

A Votary of the Lotus Sutra Will Meet Ordeals: The Role of Suffering in Nichiren's Thought (1)

by Jacqueline I. Stone

Because Nichiren's sufferings bore out the predictions of the Lotus Sutra, they legitimated his course of action; identified him as a person whose advent was foretold by the Buddha, endowed with a unique destiny to spread the Lotus Sutra in the evil latter age; and even served to establish the truth of the Lotus Sutra itself.

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In Japan, no name is more closely associated with the Lotus Sutra than that of Nichiren (1222–82). Known today as the founder of the sect that bears his name, Nichiren taught a doctrine of exclusive devotion to the Lotus Sutra, expressed in the chanting of its *daimoku*, or its Japanese title: *Namu Myōhō Rengekyō*. Nichiren had trained in the Tendai Buddhist tradition, which takes the Lotus Sutra as fundamental. He himself maintained that the Buddha had intended the teachings in this one scripture specifically for the present evil era. Other teachings, he said, were no longer efficacious. Over the course of his preaching career, Nichiren's "Lotus only" stance and his criticisms of other Buddhist forms invited the anger of leading prelates and government officials. Attempts were made on his life. He was exiled twice and experienced periods of great danger and physical privation. What did this Buddhist teacher, who endured so many trials for his convictions, have to say about the nature of suffering?

Some of the most moving passages in Nichiren's extant writings are letters of condolence to his lay supporters, in which—before offering any sort of encouragement in faith—he

acknowledges the protracted, dislocating grief that follows the loss of loved ones. To a woman whose husband had died more than a year before, he wrote:

A house without a man is like a person without a soul (*tamashii*). Whom can you consult about affairs? And to whom can you feed good things? Even a day or two's separation would make you feel anxious, but he departed on the twenty-first day of the third month of last year, and though you waited out the year in anticipation of his return, he did not come back. Now already it is the seventh month of this year. Though he himself does not come, why does he not at least send word? The blossoms that once scattered now bloom again, the fallen fruit forms again on the trees; the spring breezes are unchanged, the autumn scenery is the same as it was last year. Why has this one matter alone altered, never to be the same again? . . . Heaven itself should resent and the earth grieve that this man has gone and does not return! ("Sennichi-ama gohenji," *Shōwa teihon Nichiren Shōnin ibun* [hereafter *Teihon*], ed.

Risshō Daigaku Nichiren Kyōgaku Kenkyūjo, 4 vols. [Minobusan Kuonji, 1952–59; rev. ed. 1988], 2:1762)

And, to a woman who had lost her sixteen-year-old son:

The wealth in your coffers and [the service of] your family retainers were all for this child's sake. You must have believed that, when you died, you would be carried to the fields [for burial] and have no further concerns [having left everything in his hands]. But contrary to the proper order, he died before you. "How could this happen? Surely this is a dream, an illusion! I will wake up, I will wake up!" you must have thought. But you do not wake, and already another year has passed. . . . If told there was a place where you could meet him, then surely without wings, you would soar to the heavens, and without a boat, you would cross to China. ("Ueno-ama gozen gohenji," *Teihon* 2:1859)

Such passages suggest that Nichiren was keenly aware of the sufferings of impermanence inherent in the human



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Photo: Courtesy of Mirobusan Kuonji

Portrait of Nichiren painted by Fujiwara Chikayasu in 1282, owned by Kuonji, the head temple of the Nichiren sect of Japanese Buddhism, in Yamanashi Prefecture.

condition. To his followers he stressed that by chanting the *daimoku* of the Lotus Sutra one could “cross the sea of suffering” (“Shiiji Shirō-dono gosho,” *Teihon* 1:227–28), establishing an inner freedom and security of mind that is independent of whether one’s circumstances are favorable or adverse. “Recognize suffering as suffering, enjoy pleasures for what they are, and whether in suffering or joy, keep chanting Namu-Myōhō-Renge-kyō,” he encouraged one follower. “Then you will know the happiness of the Dharma for yourself” (“Shijō Kingo-dono gohenji,” *Teihon* 2:1181).

Yet Nichiren did not elaborate theoretically on samsaric suffering (samsara being the cycle of death and rebirth before attainment of nirvana) in a general

upholding it—the latter being a category of suffering that, without losing its quality as suffering, is also happiness.

The Most Terrible of Sins

Nichiren took as given the law of karmic causality, according to which suffering is the consequence of one’s prior misdeeds. However, his writings show little concern with the karmic consequences of such ordinary evils as killing, theft, deceit, or sexual misconduct. Rather, they focus on what Nichiren understood as an evil of an altogether different magnitude: maligning or slandering the true Dharma (*hihō shōbō*, or simply *hōbō*). The term “slander of the

true Dharma” occurs in a number of Mahayana sutras, where it often means to speak ill of Great Vehicle scriptures and was evidently intended to deflect criticism from the Buddhist mainstream that the Mahayana was not the Buddha’s teaching (*Mochizuki bukkyō daijiten* 5:4327c–28d). The Lotus Sutra itself warns of the horrific karmic retribution awaiting those guilty of this offense, most famously in the verse section of the “Parable” chapter, which represents the Buddha as saying: “One who, not believing, / maligns this scripture, / thereby cuts off the seeds of Buddhahood in all the worlds. . . / Such persons, at life’s end, / shall enter the Avīci Hell, / where they shall fulfill one kalpa. / When the kalpa is ended, they shall be reborn there, / in this way, spinning around, / for kalpas without number” (*Miaofa lianhua jing*, *Taishō Tripitaka* [hereafter *T*] no. 262, 9:15b22–c1; Leon Hurvitz, trans., *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*, rev. ed. (Columbia University Press, 2009), 71–72 (the quoted text is slightly modified)). The passage continues for numerous verses, detailing how such wretched offenders, at last emerging from the Avīci Hell, will be born as wild dogs, scabrous and emaciated, or as monstrous snakes, “deaf, stupid, and legless.” At last ascending to the human realm, they will repeatedly be born poor, deformed, and afflicted with disease, never to hear the Dharma for *kalpas* (aeons) numberless as the sands of the Ganges River. Even this, the Buddha declares, is a mere summary, for the evil recompense incurred

by those who malign the Lotus could never be explained in full, not even over the course of a *kalpa* (*Miaofa lianhua jing*, T 9:15c1–16a9; Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus*, 72–75). Nichiren, however, did not use the term *Dharma slander* simply to mean criticizing or maligning the Lotus Sutra but expanded the definition of this offense to include setting aside the Lotus, for whatever reason or motive, to embrace some lesser, provisional teaching. “To be born in a country where the Lotus Sutra has spread and neither to have faith in it nor practice it, is Dharma slander,” he wrote (*Kaitai sokushin jōbutsu gi*, *Teihon* 1:12).

Nichiren redefined Dharma slander in this way very early in his career, in debate with followers of the “exclusive *nenbutsu*” (*senju nenbutsu*) movement initiated by Hōnen (1133–1212), founder of Japan’s independent Pure Land school. Hōnen and his disciples, like other people at the time, believed themselves to be living in the Final Dharma age (*mappō*), a degenerate era following the passing of Śākyamuni Buddha, when his teachings are filtered through an ever-more flawed understanding, and liberation becomes increasingly difficult to achieve. Hōnen had taught that now in the Final Dharma age, human religious capacity had declined to a point where most people were no longer capable of achieving liberation through the traditional disciplines of precept observance, meditation, and doctrinal study. Only by chanting the *nenbutsu*, the name of Amida Buddha, and relying upon that Buddha’s aid could people in this evil age escape the miserable round of deluded rebirth and be born in Amida’s Pure Land, where their enlightenment would then be assured. In promulgating Hōnen’s “*nenbutsu* only” teaching, his followers were especially critical of Lotus Sutra devotion—probably because the Lotus was commonly read, recited, and copied with the aim of birth in Amida’s Pure Land and was widely revered as the Buddha’s highest teaching. By Nichiren’s account, Hōnen’s

disciples argued that the Lotus Sutra was too profound for people of this deluded age. Attempting to practice it was like a small boy trying to wear his grandfather’s shoes or a physically weak person trying to use a stout bow and heavy armor. They further insisted that such statements did not amount to maligning the Lotus Sutra but simply reflected a realistic assessment of human shortcomings: Those who attempted to practice the Lotus were bound to fail in their efforts and fall after death into the evil realms of rebirth. One would do better to set aside the Lotus in this lifetime, chant the *nenbutsu* instead, and achieve birth in Amida’s Pure Land. Then one could attain the awakening of the Lotus Sutra there. It was in opposition to such arguments that Nichiren redefined “slander of the true Dharma” to mean, not merely speaking ill of the Lotus Sutra, but setting it aside in favor of lesser teachings (for a more detailed treatment, see Jacqueline I. Stone, “The Sin of Slandering the True Dharma in Nichiren’s Thought,” in *Sins and Sinners: Perspectives from Asian Religions*, ed. Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara [Brill, 2012], 113–52).

For Nichiren, Hōnen’s focus on human limitations ignored what Nichiren understood to be the Buddha’s own distinction between true and provisional teachings. The Lotus was the sutra of which Śākyamuni himself had said, “In these forty years and more [before preaching this sutra], I have not yet revealed the truth” and “Frankly discarding expedient means, I will preach only the unsurpassed way” (*Miaofa lianhua jing*, T 9:386b1–2; *Wuliangyi jing*, T no. 276, 9:10a19). These passages formed the basis of the traditional Tendai *kyōhan*, or comparative classification of the Buddhist teachings, according to which the Buddha had first expounded a range of preparatory, incomplete teachings, accommodated to his hearers’ capacity, and only then revealed the full truth in the

Lotus Sutra. The *nenbutsu*, Nichiren argued, belonged to a lesser category of provisional Mahayana and did not represent the Buddha’s final intent. He likened it to the scaffolding erected in building a large stupa: once the stupa (the Lotus Sutra) has been completed, the scaffolding (the *nenbutsu*) should be dismantled (“*Nenbutsu mugen jigoku shō*,” *Teihon* 1:35). Precisely because the Lotus Sutra is profound, he said, it could save even the ignorant and evil persons of the last age. This same argument underlies Nichiren’s later criticisms, not only of the exclusive *nenbutsu*, but also of Zen, Ritsu, and the esoteric teachings (*shingon*).

We can identify at least three reasons why Nichiren held the Lotus Sutra to be superior to all others. First, only the Lotus Sutra, in his reading, enables all people to become buddhas. Other Mahayana sutras teach the emptiness and interpenetration of the dharmas, the ontological basis upon which all can in principle realize buddhahood. But according to the Tendai classification schema, this basis remains theoretical or incomplete in the provisional Mahayana, which denies the possibility of buddhahood to followers of the so-called Hinayana vehicles—*śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*, who seek to escape the wheel of samsaric suffering in personal nirvana—as well as to women and evil men. Only the Lotus Sutra fully sets forth the nondual ground upon which the realization of buddhahood takes place and extends this possibility to all. Nichiren developed this claim using the Tendai concepts of the mutual possession of the ten realms (*jikkai gogu*) and the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment (*ichinen sanzen*). The perfect interfusion and mutual encompassing of the Buddha and ordinary beings that these doctrines elucidate was for him what made the Lotus Sutra “true” and qualified it as the “wonderful Dharma” (*myōhō*) (*Kaitai sokushin jōbutsu gi*, *Teihon* 1:10).

Second, for Nichiren, the Lotus Sutra—specifically its “origin teaching” (*honmon*), the latter fourteen chapters—opened a perspective from which buddhahood is not something to be achieved as a distant goal exterior to oneself but is accessed in the very act of practice:

The merit of all other sūtras is uncertain, because they teach that one must first plant good roots and only afterward become a buddha. But in the case of the Lotus Sutra, when one takes it in one’s hand, that hand at once becomes Buddha, and when one chants it with one’s mouth, that mouth is precisely Buddha. It is like the moon being reflected in the water the moment it appears above the eastern mountains, or like a sound and its echo occurring simultaneously. (“Ueno-ama gozen gohenji,” *Teihon* 2:1890)

And third, the Lotus Sutra functions as the “seed” or source of buddhahood. Here Nichiren drew on the Tiantai patriarch Zhiyi’s (538–97) description of the process by which the Buddha instructed his disciples by first sowing the seed of buddhahood through an initial teaching, nurturing its growth through subsequent teachings, and finally enabling them to reap the harvest of enlightenment. Nichiren maintained that only the Lotus Sutra plants the seed of buddhahood. People in prior ages might have achieved liberation through provisional teachings such as the *nenbutsu* or Zen because they had already received the seed of buddhahood by forming a connection to the Lotus Sutra in previous lifetimes (*hon’i uzen*). But people born in the Final Dharma age have not yet formed such a connection (*honmi uzen*) and thus cannot benefit from the *nenbutsu* or other provisional teachings, no matter how earnestly they might practice them. In the Final Dharma age, Nichiren taught, it is specifically

the *daimoku*, the essence of the Lotus Sutra, that acts as the seed of buddhahood. “At this time,” he wrote, “Namu Myōhō Renge-kyō of the ‘Fathoming the Lifespan’ chapter, the heart of the origin teaching, should be planted for the first time as the seed of buddhahood” in the hearts of the benighted persons of the *mappō* era (*Kyōgoshō goshō*, *Teihon* 2:1480). This conviction informed the assertive proselytizing for which Nichiren is so well known. By declaring to others the unique truth of the Lotus, he believed, even if they should malign or reject it, one enabled them to form a relationship to the true Dharma that would eventually allow them to realize buddhahood, whether in this life or a future one.

For Nichiren, identifying the Lotus as “superior” or “true” and all other teachings as “inferior” or “provisional” did not represent a historically contingent human evaluation but was grounded in a metaphysical principle that informed the sequence of the Buddha’s preaching as set forth in the traditional Tendai *kyōhan*. Because the Lotus is the true and perfect teaching, encompassing all the Buddha’s virtues within itself, the merit of embracing it overrides all lesser, worldly offenses and blocks the path to rebirth in the lower realms. “Whether or not evil persons of the last age can attain buddhahood does not depend upon whether their sins are light or heavy but rests solely upon whether or not they have faith in this sūtra,” he said (“Hakii Saburō-dono gohenji,” *Teihon* 1:749). But for that very same reason, Nichiren asserted, to set aside the Lotus in favor of some lesser teaching amounts to “slander of the Dharma.” For him this was no ordinary sin such as taking another’s life or property, whose retribution might cause one to suffer for only one or a few lifetimes, but an infinitely more terrible act that cut off the possibility of buddhahood both for oneself and for others and led to countless rebirths in the Avīci Hell. It was worse,

even, than the five heinous offenses, an act so appalling that he could convey its magnitude only by analogy to exaggerations of the most reprehensible worldly crimes: slandering the Lotus Sutra was worse than killing everyone in all the provinces of China and Japan or murdering one’s parents a hundred million times (*Kaimoku shō*, *Teihon* 1:604; “Kyōdai shō,” *Teihon* 1:920).

Rebuking Dharma Slander

Such arguments were no mere scholastic exercise on Nichiren’s part but stemmed from his understanding of the collective suffering he saw around him. Nichiren first began to connect the problem of Dharma slander to actual human misery in the wake of the massive Shōka-era earthquake of 1257, which devastated much of Kamakura, where he was living. The earthquake was the latest in a series of recent calamities, including drought, famine, and epidemics. “Oxen and horses lie dead in the streets,” he wrote, “and the bones of the stricken crowd the highways . . . ; beggars are everywhere in sight, and scenes of death fill our eyes” (*Risshō ankoku ron*, *Teihon* 1:209; *Selected Writings of Nichiren*, ed. Philip B. Yampolsky, trans. Burton Watson and others [Columbia University Press, 1990], 13–14). Observing that prayer rites and government relief measures had proved equally ineffectual, Nichiren argued that the country’s suffering stemmed from rejection of the Lotus Sutra in favor of inferior teachings. Combing the Buddhist canon, he found a number of sutra passages predicting various disasters that will occur in a realm whose ruler fails to protect the true Dharma and instead allows it to be maligned or neglected. These scriptural prophecies, Nichiren observed, exactly mirrored the state of Japan at present. “When prayers are offered for the peace of the realm and still the three disasters occur within the country, then one

should know that it is because an evil teaching has spread,” he wrote (*Shugo kokka ron*, *Teihon* 1:116). In a group of essays written between 1258 and 1260, Nichiren attributed these disasters and the grief they caused to the spread of Hōnen’s exclusive *nenbutsu* teaching. The most famous of these is his *Risshō ankoku ron* (On bringing peace to the land by establishing the true Dharma), submitted as a memorial to the Bakufu, or shogunate, in 1260. Here Nichiren argued that the offense of slandering the Dharma not only carries frightful consequences for the perpetrator but also has repercussions for society at large. Because the Lotus Sutra and the esoteric teachings had been set aside in favor of the *nenbutsu*, he said, the protective deities, no longer able to hear the true Dharma on which they subsisted, had abandoned the country, enabling demons to enter and wreak havoc. In effect, the spread of Hōnen’s teaching was turning all of Japan into a nation of Dharma slanderers. “With the power of faith that is in their hearts,” Nichiren asked, “why must they recklessly give credence to distorted doctrines? If they do not shake off these delusions that they cling to but continue to harbor erroneous views, then they will quickly leave this world of the living and surely fall into the Avīci Hell!” (*Risshō ankoku ron*, *Teihon* 1:225; *Selected Writings of Nichiren*, 39 [slightly modified]). Conversely, he argued that the spread of faith in the Lotus Sutra would transform this world into a Buddha land.

Nichiren pointed out that violent storms, crop failure, starvation, disease, and ominous celestial portents had already occurred, just as the sutras foretell. If the situation was not promptly rectified, then, judging by these scriptural predictions, two further disasters might be expected: “revolt within one’s own domain” and “invasion from foreign lands.” Both would surely occur, he warned, if the exclusive *nenbutsu* continued to spread unchecked. In time, a

rebellion led by the shogunal regent’s half brother in 1271 and the emergence of the Mongol threat, culminating in two invasion attempts in 1274 and 1281, gave seeming credence to his words. The *Risshō ankoku ron* directs its polemics only at Hōnen’s exclusive *nenbutsu* teaching, but Nichiren’s later works expand the same argument to include the Zen school, newly imported from China; the Risshū precept-revival movement; and the esoteric teachings.

Nichiren’s redefining of *slander of the Dharma* as meaning not necessarily verbal abuse but rejection of the Lotus Sutra in favor of some lesser teaching meant that one could commit this offense without malicious intent, indeed, even without knowledge, simply by falling under the influence of a misguided teacher. He alone, he believed, had come to see clearly how present calamities had come about because the people at large had been deceived into abandoning the Lotus Sutra for provisional teachings and were therefore destined to “fall like rain into the Avīci Hell” (“Niiama gozen gohenji,” *Teihon* 1:867). This insight, he believed, conferred upon him a moral obligation to speak out. To see slander of the Dharma being committed and fail to speak out against it was to share in the same offense and to receive the same karmic retribution. “Because I wish to avoid the offense of complicity [in slander of the Dharma], because I fear the Buddha’s rebuke, and because I understand my obligations and wish to repay the debt I owe my country, I have made all this known to the ruler and to the people,” he wrote (“Akimoto gosho,” *Teihon* 2:1735; *Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, trans. Gosho Translation Committee [Sōka Gakkai, 1999], 1:1019 [modified]). At the same time, to speak out was an act of compassion toward all those suffering in consequence of an error they did not recognize as such. To rebuke another’s slander of the Dharma was, potentially, to save that person from

rebirth in the Avīci Hell. As Nichiren phrased it: “If a bad son who is insane with drink is threatening to kill his father and mother, shouldn’t you try to stop him? . . . If your only child is gravely ill, shouldn’t you try to cure him with moxibustion treatment? To fail to do so is to act like those people who see but do not try to put a stop to the Zen and Nenbutsu followers in Japan. As [Zhiyi’s disciple] Guanding writes, ‘If one befriends another but lacks the compassion to correct him, one is in fact that person’s enemy’” (*Kaimoku shō*, *Teihon* 1:608; *Selected Writings of Nichiren*, 146 [slightly modified]).

Spreading faith in the Lotus Sutra was thus for Nichiren inseparable from denouncing slander of the Dharma. This conviction underlay his choice of *shakubuku*, a method of Dharma teaching that directly rebukes another’s attachment to provisional teachings, over the more accommodating *shōju* approach of leading others gradually without criticizing their present views. Nichiren saw himself as engaged in a great Dharma battle:

When one must face enemies, one needs a sword, a staff, or a bow and arrows. . . . When the time is right to propagate the teaching of the one vehicle, the provisional teachings become enemies. When they are a source of confusion, one must refute them from the standpoint of the true teaching. Of the two types of practice, this is *shakubuku*, the practice of the Lotus Sutra. (*Nyosetsu shugyō shō*, *Teihon* 1:735–36; *Letters of Nichiren*, ed. Philip B. Yampolsky, trans. Burton Watson and others [Columbia University Press, 1996], 68 [slightly modified])

Nichiren also represented this course as something he had chosen in full advance recognition of the consequences: “In Japan I alone have understood this [that is, how people are deceived into abandoning the Lotus Sutra for lesser

Nichiren (center) and his followers are attacked by warriors led by the land steward Tōjō Kagenobu (on horseback), a follower of the Pure Land teachings. The attack, known as the Komatsubara persecution of 1264, took place near Nichiren's home village in Awa Province. Woodcut by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798–1861), from his series *Kōso go-ichidai ryakuzu* (Concise illustrated biography of Nichiren), ca. 1835.



Photo: PPS

teachings]. But if I utter so much as a word concerning it, then parents, brothers, and teachers will surely criticize me, and the government authorities will take steps against me. On the other hand, I am fully aware that if I do not speak out, I will be lacking in compassion. . . . If I remain silent, I may escape harm in this lifetime, but in my next life I will most certainly fall into the Avīci Hell. If I speak out, I am fully aware that I will have to contend with the three obstacles and the four devils. But of these two courses, surely the latter is the one to choose” (*Kaimoku shō*, *Teihon* 1:556–57; *Selected Writings of Nichiren*, 79 [slightly modified]).

The Sufferings of the Lotus Devotee

Nichiren’s outspoken criticism of the *nenbutsu* and other Buddhist forms provoked the anger of influential clerics and their followers, who eventually prompted Bakufu officials to take action against him. He was twice arrested and exiled, first to the Izu peninsula (1261–63) and again to Sado Island (1271–74). He was physically attacked and once nearly executed, and some of his followers were imprisoned, had their

lands confiscated, or in a few cases were put to death. Most painful of all to him was that the authorities paid no heed to his message. These experiences led him to ponder a different kind of suffering: that which one encounters in upholding the Lotus Sutra and declaring its unique efficacy for the present age. In the course of his efforts, Nichiren found deep soteriological meaning in the hardships that his confrontational stance elicited. The remainder of this essay will consider his thinking in this regard (see also Jacqueline I. Stone, “Giving One’s Life for the *Lotus Sūtra* in Nichiren’s Thought,” *Hokke bunka kenkyū* 33 [2007]: 51–70).

The Lotus Sutra itself speaks of the great trials that those who uphold it must undergo in an evil age after the Buddha’s passing. The “Dharma Preacher” chapter reads: “Hatred and jealousy toward this sutra abound even during the Buddha’s lifetime. How much more so after his nirvāṇa!” (*Miaofa lianhua jing*, T 9:31b20–21). And in the “Fortitude” chapter, numbers of bodhisattvas describe the hardships they are resolved to meet in order to spread the Lotus Sutra at that future time: ignorant people will attack them with swords and staves, while eminent monks, revered

by the world at large, will revile, persecute, and oust Lotus devotees and induce the authorities to take action against them. “We will endure all these ordeals,” they vow. “We do not cherish bodily life. We value only the unsurpassed way” (*ibid.*, T 9:36c17–18). It is difficult to know whether these passages represent the actual experience of the sutra’s redactors as followers of the minority Mahayana movement in being ostracized by the Buddhist mainstream or are simply the hyperbole of a small and marginal community. Whatever the case, the sutra casts these passages in the form of predictions, and Nichiren read them as foretelling both the slander of the Lotus Sutra that had spread in Japan in his own time and the hostility that he himself encountered in rebuking it.

About a year after he had submitted the *Risshō ankoku ron*, a mob attacked Nichiren’s dwelling, and shortly thereafter, he was arrested and exiled to the Izu peninsula, where he remained for almost two years. It was around this time that he began to read the Lotus Sutra as speaking directly to his own experience. In a letter to a lay follower, he wrote, “When I think that a base and ignorant person like myself, a monk

without precepts, should be mentioned in the Lotus Sutra, taught more than two thousand years ago, and that my trials were foretold by the Buddha himself, I cannot contain my joy” (“Shion shō,” *Teihon* 1:236). The coincidence of the sutra’s prediction of grave trials and his own experience of persecution solidified for Nichiren the sense that he was karmically destined to proclaim the truth of the Lotus Sutra in this age. Another of his letters from the same period reads:

In the Final Dharma age, a votary of the Lotus Sutra will surely appear. The greater the hardships confronting him, the more he rejoices, because his faith is strong. Doesn’t a fire burn more briskly when firewood is added? All rivers flow into the ocean, but does the ocean reject the rivers? The many rivers of adversity pour into the great sea of the Lotus Sutra and dash against its votary, but he neither rejects nor finds fault with them. Without the rivers, there would be no sea, and without grave trials, there would be no votary of the Lotus Sutra. (“Shiji Shirō-dono gosho,” *Teihon* 1:227; *Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, 1:33 [modified])

This represents an early occurrence of the term *votary of the Lotus Sutra* (*Hokekyō no gyōja*), by which term Nichiren designated himself and his disciples. (*Gyōja* is translated variously as “practicer,” “practitioner,” “votary,” “devotee.” I have varied the translation in this essay.) To my knowledge, it is Nichiren’s coinage and has no precedent in the history of Lotus Sutra devotion. People in Japan’s Heian (794–1185) and Kamakura (1185–1333) periods who devoted themselves largely or exclusively to reciting the Lotus Sutra as their personal practice were known as *jikyōsha*, literally, “one who holds the sutra.” Nichiren, however, saw his experience of persecution as distinguishing him from this category of practitioner. “The *jikyōsha*

in Japan have not yet experienced these scriptural passages [foretelling great trials]. I alone have read them. This is the meaning [of the statement]: “We do not cherish bodily life. We value only the unsurpassed way” (“Nanjō Hyōe Shichirō-dono gosho,” *Teihon* 1:327).

A votary of the Lotus Sutra, then, is one who practices the Lotus not only by having faith in and reciting it but by living out its predictions. Having been exiled, as he saw it, for the sutra’s sake, Nichiren wrote that even when not engaged in actual recitation, he was in effect practicing the Lotus Sutra at every moment of the day and night, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. “For one born human, what greater happiness could there be?” (“Shion shō,” *Teihon*, 1:236). Nichiren also described practice in this sense as “bodily reading” (*shikidoku*) of the Lotus. On the eve of his second exile, while under arrest, he wrote to his disciple Nichirō, who had also been arrested and imprisoned, praising him for reading the sutra not only by verbally reciting its words or mentally grasping and internalizing their meaning but by personally undergoing this ordeal for the sutra’s sake:

Tomorrow I leave for Sado Province. In the cold tonight, it grieves me to think of your sufferings in prison and my thoughts go out to you. How admirable it is, that because you have now read the entire Lotus Sutra with both body and mind, you will be able to save your parents and relatives and all living beings! (“Tsuchirō gosho,” *Teihon* 1:509–10)

“Bodily reading,” the willingness to give one’s life if needed to propagate the sutra and to endure the hardships it predicts, defines the practice of the *Hokekyō no gyōja*. The somatic overtones of *bodily reading* also resonate with widespread use of the term *gyōja* to denote especially ascetic practitioners. In his Izu writings, Nichiren

began to refer to the hero bodhisattvas of the Buddhist scriptures, like the boy of the Snow Mountains (Sessen Dōji), Bodhisattva Medicine King (Yakuō Bosatsu), Bodhisattva Ever Weeping (Jōtai Bosatsu), and others who burned their bodies in offering, sacrificed their flesh to learn the Dharma, or tore off their skin to use as paper on which to record Buddhist teachings. On the one hand, Nichiren saw the acts of these ascetic virtuosi as beyond the reach of ordinary persons. But his willingness to meet hardship for the Lotus Sutra’s sake had catapulted him into their exalted company. “I am a foolish ordinary worldlyling with a body of flesh and blood, who has not uprooted even the slightest part of the three kinds of delusion,” he said. “But for the Lotus Sutra’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 their heads [as sacrifice]” (“Shion shō,” *Teihon* 1:239–40). Nichiren’s later followers have included some serious ascetic practitioners, notably those who train as healers and exorcists (*kitōshi*). But Nichiren devotees have rarely if ever engaged in the practices of self-mutilation or self-immolation found in the ascetic strands of other Buddhist traditions. Rather, it is those willing to give their lives for the Lotus Sutra’s sake, especially those who met persecution at the hands of worldly authorities, who have been celebrated as the Nichiren sect’s great heroes (Stone, “Giving One’s Life”).

The Work of Bodhisattva Superior Conduct

After his pardon from exile in 1264, Nichiren traveled in the Kantō provinces to preach and encourage followers. By 1268 he had returned to Kamakura. That same year messengers had arrived from

Kublai Khan demanding that Japan submit to Mongol overlordship; subsequent envoys repeated these demands in 1269. A sense of crisis mounted as the Bakufu mobilized its defenses and the major temples and shrines conducted prayer rites for the country's safety. Nichiren and his followers were emboldened by the seemingly imminent fulfillment of the prophecy of "invasion from foreign lands" made in his *Risshō ankoku ron*. Nichiren repeated his admonitions to top officials, and Zen and the Shingon-Ritsu precept-revival movement now joined the nenbutsu among his polemical targets. His specific criticisms of *shingon*—by which term he designated both Shingon and Tendai esoteric traditions—also began around this time or perhaps shortly thereafter, in connection with government sponsorship of esoteric ritual for protection from the Mongols. Again, Nichiren's attacks on other Buddhist traditions made enemies. He and his followers may also have been targeted by official measures aimed at readying the country against foreign attack by suppressing potentially disruptive elements on the domestic front (Yutaka Takagi, *Nichiren to sono montei* [Kōbundō, 1965], 189–90). In the autumn of 1271, Nichiren was arrested and again sent into exile, this time a "remote exile" to Sado Island in the North Japan Sea.

On Sado, Nichiren deepened his conviction that his sufferings incurred on the Lotus Sutra's account were a proof of his karmically destined mission. Just as his meeting with "hatred and jealousy" established him in his own eyes as the sutra's votary, his encounters with persecution in turn confirmed the truth of the Lotus, a point he now began to stress. "The sutra says, 'There will be many ignorant people who will curse and speak ill of us and 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 Sutra or who are attacked with swords and staves? Were it not for me, the prophecy made in this verse of the sutra would have been sheer falsehood!" (*Kaimoku shō*, 1:559; *Selected Writings of Nichiren*, 83). At this point, Nichiren's "bodily reading of the Lotus Sutra" became what Ruben Habito has termed a "circular hermeneutic" in which sutra and practitioner reflect, validate, and bear witness to each other. The sutra's predictions that its devotees would meet with hardships legitimated Nichiren's experience, and Nichiren's experience of persecution, in that it fulfilled these predictions, legitimated the Lotus Sutra (Ruben L. F. Habito, "Bodily Reading of the *Lotus Sūtra*," in *Readings of the Lotus Sūtra*, ed. Stephen F. Teiser and Jacqueline I. Stone [Columbia University Press, 2009], 198–99). Not only was his suffering valorized by the Lotus Sutra; that suffering was necessary for the Lotus Sutra to be true.

During his exile to Sado, Nichiren turned his attention increasingly to the "origin teaching" (*honmon*), the latter fourteen chapters of the Lotus Sutra, which reveal that Śākyamuni Buddha has been awakened since the inconceivably remote past and ever since has remained present and active in the world. Like other Tendai thinkers of his day, Nichiren associated the "origin teaching" portion of the Lotus Sutra and its revelation of the Buddha's constant presence with the view that buddhahood is not an external goal to be achieved in the distant future but can be accessed now, in the very act of faith and practice. His writings from this period assert that all the practices that the primordial Śākyamuni Buddha carried out over countless *kalpas*, and the virtues and wisdom he consequently achieved, are perfectly contained within the *daimoku*, the sutra's title, and are immediately accessible to those who chant it. In this connection, Nichiren also began to identify his heightened sense of personal mission as the votary of the

Lotus Sutra with the task of Bodhisattva Superior Conduct (Skt., *Viśiṣṭacāritra*; Jpn., *Jōgyō*), leader of a vast throng of bodhisattvas—Śākyamuni's disciples from the inconceivably distant past—who emerge from beneath the earth in chapter 15 of the Lotus. In the sutra's narrative, their appearance provides the occasion for Śākyamuni Buddha to reveal his original awakening in the far distant past, and it is to them that he entrusts the task of propagation in an evil age following his nirvana. At this point, Nichiren began to speak of the *daimoku* as the very teaching transmitted from Śākyamuni Buddha to Bodhisattva Superior Conduct at the Lotus Sutra assembly in open space above Vulture Peak, and of himself as a forerunner or an envoy of this bodhisattva ("Shōji ichidaiji," *Teihon* 1:524; "Shijō Kingodono gohenji," *Teihon* 1:637; "Shohō jissō shō," *Teihon* 1:725). Nichiren's identification with the work of Bodhisattva Superior Conduct developed in tandem with a growing conviction that he and his followers had been the Buddha's disciples since the remotest past and must have been present at the Lotus assembly. "When I think of things in this way," he wrote, "I feel boundless joy, even though I am in exile" ("Shohō jissō shō," *Teihon* 1:727).

Because Nichiren's sufferings bore out the predictions of the Lotus Sutra, they legitimated his course of action; identified him as a person whose advent was foretold by the Buddha, endowed with a unique destiny to spread the Lotus Sutra in the evil latter age; and even served to establish the truth of the Lotus Sutra itself. From this perspective, suffering became the vehicle that confirmed to Nichiren the transcendent purpose of his life and thus became precious and meaningful. At the same time, intertwined with this particular strand of interpretation in his thought was another, no less significant: that of redemptive suffering.

To be continued

A Votary of the Lotus Sutra Will Meet Ordeals: The Role of Suffering in Nichiren's Thought (2)

by Jacqueline I. Stone

In addressing the question of why he and his followers had to endure harsh trials, Nichiren did not fix on a single explanation but adopted multiple perspectives. On the one hand, his sufferings were necessary to prove the truth of the Lotus Sutra and to verify his own status as its votary. On the other hand, they were an act of expiation for past slanders of the Dharma.

This is the concluding part of an article begun in the previous issue, based on a paper presented at the International Lotus Sutra Seminar held May 27–June 1, 2013, near Tokyo by Risho Koseikai on the theme “Buddhism, the Lotus Sutra, and human suffering: classical, modern, and contemporary approaches.”

Suffering and Expiation

Nichiren's second exile, on Sado Island, proved a far worse ordeal than his earlier banishment to Izu, and initially he suffered terribly from cold, hunger, and the hostility of the locals. He also worried about his followers in Kamakura, several of whom had been arrested in his absence. Others had drifted away in the wake of his arrest and banishment. Some, not unreasonably, blamed the persecution on Nichiren's own intransigent stance. Had he been less aggressive and uncompromising, matters might not have come to this pass. Knowing the survival of his community to be at stake, Nichiren struggled to encourage his followers by letter. His writings from the Sado period also show him wrestling with his own doubts. If he was indeed a true votary of the Lotus Sutra, then why did he have to endure such hardships when the Lotus Sutra promises its devotees “security and peace in the present life” (*Miaofa lianhua jing, Taishō Tripitaka* [hereafter T] 9:19b19–20)? Why were he and his followers not protected by the Buddhist tutelary deities, who vow in the Lotus Sutra to safeguard its practitioners? And why

Photo: Courtesy of Minobusan Kuonji



Portrait of Nichiren painted by Fujiwara Chikayasu in 1282, owned by Kuonji, the head temple of the Nichiren sect of Japanese Buddhism, in Yamanashi Prefecture.

did their persecutors receive no obvious karmic retribution?

Nichiren detailed his struggles with these doubts in several writings, most notably in his famous *Kaimoku shō* (Opening of the eyes), completed during the first winter of his exile on Sado as a last testament to his followers in the event of his death. In general, he wrote, when people meet with contempt and hostility, it is because they have slighted or abused others in the past, in accordance with the ordinary law of karmic causality. However, Nichiren concluded that his own past sins must have been of

an altogether different magnitude and that he himself, in prior lifetimes, must have committed the very act of maligning the Dharma that he now so implacably opposed. “From the beginningless past I must have been born countless times as an evil ruler who deprived practitioners of the Lotus Sutra, of their clothing and food, paddies and fields, much as the people of Japan in the present day go about destroying temples dedicated to the Lotus Sutra,” he reflected. “In addition, countless times I cut off the heads of Lotus Sutra practitioners” (*Kaimoku shō, Shōwa teihon Nichiren Shōnin ibun* [hereafter *Teihon*], ed. Rishō Daigaku Nichiren Kyōgaku Kenkyūjo, 4 vols. [Minobusan Kuonji, 1952–59; rev. ed. 1988], 1:602; *Selected Writings of Nichiren*, ed. Philip B. Yampolsky, trans. Burton Watson and others [Columbia University Press, 1990], 139 [slightly modified]). Ordinarily, he said, the karmic retribution for such offenses would torment a person over the course of innumerable lifetimes. But thanks to his efforts in denouncing slander of the Dharma, that retribution was being summoned into the present so that it might be eradicated once and for all in his present life:



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“When iron is heated, if it is not strenuously forged, the impurities in it will not become apparent. Only when it is subjected to the tempering process again and again will the flaws appear. . . . It must be that my actions in defending the Dharma in this present life are calling forth retributions for the grave offenses of my past” (*Kaimoku shō*, *Teihon* 1:602–3; *Selected Writings of Nichiren*, 139 [slightly modified]). From this perspective, Nichiren’s sufferings not only validated his mission but were also offered up as an act of repentance, to expiate his own past sins of Dharma slander.

To attribute one’s present suffering to one’s own past deeds is to claim agency; one suffers, not meaninglessly or as the

victim of others, but to repay a debt incurred by one’s own prior acts. By the end of his period of exile on Sado, Nichiren began to represent himself as having deliberately courted his ordeals as an act of expiation:

Now if I, insignificant person that I am, were to go here and there throughout the country of Japan denouncing [slanders of the Dharma], . . . the ruler, allying himself with those monks who disparage the Dharma, would come to hate me and try to have me beheaded or order me into exile. And if this sort of thing were to occur again and again, then the

grave offenses that I have accumulated over countless *kalpas* could be wiped out within the space of a single lifetime. Such, then, was the great plan that I conceived; and it is now proceeding without the slightest deviation. So when I find myself thus sentenced to exile, I can only feel that my wishes are being fulfilled. (“Kashaku hōbō metsuzai shō,” *Teihon* 1:781; *Letters of Nichiren*, trans. Burton Watson and others [Columbia University Press, 1996], 285 [slightly modified])

Banished and despised, Nichiren was in this way able to conceive of and to represent himself, rather than his



Photo: Kyoto National Museum

This detail from *Nichiren shōnin chū ga san* (*An illustrated biography of Saint Nichiren*) depicts Nichiren awaiting beheading at Tatsunokuchi, near Kamakura. Painted by Kubota Muneyasu in 1536. Owned by Honkokuji, Kyoto.

tormenters, as the agent of his own tribulations. In the same vein, he expressed gratitude toward the eminent clerics and government officials who had persecuted him, calling them his “best allies” in attaining buddhahood (*Shuju onfurumai goshō*, *Teihon* 2:973).

In reading his sufferings as an expiation of his own past offenses against the Dharma, Nichiren identified with another figure in the Lotus Sutra: Bodhisattva Never Disparaging (Skt., *Sadāparibhūta*; Jpn., *Jōfukyō*), whose story appears in chapter 20 and who, like Nichiren, had persevered despite opposition in spreading the Dharma. This bodhisattva (eventually revealed to be Śākyamuni Buddha in a prior life) was dubbed “Never Disparaging” because he bowed to everyone he met, saying, “I profoundly revere you all! I dare not hold you in contempt. What is the reason? You are all treading the bodhisattva path, and shall succeed in becoming buddhas!” (*Miaofa lianhua jing*, T 9:50c19–20; Leon Hurvitz, trans., *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*, rev. ed. [Columbia University Press, 2009], 258). People mocked and reviled the bodhisattva, beat him with staves, and pelted him with stones. Nonetheless, as a result of his practice, he was able to encounter the Lotus Sutra and acquire the great supernatural penetrations. Those who mocked him suffered for a thousand *kalpas* in the Avīci Hell, but after expiating this sin, they were again able to meet Never Disparaging and were led by him to attain supreme enlightenment.

Nichiren read the story of Never Disparaging in a way that reflected—or perhaps even inspired—his understanding of his own ordeals as redemptive suffering. In his reading, Never Disparaging, like Nichiren himself, had spread by means of *shakubuku* a teaching embodying the essence of the Lotus Sutra and encountered hostility as a result. Those who harassed the bodhisattva fell into hell for many *kalpas*

for having persecuted a practitioner of the Lotus. In the sutra text, the phrase “after expiating this sin” unmistakably refers to those people who mocked and attacked Never Disparaging and who, after eradicating the grave offense of their Dharma slander, were eventually able to reencounter him and achieve supreme awakening through the Lotus Sutra. But Nichiren deliberately read the passage so that the grammatical subject of “after expiating this sin” was not those who persecuted Never Disparaging but the bodhisattva himself. “Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was not abused and vilified, stoned and beaten with staves without reason,” he suggested. “He had probably slandered the true Dharma in the past. The phrase ‘after expiating this sin’ means that because he met persecution, he was able to eradicate his sins from prior lifetimes” (“*Tenju kyōju hōmon*,” *Teihon* 1:507; *Letters of Nichiren*, 161 [slightly modified]). In this way, Nichiren interpreted the scriptural account of Never Disparaging in terms that reinforced his understanding of his own experience of persecution as a form of atonement for his past offenses against the Dharma and as a guarantee of future buddhahood.

Nichiren’s “Nexus for Salvation”

The “Dharma Preacher” chapter of the Lotus Sutra, in praising the merits of those who can uphold the sutra in a future age, represents Śākyamuni Buddha as saying that such a person is his envoy, sent by him to carry out the Buddha’s work: “Let it be known that that person is a great bodhisattva who, having achieved anuttarasamyaksambodhi, [has] taken pity on the living beings, and vowed to be reborn here. . . . [Such a person,] rejecting the reward due his own pure deeds, out of pity for living beings after my passage into extinction shall have been reborn in the evil world, where he shall broadly preach this scripture” (*Miaofa lianhua*

jing, T 9:30c21–26; Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus*, 160).

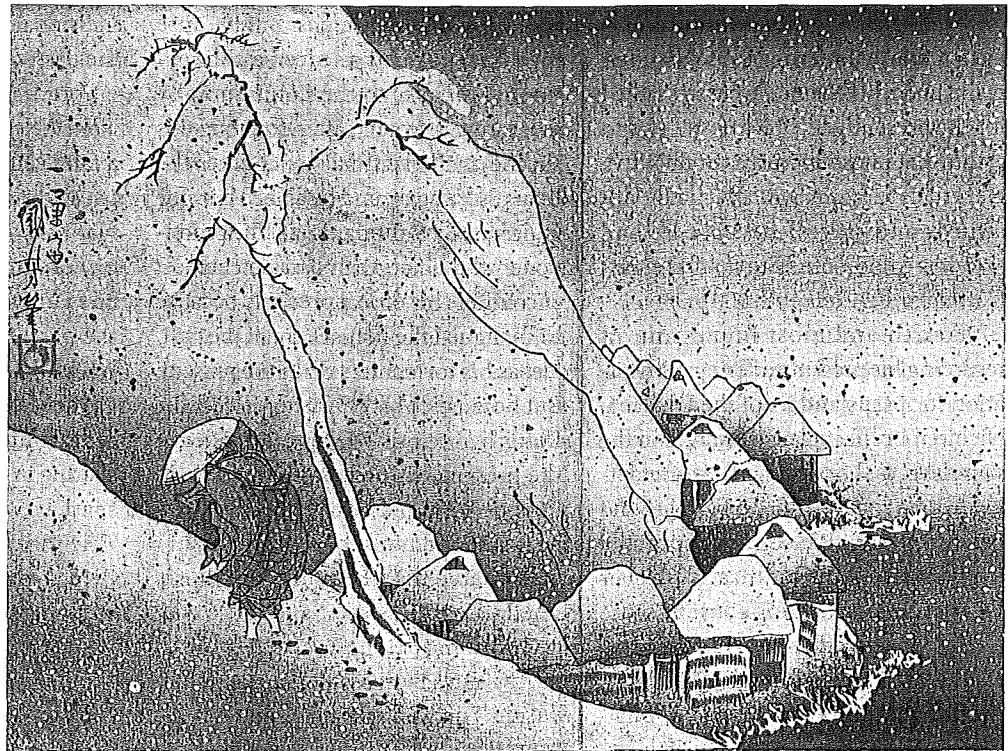
Hiroshi Kanno, in an insightful analysis of this passage, stresses the empowerment to be gained by choosing to regard one’s sufferings as stemming not from one’s past evil deeds but from a vow compassionately undertaken for others’ sake. This passage, Kanno argues, “can cast a light which can change the worldview of persons who really groan under the weight of suffering.” He suggests that the Lotus Sutra aims at converting its followers from “persons to be saved” to those who work actively to save others (Hiroshi Kanno, “The Bodhisattva Way and Valuing the Real World in the *Lotus Sūtra*,” *Journal of Oriental Studies* 17 [2007]: 182–87). Nichiren certainly saw himself and his disciples as those who save others, and he referred to himself and his followers as “envoys of the Tathāgata,” citing this same sutra passage. But—judging from his extant writings—he himself never claimed to be a great bodhisattva who had voluntarily rejected “the reward due his own pure deeds” for others’ sake. Why, when confronted with the need to explain his present sufferings to himself and his disciples, did he not avail himself of so powerful a proof text but instead chose to represent his hardships as expiation for his own prior sins against the Dharma?

One might suggest several reasons for this. First, Nichiren’s claim that his present trials were the result of his own past enmity toward the Lotus Sutra enabled him to use himself as an object lesson in conveying the message that attachment to provisional teachings brings immense suffering. Here he referred to a period in his youth, before his commitment to the Lotus Sutra, when he himself had chanted the *nenbutsu* as his teacher had done: “Since I too slandered the Dharma in the past, I became a *nenbutsu* devotee in this lifetime, and for several years, whenever I saw those who practiced the Lotus Sutra, I mocked them, saying

that not a single person has ever attained buddhahood through that sūtra, or that not even one in a thousand can be saved by it. Awakening from my slander, I am like a man who, while drunk on sake, felt pleasure in striking his parents but regrets it on sobering up” (“Sado gosho,” *Teihon* 1:615).

Second, Nichiren seems to have felt that an awareness of one’s own past acts against the Dharma was necessary to sustain one’s resolve in the face of hardship. To two lay followers, the brothers Ikegami, whose father was threatening to disinherit them on account of their faith, he wrote, “Never doubt but that you slandered the Dharma in past lifetimes. If you doubt that, you will not be able to withstand even the minor sufferings of this life” (“Kyōdai shō,” *Teihon* 1:924–25). Nichiren also occasionally applied this principle to personal tribulations that did not take the form of external opposition and were seemingly unrelated to the propagation of the Lotus Sutra. To another follower, the lay monk Ōta Jōmyō, who was suffering from painful skin lesions, he wrote:

Although you were not in the direct lineage [of *shingon*], you were still a retainer to a patron of that teaching. For many years you lived in a house devoted to a false doctrine, and month after month your mind was influenced by false teachers. . . . Perhaps the relatively light affliction of this skin disease has occurred so that you may expiate [your past offenses] and thus be spared worse suffering in the future. . . . These lesions have arisen from the sole



Nichiren is depicted walking in winter along his path to exile on Sado Island. Woodcut by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798–1861), from his series *Kōso go-ichidai ryakuzu* (*Concise illustrated biography of Nichiren*), ca. 1835.

offense of slandering the Dharma. [But] the wonderful Dharma that you now embrace surpasses the moon-praising *samādhi* [*gatsuai zanmai*] [by which the Buddha cured King Ajātasatru of the foul sores resulting from his sins]. How could your disease not be cured and your life extended?” (“Ōta Nyūdō-dono gohenji,” *Teihon* 2:1117–18)

Nichiren did not attribute all of his followers’ personal sufferings in blanket fashion to past acts against the Dharma, and why he did so in this particular case is not altogether clear. Perhaps it stemmed from his assessment of what kind of interpretation of Ōta’s illness would best encourage him. Or perhaps the opportunity to take aim at the defects of *shingon* esoteric teachings—an issue then very much on Nichiren’s mind—may have also played a role. In this reading, not only persecution at the hands of others but even the ordinary sufferings of devotees, such as illness, are drawn into the explanatory

framework of why Lotus Sutra practitioners, contrary to the promise of “security and peace in the present life,” should meet with suffering. Nichiren’s argument here is that personal conviction of past wrongdoing, and thus of a debt to be paid, enables one to embrace present suffering, taking it as an opportunity to eradicate that offense in toto. Also, by the power of one’s faith in the Lotus Sutra, one receives these karmic consequences far more lightly and over a much shorter period of time than would otherwise be the case.

Third, in asserting that his present sufferings were the result of maligning the Dharma in the past, Nichiren was able to account for the puzzling fact that his tormentors received no obvious sign of karmic retribution. He argued that were a votary of the Lotus Sutra to be unjustly charged with some crime, even a minor one, his persecutors would incur immediate karmic retribution—as long as that individual himself had not slandered the true Dharma in

Image: TMM Image Archives

prior lifetimes. But because he *had* committed this evil in prior lives, Nichiren maintained, his enemies went unscathed for the present while he himself had to endure their hostility, just as Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was attacked “with swords and staves” because he had slandered the Lotus Sutra in the past (*Kaimoku shō*, *Teihon* 1:600).

Fourth and most important, in regarding his present sufferings as expiation for past slanders of the Dharma, Nichiren in effect placed himself on the same level as the people he was attempting to save and identified a karmic bond between them. We see this especially in his reading of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging as meeting abuse because of the Dharma slander that he himself had committed in prior lifetimes. Nichiren wrote:

The past events described in the “Never Disparaging” chapter I am now experiencing, as predicted in the “Fortitude” chapter; thus the present foretold in the “Fortitude” chapter corresponds to the past of the “Never Disparaging” chapter. The “Fortitude” chapter of the present will be the “Never Disparaging” chapter of the future, and at that time I, Nichiren, will be its Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. (“Teradomari gosho,” *Teihon* 1:515; *Letters of Nichiren*, 170 [slightly modified])

The “Never Disparaging” chapter tells of a Lotus practitioner who met great trials in spreading the sutra in the past, while the “Fortitude” chapter predicts the trials of practitioners who will spread it in the future. Based on his reading of these two chapters, Nichiren saw himself and his opponents as linked together by the Lotus Sutra in a vast soteriological drama of sin, expiation, and the realization of buddhahood. Those who malign a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra must undergo repeated rebirth in the Avici

Hell for countless *kalpas*. But because they have formed a “reverse connection” (*gyakuken*) to the Lotus Sutra by slandering its votary, after expiating this sin they will eventually encounter the Lotus Sutra again and be able to become buddhas. By a similar logic, the practitioner who suffers their harassment must encounter this ordeal precisely because he maligned the Lotus Sutra in the past, just as his tormenters do in the present. But because of his efforts to protect the Lotus by opposing Dharma slander in the present, his own past offenses will be wiped out, and he will not only attain buddhahood himself in the future but also enable his persecutors to do so. The Lotus practitioner and those who oppose him are thus inseparably linked via the sutra in the same “nexus for salvation,” or web of causes and conditions, that will ultimately enable both to realize buddhahood. The term *nexus for salvation* has been used in reference to the Pure Land movements of Japan’s Heian (794–1185) and Kamakura (1185–1333) periods, in which all who placed faith in Amida Buddha were thought to be connected, and forming a karmic tie to anyone deemed certain to achieve birth in Amida’s Pure Land was believed to assist one’s own realization of that goal (Frederic Kotas, “Öjōden: Accounts of Rebirth in the Pure Land” [PhD diss., University of Washington, 1987], 35, 303). We find something similar in Nichiren’s teaching, in his idea that all of those who form a bond with the Lotus Sutra are karmically connected and that whether they embrace the Lotus or oppose it, they shall by virtue of that bond eventually “succeed in becoming buddhas” (Nichiren characterized the *mappō* era as a time when people were most likely to form a karmic bond with the Lotus Sutra through “reverse connection,” that is, by slandering it).

To shift one’s perspective—using Professor Kanno’s terms—from “someone needing to be saved” to “someone who saves others” restores agency to the

individual involved; he or she is no longer the passive victim of events but actively embraces adversity to benefit others. Nonetheless, there exists the potential for a false sense of superiority, even spiritual arrogance, in defining oneself as “one who saves others.” Whether deliberately or not, in identifying himself as someone guilty of slandering the Dharma in the past, Nichiren rejected this possibility, placing himself on the same level as those who opposed him and representing himself, together with them, as sharing in the same causal nexus. In that spirit, he wrote: “The *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* says: ‘The various individual sufferings of all living beings are all the Tathāgata’s own sufferings.’ I say: This one common suffering of all living beings [resulting from slander of the Dharma] is entirely my own suffering” (*Kangyō Hachiman shō*, *Teihon* 2:1847).

Nichiren did not claim that he could take upon himself all individual sufferings of all beings, something perhaps only the Buddha could do. But he did see himself as participating in the suffering that arises from having rejected the true Dharma, and he committed his life to the task of freeing others from the consequences of that same error.

Conclusion

In addressing the question of why he and his followers had to endure harsh trials, Nichiren did not fix on a single explanation but adopted multiple perspectives. On the one hand, his sufferings were necessary to prove the truth of the Lotus Sutra and to verify his own status as its votary. On the other hand, they were an act of expiation for past slanders of the Dharma, an expiation made possible within a radically reduced time frame by his efforts to defend the sutra. Nichiren similarly advanced multiple explanations for related questions, such as why he and his disciples were not protected by the gods and why their enemies incurred no obvious karmic

backlash. For example, he argued, as he had in the *Risshō ankoku ron*, that the protective deities, unable to hear the true Dharma of the Lotus Sutra on which they rely for sustenance, had abandoned the country, or that when people perform acts so evil as to merit rebirth in the Avici Hell, they will not necessarily exhibit any sign of retribution in this lifetime (*Kaimoku shō*, *Teihon* 1:600, 601). Some passages in his writings suggest a deep conviction that, appearances to the contrary, he was indeed under the protection of the buddhas:

Practitioners born in the Final Dharma age who spread the Lotus Sutra will encounter the three kinds of enemies and be exiled, perhaps even put to death. But Śākyamuni Buddha will enfold in his robe those who persevere in propagation. . . . Śākyamuni Buddha, Many Jewels, and the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions will praise them as persons of great good roots and as teachers for all living beings. . . . Thus praised, I have been able to withstand immeasurable ordeals. (“Shohō jissō shō,” *Teihon* 1:726. Nichiren probably refers to the “robe of the Tathāgata” mentioned in the “Dharma Preacher” chapter of the Lotus Sutra [*T* 9:31c24, 26], which represents great forbearance.)

Yet in other passages, he voices a conviction that seeks no guarantee of protection, simply a resolve to carry on with his mission, no matter what may happen. “Let Heaven forsake me. Let ordeals confront me. I will not begrudge bodily life. . . . Although I and my disciples must endure many trials, so long as we do not have a mind of doubt, we will naturally arrive at the state of buddhahood” (*Kaimoku shō*, *Teihon* 1:601, 604).

This plurality of perspectives speaks perhaps to the fact that no single explanation will adequately account, at every

junction, for one’s own suffering. What these multiple explanations all share, however, is Nichiren’s absolute refusal to regard his ordeals as arbitrary or meaningless, or himself as their hapless victim. Whether as an inevitable part of his sacred task or as an act of expiation, he actively embraced them not only for his own sake but for others’. This attitude enabled him to find happiness, purpose, and at times even an awed sense of privilege amid the harshest adversity. It prompted him to describe himself during the first winter of his exile to Sado—cold, hungry, isolated, and in danger for his life—as “the richest man in Japan today” (*ibid.*, 589).

Nichiren’s Lotus exclusivism rested on an interlocking set of hermeneutical premises concerning the soteriological powers inherent in the Lotus Sutra; the distinction between “true” and “provisional” teachings as something grounded in metaphysical reality; and the workings of karmic causality over past, present, and future lifetimes. This essay has attempted, as an act of historical imagination, to enter into these premises in order to understand Nichiren’s view of suffering—his own and that of the people around him. But today, apart from the more literalist contingent among his followers, there are many people, including some Lotus practitioners, for whom such assumptions no longer resonate, making Nichiren’s view of suffering hard to translate into a contemporary idiom. His attributing of major disasters to rejection of the Lotus Sutra and attachment to other teachings runs counter to modern pluralistic sensibilities and is apt to appear naive and distasteful, even dangerous, in an age when the brutal consequences of religious strife are sharply evident. His elevated sense of personal mission, too, easily appears as delusive self-righteousness, and his attributing of one’s present trials to past slanders of the Dharma can seem to be a potentially insidious form of victim blaming. Viewed from outside

Nichiren’s own hermeneutical framework, is there anything more broadly applicable to be drawn from his attitude toward suffering?

Nichiren has long been admired, even outside his own following, for his perseverance in the face of opposition and his defiance of worldly authority. But there is more to his stance than mere courage or perseverance. The suffering that Nichiren addressed was, in his understanding, not something remediable by wealth, technology, or political power. In confronting unavoidable suffering, he demonstrated an attitude that wastes little energy in railing against it but unflinchingly embraces it, interpreting it in whatever way appears meaningful at the moment so as to use that suffering for one’s own development and to offer it on behalf of others. In Mahayana terms, this is the commitment of the bodhisattva. To quote again from Professor Kanno’s analysis of the “Dharma Preacher” chapter: “Followers of the Lotus Sutra do not seek to attain enlightenment through their own efforts, nor do they seek to be saved by an absolute savior. They strongly bear in mind their true identity that they have been born into this evil world of their own will to propagate the Lotus Sutra for the sake of all living beings, and thus feel satisfied by fulfilling their mission” (Kanno, “Bodhisattva Way,” 186). This well describes the stance that Nichiren adopted. In so doing, he also showed the value of abandoning the false and ultimately frustrating expectation that happiness should mean an absence of suffering. “Don’t doubt because heaven does not lend you protection,” he told his followers. “Don’t lament that your present life is not ‘secure and peaceful’” (*Kaimoku shō*, *Teihon* 1:604). For him, the Lotus Sutra’s promise of “security and peace in this life” came to mean, not freedom from suffering, but a happiness to be found even in the midst of it, because of the commitment he had made. □