thought-moment. . . .

Question: . . . Even if this is what the Buddha preached, I find it hard to believe. Now when I look repeatedly at others' faces, I see only the human realm. I do not see the other realms. And the same is true of my own face, too. How am I to believe?

Answer: When you look repeatedly at another's face, you will at times see joy, at other times rage, and at other times calm. At times greed will appear, at times foolishness, and at times deviousness. Rage is the hell [realm]; greed is that of hungry ghosts; foolishness is that of beasts; deviousness, that of *asuras*; joy, that of *devas*; and calm, the human [realm]. The six paths are all present in the physical aspect of another's face. The four noble realms are hidden and do not appear, but if you investigate carefully, you will find that they are there.

Question: Although I am not entirely clear about the six paths, from listening to you, it would seem that we possess them. But the four noble realms cannot be seen at all. How do you account for them?

Answer: Just now you doubted that the six paths exist within the human realm, but when I did my best to explain, you agreed that such seems to be the case. Perhaps it will be the same with the four noble realms. Let me apply reason and thus try to explain a small portion of the matter. The impermanence of worldly phenomena is clear before our eyes, so how could the human realm not include the two vehicles [the *śrāvaka* vehicle and the *pratyekabuddha* vehicle]? Even an evil man lacking in reflection still cherishes his wife and children; [his affection] is part of the *bodhisattva*-realm. The buddha-realm alone does not readily appear. But because you have the nine realms, you should be able to believe you have the buddha-realm as well. Do not give rise to doubts. . . . That ordinary worldlings born in the latter age can arouse faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* is because the buddha-realm is present in the human-realm. . . .

Question: You still have not fully answered my question [about how the Buddha can exist in the mind of us ordinary worldlings].

Answer: The *Sūtra of Unfathomable Meanings* (*Wuliang yijing*) states, 'Even if they have not yet cultivated the six *pāramitās* [*bodhisattva* perfections], the six *pāramitās* will naturally abide in them.' The *Lotus Sūtra* states, 'They wish to hear the perfectly encompassing way.' The *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* states, 'Sad [of the *Lotus*'s title, *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*] means perfectly encompassing.' . . . The Great Teacher Tiantai says, 'Sad is Sanskrit. Here [in China] we translate it as *miao* or "perfect" [Japanese: *myō*, also "subtle" or "wonderful"].' To impose my own interpretation may slight the original texts, but the heart of these passages is that Śākyamuni's causal practices and their resulting virtues are perfectly encompassed 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.

The four great *śrāvaka* disciples, having understood [the one-vehicle teaching], said, 'An unsurpassed precious jewel has come to us of itself, without our seeking.' They represent the *śrāvaka*-realm within our mind. [The Buddha stated], 'My vow of the past – to make all beings equally like myself, without difference – has now already been fulfilled. I have converted all beings and

caused them to enter the buddha way.' Śākyamuni of perfect awakening is our blood and flesh. Are not the merits of his causes and effects our bones and marrow? . . . The Fathoming the Lifespan chapter states, 'Since I in fact achieved buddhahood, it has been immeasurable and boundless hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions of *ṇayutas* of *kalpas* [billions of aeons].' Śākyamuni within our own mind has manifested the three [*tathāgata*] bodies since countless dust-particle *kalpas* ago; he is the ancient buddha without beginning. The *sūtra* states, 'The lifespan that I [Śākyamuni] acquired in my former practice of the *bodhisattva* path is still not exhausted. Indeed, it will last twice the above number [of *kalpas*].' This refers to the *bodhisattva*-realm within us. The countless *bodhisattvas* who emerged from beneath the earth [in the *Lotus Sūtra*] are the retainers of Lord Śākyamuni within our mind. They are like Taigong and Dan, the Duke of Zhou, ministers to King Wu of the Zhou, who served [his heir, the] infant king Cheng, or the minister Takeshiuchi, the support of Empress Jingū, who also served [her grandson], crown prince Nintoku. [The four leaders of these *bodhisattvas*] – Superior Conduct, Boundless Conduct, Pure Conduct and Firm Conduct – are the *bodhisattvas* within our mind. The Great Teacher Miaoluo [Zhanran, 711–782] says, 'You should realize that one's person and land are the three thousand realms in one thought-moment. When we attain buddhahood, in accordance with this principle, our body and mind in that moment pervade the *dharma*-realm.' . . .

Now the Sahā world of the original time [of the Buddha's enlightenment] is the constantly abiding pure land, freed from the three disasters and transcending [the cycle of] the four *kalpas* [formation, stability, decline and extinction]. Its buddha has not already entered *nirvāṇa* in the past, nor is he to be born in the future. And his disciples are the same. This [reality] is precisely the three realms [the five aggregates, living beings and the land] included in the three thousand realms of one's mind. [The Buddha] did not expound this in the fourteen chapters of the trace teaching, perhaps because – even though the trace teaching is part of the *Lotus Sūtra* – the time and his hearers'

understanding had not yet matured. And with respect to the five characters *namu-myōhō-renge-kyō*, the heart of the origin teaching, the Buddha did not transmit this even to Mañjuśrī or Medicine King, let alone to any *bodhisattvas* of lesser stature. Instead he summoned countless *bodhisattvas* from beneath the earth and preached the eight core chapters [fifteen to twenty-two], entrusting it to them. As for the form of the corresponding object of worship [indicated in this transmission]: Above the *sahā* world of the original teacher [Śākyamuni], the jewelled *stūpa* resides in empty space, and within the *stūpa*, Śākyamuni Buddha and the buddha Many Jewels appear to the left and right of *myōhō-renge-kyō*. Śākyamuni is attended by Superior Conduct and the others of the four *bodhisattvas* [leading those who emerged from beneath the earth], while four *bodhisattvas* [of the provisional teachings] including Mañjuśrī and Maitreya take lower seats as retainers. All the *bodhisattvas* of the great and lesser vehicles, whether they are disciples of the Buddha in his provisional forms or have come from other worlds, are like commoners on the ground gazing up at lofty nobles. The various buddhas of the ten directions likewise remain on the ground, showing that they and their lands are provisional traces [of the original buddha and his land]. . . .

[This object of worship was not previously revealed], because it was entrusted to the countless *bodhisattvas* from the earth. Having received the Buddha's command, they have been waiting near at hand beneath the great earth. They did not appear in the True or Semblance [*dharma*-ages], but if they failed to appear now, in the Final *Dharma*-age, they would be great liars, and the prophecies of the three buddhas [Śākyamuni, Many Jewels and the emanation buddhas], mere empty froth.

In this light, we should consider the great earthquake, comet and other recent disasters, such as never occurred in the True and Semblance [*dharma*-ages]. These are not the activities of *garuḍas*, *asuras*, or dragon deities; they can only be signs heralding the advent of the four great *bodhisattvas*. Tiantai says, 'By observing the force of the rainfall, one can know the size of the dragon, and by observing the flourishing of the [lotus]

blossoms, one can know the depths of the pond.' Miaoluo comments, 'A wise man knows why things happen, as a snake naturally knows the way of snakes.' When the heavens are clear, the ground is illuminated. One who knows the *Lotus* will also understand occurrences in the world.

For those unable to discern the three thousand realms in one thought-moment, the Buddha, arousing great compassion, wrapped up this jewel within the five characters and hung it from the necks of the immature beings of the last age. The four great *bodhisattvas* will protect these people just as Taigong and the Duke of Zhou aided King Cheng or as the four white-haired elders served Emperor Hui.

Translated by Jacqueline Stone, based on the critical edition of Nichiren's writings, *Shōwa teihon Nichiren Shōnin ibun*, ed. Risshō Daigaku Nichiren Kyōgaku Kenkyōjo (Minobu-chō, Yamanashi Prefecture: Minobusan Kuonji, 1952-59; revised 1988), vol. 1, pp. 702-21. Commentaries consulted include Asai Endō, *Kanjin honzon shō*, *Butten kōza* 38 (Tokyo: Daizō Shuppan, 1981), and Komatsu Kuniaki, *Kanjin honzon shō yakuchū* (Tokyo: Sankibō Busshorin, 1995).