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THE SIN OF "SLANDERING THE TRUE DHARMA" IN NICHIREN'S THOUGHT

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In considering the category of "sin" in comparative perspective, certain acts, such as murder and theft, appear with some local variation to be proscribed across traditions. Other offenses, while perhaps not deemed such by the researcher's own culture, nonetheless fall into recognizable categories of moral and ritual transgression, such as failures of filial piety or violations of purity taboos. Some acts characterized as wrongdoing, however, are so specific to a particular historical or cognitive context as to require an active exercise of imagination on the scholar's part to reconstruct the hermeneutical framework within which they have been abhorred and condemned. Such is the case with the medieval Japanese Buddhist figure Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1282) and his fierce opposition to the sin of "slandering the True Dharma" (*hihō shōbō* 誹謗正法, or simply *hōbō* 謗法). Originally trained in the Tendai school 天台宗 of Buddhism and the initiator of the Nichiren sect that came to bear his name, Nichiren taught a doctrine of exclusive devotion to the *Lotus Sūtra* and promoted the practice of chanting the sūtra's *daimoku* 題目 or title in the formula *Namu-myōhō-renge-kyō* 南無妙法蓮華經, which, he said, contained the entirety of all Buddhist truth within itself and enabled the direct realization of Buddhahood. The *Lotus Sūtra* was widely revered in Nichiren's day as the Buddha's ultimate teaching, and in his eyes, it was the only teaching that could lead all persons to liberation now in the degenerate Final Dharma age (*mappō* 末法). Based on this conviction, Nichiren harshly criticized other forms of Buddhist practice as no longer soteriologically efficacious. And because, he argued, only faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* leads to Buddhahood, to reject the *Lotus* in favor of other, "inferior" teachings was in effect to slander the True Dharma and led inexorably to rebirth in the Avīci Hell. To the evil of "slandering the Dharma" he attributed all the calamities facing Japan in his day: famine, epidemics, earthquakes, outbreaks of civil unrest, and the threat of invasion by the Mongols. Nichiren is by no means the only Buddhist teacher to have leveled charges of "Dharma slander" against his rivals. But he is unusual in the extent to which he built this idea into the structure of his message,

making it the basis of his lifelong preaching career. A perceived need to counter slander of the Dharma runs throughout his corpus, from his earliest known essay, written at age twenty, to his very last writings some forty years later. It prompted his denunciations of prominent religious leaders and of government officials for supporting them, which in turn brought down on him the wrath of the authorities; he was repeatedly attacked, twice arrested and sent into exile, and once very nearly executed. Opposing slander of the Dharma was for Nichiren a form of Buddhist practice in its own right and a debt owed to the Buddha, to be discharged even at the cost of his life. Yet, despite its formative role in his doctrine, this concept has rarely been explored in studies of Nichiren, even among Nichiren sectarian scholars.¹ Neglect of “Dharma slander” as a category integral to his thought may owe to its lack of resonance, or more properly, outright conflict with modernist religious sensibilities as well as a desire to defuse widespread perceptions of Nichiren as “intolerant.” This essay attempts to clarify Nichiren’s idea of Dharma slander as the worst imaginable of all sins. Rather than tracing his development of this concept in a strictly chronological way, I will address recurring themes in his treatment of it.

“Nenbutsu Leads to the Avīci Hell”

The term “slander of the Dharma” did not originate with Nichiren but appears in Buddhist canonical sources. In the broadest sense, it means disparaging any of the three jewels—the Buddha, his teaching, or his order. But the term occurs most frequently in the Mahāyāna sūtras, where it often carries the specific meaning of speaking ill of the Great Vehicle scriptures and was evidently intended to deflect criticism from the Buddhist mainstream that the Mahāyāna was not the Buddha’s teaching.² A warning against the horrific karmic retribution awaiting those guilty of this offense occurs, for example, in the verse section of the “Parable” chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which represents the Buddha as saying:

¹ The most detailed study of this topic to date is Watanabe Hōyō, “Nichiren Shōnin no shūkyō ni okeru ‘hōbō’ no igi.”

² BD 5:4327c–28c. Sanskrit terms for ‘slander of the True Dharma’ include *saddharma-pratikṣepa*, *saddharma-pratikṣipta*, *saddharmāpavādaka*, *saddharma-pratikṣepāvaraṇa-kṛta*, and others (*Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, accessed May 8, 2012, [http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?8a.xml+id\('b8ab9-8b17-6b63-6cd5'\)](http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?8a.xml+id('b8ab9-8b17-6b63-6cd5'))).

If someone, not believing, / maligns this scripture, / then he 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.³

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 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.⁴

For a number of Japan’s leading scholar-monks around the turn of the thirteenth century, the offense of “slandering the Dharma” was no abstract scriptural category but an evil that had seemingly appeared before their eyes, in the form of the exclusive *nenbutsu* doctrine (*senju nenbutsu* 専修念佛) of Genku-bō Hōnen 源空房法然 (1133–1212). Originally a Tendai monk, Hōnen is known as the first of the teachers of the so-called “new Buddhist” movements of Japan’s Kamakura period (1185–1333) and the founder of the Jōdoshū 浄土宗 or independent Pure Land sect. Hōnen taught that now in the period of the Final Dharma age, human religious capacity has declined to a point where most people are no longer capable of achieving liberation through traditional practices such as precept observance, meditation, or doctrinal study. Only by chanting the *nenbutsu*, the name of Amida Buddha (“Namu Amida-butsu” 南無阿彌陀佛), 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. Hōnen advanced this claim in his *Senchaku hongan nenbutsu shū* 選擇本願念佛集 (Passages singling out the *nenbutsu* of the original vow; hereafter *Senchakushū*). Birth in the Pure Land (*ōjō* 往生) was a common soteriological goal, and the chanted *nenbutsu* was practiced across lineage and sectarian lines, by monastics and lay devotees of all social levels. But most people believed that the merit of any religious practice could be directed

³ *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經, T no. 262, 925b22–c1; Leon Hurvitz, trans., *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*, 77, slightly modified.

⁴ *Miaofa lianhua jing*, T 925c1–16a9; Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus*, 77–80.

to achieving birth in the Pure Land, and many who chanted the *nenbutsu* also conducted esoteric rites or engaged in sūtra copying and recitation as well as other practices. In his *Senschakushū*, however, Hōnen urged that all practices other than the *nenbutsu*, and all sūtras other than the three major Pure Land sūtras upon which his school was based, should be set aside as no longer leading to liberation in this age.⁵ This assertion outraged clerics of the Buddhist mainstream, who perceived it as a direct attack on their religious disciplines and institutions, and they demanded the suppression of Hōnen's teaching. Monks of Mt. Hiei, where the Tendai school was headquartered, seized and burned the woodblocks used to print the *Senchakushū*, and Hōnen and his leading disciples were sent into exile.⁶

By 1233, when Nichiren as a boy entered the monastic order at the temple Kiyosumidera 清澄寺 in Awa province in eastern Japan, more than a generation had passed since Hōnen's death, and the exclusive *nenbutsu* teaching had begun to gain considerable ground. Nichiren's own teacher at Kiyosumidera, Dōzen-bō 道善房, was a *nenbutsu* devotee; Nichiren would also have encountered the exclusive *nenbutsu* during an early period of study in nearby Kamakura, where a few decades earlier the Bakufu or military government had established its base. By his own account Nichiren himself chanted the *nenbutsu* in his youth.⁷ Early on, however, he became critical of this practice, as seen in his very first extant essay, *Kaitai sokushin jōbutsu gi* 戒體即身成佛義 (The meaning of the precept essence and the realization of Buddhahood with this very body). In this work, based on Tendai *Lotus* and esoteric teachings of nonduality and the interpenetration of the dharmas, Nichiren attacked Hōnen's doctrine for teaching aspiration to a pure land apart from one's own body and mind, a position he saw as contravening both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna sūtras. "Its teacher is a devil and his disciples, the devil's people," he asserted.⁸ Nichiren's objections were reinforced during his studies at

Mt. Hiei and other temples in the region of the imperial capital (present-day Kyoto). Tradition holds that, on Mt. Hiei, Nichiren studied with the Tendai scholar-monk Shunpan 俊範 (fl. mid-thirteenth century), then the master of instruction on the mountain, who was known for his opposition to the exclusive *nenbutsu*. While a master-disciple connection between Shunpan and Nichiren has not been definitively established, quotations and extracts in Nichiren's early writings show that he had access to a collection of petitions to both the court and Bakufu protesting Hōnen's teaching as well as edicts banning its dissemination—documents that he could well have received from Shunpan.⁹ By 1253, Nichiren returned from the capital to Kiyosumidera, where his growing opposition to the exclusive *nenbutsu* placed him at odds with the local Bakufu-appointed steward (*jitō* 地頭). Forced eventually to leave the temple, Nichiren went to Kamakura to launch his preaching career. There he again encountered disciples of Hōnen, who were beginning to build a patronage base among Bakufu warriors. These Pure Land followers were Nichiren's first polemical opponents, and his early teachings were in no small measure formulated in opposition to them.¹⁰

Several of Nichiren's early writings, up until his first exile in 1261, focus on why, in his view, the *Senchakushū* amounted to a work of Dharma slander. He was well aware of earlier criticisms of this work, such as *Zaijarin* 摧邪輪 (Wheel to smash heresy) by Myōe 明恵 (1173–1232), or the famous Kōfukuji petition (興福寺奏状), in which Jōkei 貞慶 (1155–1213), on behalf of the monks of the prominent Nara temple, Kōfukuji, petitioned the court to take action against the exclusive *nenbutsu*. But in Nichiren's estimation, these earlier rebuttals were inadequate,

like a little rain falling in a time of severe drought, which leaves trees and grasses more parched than ever, or a weak force dispatched against a powerful enemy, who is only emboldened thereby.¹¹

⁵ Hōnen designates the "three Pure Land sūtras" in chap. 1 of his *Senchakushū* (T no. 2608, 83:224–7).

⁶ On the persecution of Hōnen and his disciples, see James C. Dobbins, *Jōdo Shinshū*, 11–20. For Buddhist mainstream opposition to Hōnen's exclusive *nenbutsu*, see James L. Ford, *Jōkei and Buddhist Devotion in Early Medieval Japan*, 159–84, and Christoph Kleine, *Hōnen Buddhismus des Reinen Landes*. Nichiren's *Nenbutsusha tsuihō senjōji* 念佛者追放宣状事 (*Teihon* 3:2253–72) reproduces a number of petitions and edicts against Hōnen's teaching.

⁷ See for example "Sado gosho" 佐渡御書, *Teihon* 1:615; "Myōhō bikuni-ama gohenji" 妙法比丘尼御返事, 2:553.

⁸ *Teihon* 1:11.

⁹ This has been suggested by Taira Masayuki (*Nihon chūsei no shakai to bukkyō*, 358). Shunpan is mentioned in Nichiren's *Nenbutsusha tsuihō senjōji* (*Teihon* 3:2261) and *Jōdo kushō no koto* 浄土九品之事 (3:2310), both times in connection with his opposition to Hōnen's exclusive *nenbutsu*.

¹⁰ On Nichiren's polemics against Pure Land teachers, see Kawazoe Shōji, "Nichiren no shūkyō keisei ni okeru nenbutsu haigeki no igi," and Nakao Takashi, "Nichiren Shōnin no Jōdoshū hihan to sono igi."

¹¹ *Shugo kokka ron* 守護國家論, *Teihon* 1:90; see also "Nenbutsu mugei jigoku shō" 念佛無間地獄抄, 1:39.

They did not go to the heart of Hōnen's error. In pursuing this issue, Nichiren's turned against Hōnen a major hermeneutical strategy that Hōnen himself had relied on in establishing his claim for the sole efficacy of the *nenbutsu* now in the Final Dharma age: use of a comparative classification of the Buddhist teachings.

Projects of comparative doctrinal classification (Ch. *panjiao* 判教 or *jiaopan* 教判; Jpn. *kyōhan*) developed to a high degree in Chinese Buddhist scholasticism and represent attempts to systematize the vast body of Buddhist texts introduced to China from India and Central Asia. Such schemas presupposed that the sūtras were all expounded by a single enlightened figure, Śākyamuni Buddha, and that discrepancies among them were therefore only apparent, not fundamental, and could be resolved by uncovering their proper relation. Peter Gregory has noted that *kyōhan* systems served three kinds of aims: hermeneutical, sectarian, and soteriological. Hermeneutically, they attempted to establish an underlying principle that would order the mass of diverse, even contradictory, Buddhist teachings within a unifying framework. Often that framework took the form of a hierarchy or graded sequence of teachings and thus served a sectarian aim by enabling particular schools to claim their teaching as the highest. And soteriologically, classification schemes functioned as models of the path, in which successive stages of teaching corresponded to individual practitioners' varying levels of capacity or attainment.¹² Hōnen could claim legitimacy for the Pure Land school in part because he had established a new *kyōhan* to support his argument for the sole efficacy of the chanted *nenbutsu* in the evil latter age. Hōnen's doctrinal classification system drew together the claims of earlier, Chinese Pure Land masters for the superior accessibility of Pure Land practices. Daochuo 道綽 (562–645) had distinguished between the teachings of the Path of the Sages (*shōdōmon* 聖道門), which stress pursuit of liberation through personal efforts in religious cultivation, and the Pure Land teachings (*jōdomon* 淨土門), which encourage reliance on the Buddha Amida's compassionate vow that all who place faith in him will achieve birth in his Pure Land. Tanluan 曇鸞 (476–542) had drawn a similar distinction, labeling these two kinds of teachings respectively the ways of "difficult practice" (*nangyō* 難行) and of "easy practice" (*igyō* 易行) by which

¹² *Tsung-mi and the Sinification of Buddhism*, 115; see also 93–114.

bodhisattvas in training might attain the stage of non-retrogression.¹³ And Shandao 善導 (613–681) had divided practices leading to birth in Amida's Pure Land into "main practices" (*shōgyō* 正行), or those based on the Pure Land sūtras, such as reciting those sūtras, contemplating Amida's land, or chanting his name, and "sundry practices" (*zōgyō* 雜行), or those not directly connected to Amida; among the "main practices," he gave the chanted *nenbutsu* special prominence. Uniting these distinctions into a schema of progressive selection and rejection, Hōnen argued that Amida himself had singled out the chanted *nenbutsu* as the sole practice according with his original vow, and that it should replace all teachings of the Path of the Sages, difficult practice, and sundry practice categories.¹⁴ Hōnen legitimated this radical move by invoking the concepts of time and human capacity. While acknowledging that teachings of the Path of the Sages had greater doctrinal sophistication, he argued that because people living now in the benighted *mappō* era lacked the spiritual ability to practice them, they were in effect soteriologically useless.¹⁵ Only the *nenbutsu* would remain efficacious throughout the Final Dharma age and save even the most ignorant and evil. Hōnen was by no means the first teacher to argue that the chanted *nenbutsu* was particularly suited to sinful persons of the latter age, but he was the first to explicitly urge that all other teachings be rejected in its favor.

Nichiren countered with the same weapon of doctrinal classification, drawing upon the far older and better established *kyōhan* of the Tendai school, in which both he and Hōnen had been trained. According to this classification system, the Buddha had for forty-two years preached provisional teachings (*gonkyō* 權教) in accordance with his listeners' varying capacities, revealing only partial or expedient truths; only in the last eight years of his life did he preach the true teaching (*jikyō* 實教) of the

¹³ These terms derive from the "Easy Practices" chapter of the *Ten Stages Treatise* attributed to Nāgārjuna, which famously recommends birth in a pure land as an "easy" path of achieving the stage of non-retrogression by chanting the names of the various buddhas and relying on the power of their vows, as opposed to relying solely upon self-cultivation through personal effort (*Shizhu piposha lun* 十住毘婆沙論, T no. 1521, 26:41a13–b6). Tanluan assimilates these terms specifically to practice for achieving birth in Amida's Pure Land.

¹⁴ *Senchaku hongan nenbutsu shū*, especially the first three chapters (T 83:1b6–6c9). In English, see *Senchakushū* English Translation Project, ed. and trans., *Hōnen's Senchakushū*, esp. 56–81.

¹⁵ Hōnen uses the phrase, often quoted by his followers, "The principle is profound but [human] understanding is shallow" (*rijin gemi* 理深解微). This expression is taken from Daochuo's *Anle ji* 安樂集 (T no. 1958, 47:13c8, quoted in *Senchakushū*, T 83:1b12–13, 2a22).

Lotus Sūtra, perfectly unifying all partial truths within itself and opening the possibility of Buddhahood to all beings.¹⁶ The *Lotus* was the sūtra of which the Buddha himself had said, "In these forty years and more [before preaching this sūtra], I have not yet revealed the truth," and, "Frankly discarding expedient means, I will preach only the unsurpassed Way."¹⁷ This schema assigned the Pure Land sūtras to a lesser category of provisional Mahāyāna, and provisional teachings, Nichiren asserted, did not represent the Buddha's true intent. The *nenbutsu* practice set forth in these sūtras was only a temporary expedient, like the scaffolding erected in building a stūpa; once the stūpa—that is, the *Lotus Sūtra*—had been completed, the scaffolding (the *nenbutsu*) should be dismantled and discarded.¹⁸ Hōnen, Nichiren charged, had "taken the 637 scriptures in 2,883 fascicles of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the esoteric teachings (*shingon* 眞言), and all the other Mahāyāna teachings preached by the Buddha in his lifetime, as well as all buddhas, bodhisattvas, and deities of the world, and relegated them to the Path of the Sages, difficult practice, and sundry practice categories, urging people to 'discard, close, put aside, and abandon' them. With these four injunctions, he has led everyone astray."¹⁹ In insisting that all of these teachings of the Buddha, including the *Lotus*, were to be rejected, Hōnen

¹⁶ For the complex Tiantai/Tendai doctrinal classification system, known in its entirety as the "five periods and eight teachings" (*goji hakkyō* 五時八教), see David W. Chappell, ed., *T'ien-t'ai Buddhism*. The division of the Buddha's teaching into five periods (55–82) is particularly relevant here, especially the discussion of the *Lotus* and *Nirvāṇa* sūtras, which constitute the fifth and final period (62–67). Nichiren would eventually expand the stages of comparison in the traditional Tendai doctrinal classification in clarifying his own interpretation of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *daimoku* (see Stone, *Original Enlightenment*, 265). But the distinction between true and provisional teachings, already established in the Tendai *kyōhan*, remained fundamental to his criticism of other schools.

¹⁷ *Wuliangyi jing* 無量義經, T no. 276, 9:386b1–2; *Miaofa lianhua jing*, T 910a19. The *Wuliangyi jing*, in which the first passage appears, has traditionally been considered a prefatory scripture to the *Lotus*. For scholarly debate over its provenance, see Mitomo Ken'yō, "Muryōgikyō Indo senjutsu-setsu."

¹⁸ "Nenbutsu mugei jigoku shō," *Teihon* 1:35. Nichiren uses the same analogy of scaffolding in writings spanning the course of his career, for example, "Hōmon mōsarubeki yō no koto" 法門可被申様之事, 1:447; *Yorimoto chinjō* 頼基陳狀, 2:1357; and "Ueno-dono haha ama gozen gohenji" 上野殿母尼御前御返事, 2:1812.

¹⁹ *Risshō ankoku ron*, *Teihon* 1:216; *Selected Writings*, 24, slightly modified. Hōnen uses the verbs "discard" (*sha* 捨), "close" (*hei* 閉), "put aside" (*kaku* 闕), and "abandon" (*hō* 抛) in different passages of the *Senchakushū* to express the exclusion of other practices in favor of the *nenbutsu*. The use of these four injunctions as an abbreviated expression of Hōnen's "Dharma slander" appears in a number of Nichiren's writings, of which "Nenbutsu mugei jigoku shō" appears to be the earliest (*Teihon* 1:39). Ironically, scholars within the Pure Land school would later appropriate the phrase "discard, close, put aside, and abandon" in a positive sense as an expression of Hōnen's mature thought (Mark L. Blum, "Kōsai and the Paradox of *Ichinengi*," 68–69).

himself had in effect maligned the Dharma, Nichiren said. He repeatedly drew attention to the text of Amida Buddha's original vow in the *Larger Sūtra*, which promises birth in his Pure Land to all who place faith in him—"except those who commit the five heinous offenses or slander the True Dharma."²⁰ Hōnen, he insisted, had violated the teaching of one of his own sacred texts. Nichiren argued that, in slandering the *Lotus Sūtra* by consigning it to a category of teachings that are to be set aside, Hōnen himself must have been abandoned by the very Amida Buddha to whom he looked for salvation and must even now be languishing in the Avīci Hell.²¹

Over time Nichiren would put forth a number of criticisms of the exclusive *nenbutsu*. Based on traditional Tendai interpretations of emptiness, nonduality, and the interpenetration of the dharmas, he rejected the notion of a pure land apart from one's present reality. "The originally enlightened Buddha of the perfect teaching abides in this world," he wrote.

If one abandons this land, toward what other land would one aspire?... For people of our day, who have not yet formed a bond with the *Lotus Sūtra*, to aspire to Amida's Pure Land is to aspire to a land of rubble.²²

Alternatively, he insisted that people of this world have no karmic connection to Amida, the Buddha of another realm. Only Śākyamuni Buddha possesses the virtues of sovereign, teacher, and parent with respect to the beings of the present, Sahā world. Thus to give one's allegiance to Amida, the Buddha of another land, is to be disloyal and unfilial.²³ All these criticisms, however, were ultimately rooted in the traditional Tendai *kyōhan* and its distinction between true and provisional teachings. For Nichiren, the *Lotus Sūtra*, representing the true or perfect teaching, sets forth the mutual inclusion of the Buddha realm and the nine realms of ordinary unenlightened beings (*jikkai gogu* 十界互具), thus clarifying the ontological basis upon which all persons can achieve Buddhahood, while the provisional teachings reveal only partial aspects of this truth.²⁴ Hōnen had stressed the issue of human capacity: because the teachings of the Path of the Sages were too profound for people in the *mappō* era, he had

²⁰ *Wuliangshou jing* 無量壽經, T no. 360, 12:268a27–28, emphasis added.

²¹ "Rokurō Sanenaga goshōsoku" 六郎恆長御消息, *Teihon* 1:441; "Shijō Kingo-dono gohenji" 四條金吾殿御返事 1:663; *Yorimoto chinjō* 2:1348.

²² *Shugo kokka ron*, *Teihon* 1:129, 130. See also *Kaitai sokushin jōbutsu gi*, 1:11.

²³ E.g., "Nenbutsu mugei jigoku shō," *Teihon* 1:34–35; "Shu shi shin gosho" 主師親御書 1:45–46; "Myōhō bikuni-ama gohenji," 2:1557–58.

²⁴ See Stone, *Original Enlightenment*, 266.

argued, those attempting to practice them were bound to fail and would therefore fall after death into the evil realms. Only the chanted *nenbutsu*, accessible to all, could save people in this latter age. For Nichiren, however, the key issue was the distinction between true and provisional; only the *Lotus* embodied the Buddha's real intent, which was to lead all others to become buddhas like himself. Precisely because the *Lotus* is profound, Nichiren insisted, it can save even the most evil and ignorant.²⁵

Well before Nichiren's time, in promoting the exclusive *nenbutsu*, Hōnen's followers appear to have singled out the *Lotus Sūtra* for particular criticism. According to the Kōfukuji petition, some among them claimed that persons who embraced the *Lotus Sūtra* would fall into hell, or that those who recited it in hopes of achieving birth in Amida's Pure Land—an extremely common practice—were guilty of slandering the Mahāyāna.²⁶ Not only was the *Lotus Sūtra* widely revered across sectarian boundaries and honored in particular in the Tendai school as the teaching integrating all doctrines and practices in the one Buddha vehicle, but, before Hōnen, its recitation had been closely linked to Pure Land aspirations. The mainstream of Japanese Pure Land thought during the Heian period (794–1185) had developed chiefly within Tendai circles, and all three of Mt. Hiei's pagoda precincts had halls for both *Lotus* recitation and *nenbutsu* chanting. The two practices were often combined in temple ritual programs and in the personal practice of both monastics and lay people.²⁷ Because of this close association, pointed rejection of the *Lotus Sūtra* in particular may have appeared to some among Hōnen's followers as a necessary step in establishing the *nenbutsu* as an exclusive teaching.

Such criticisms were evidently still current in Nichiren's day. He himself mentions exclusive *nenbutsu* practitioners of his own time who mocked *Lotus* devotees for attempting to practice a teaching beyond their capacity, like a small boy trying to wear his grandfather's shoes, or who advised others to discard the *Lotus Sūtra* on the grounds that forming a karmic connection with it would obstruct one's birth in the Pure Land.²⁸

²⁵ For example, *Shugo kokka ron*, *Teihon* 1109.

²⁶ *Kōfukuji sōjō*, article 4, in Kamata Shigeo and Tanaka Hisao, eds., *Kamakura kyū bukkyō*, 34. Mujū 無住 (1226–1312) mentions *nenbutsu* devotees who threw copies of the *Lotus Sūtra* into the river or asserted that persons who recited the *Lotus* would fall into hell (Watanabe Tsunaya, ed., *Shasekishū* 110, 86–87; trans. Robert Morrell, *Sand and Pebbles*, 101–102).

²⁷ Shioda Gisen, "Asa daimoku to yū nenbutsu"; Kiuchi Gyōō, "Asa daimoku yū nenbutsu."

²⁸ *Kaitai sokushin jōbutsu gi*, *Teihon* 112; *Shugo kokka ron*, 1117.

By Nichiren's account, these *nenbutsu* practitioners often denied that remarks of this kind amounted to slander of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Their point, they said—invoking Hōnen's argument against the Path of the Sages more generally—was simply that the *Lotus Sūtra* was too profound for persons of the present, benighted Final Dharma age; if they attempted to practice it, far from attaining Buddhahood, they would only fail in their efforts and fall into the lower realms. Thus one would be far better advised to set aside the *Lotus Sūtra* in this life and instead chant the *nenbutsu* in order to achieve birth after death in Amida's Pure Land, where conditions are more favorable for attaining insight; then one could gain the enlightenment of the *Lotus Sūtra* there.²⁹

In Nichiren's view, however, discouraging people from practicing the *Lotus Sūtra* as too profound for their capacity was a sin far greater than direct verbal abuse of the sūtra, as it functioned to drive the *Lotus* into obscurity, closing off the one teaching able to rescue persons of this age from their grave soteriological hindrances. It was in opposition to arguments of this kind from Hōnen's disciples that he first expanded the definition of Dharma slander to include not only verbal disparagement, as the term suggests, but the mental act of rejection or disbelief. "To be born in a country where the *Lotus Sūtra* has spread and neither to have faith in it nor practice it, is Dharma slander," he wrote.³⁰ This understanding of "Dharma slander" appears in his earliest known writing and would remain constant throughout his life.

In promoting faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*, Nichiren went beyond simply reasserting the traditional Tendai distinction between true and provisional teachings and began to develop his own message of devotion to the *Lotus* as an exclusive practice. Many Tendai scholar-monks of his time maintained that, because the perfect teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* integrates all others within itself, any form of practice—whether esoteric ritual, sūtra copying, or *nenbutsu* chanting—in effect becomes the practice of the *Lotus Sūtra* when carried out with this understanding. This interpretative stance supported the widespread participation of both monastics and lay people in multiple forms of religious devotion. For Nichiren, however, the integration of all teachings into the *Lotus Sūtra* meant that they lose their separate identity, just as the many rivers, emptying into the ocean,

²⁹ *Ichidai shōgyō taii* 一代聖教大意, *Teihon* 1175; *Shugo kokka ron*, 1133; "Jisshō shō" 十章鈔 1490.

³⁰ *Kaitai sokushin jōbutsu gi*, *Teihon* 112.

assume the same salty flavor and lose their original names.³¹ He also began to promote the particular practice of chanting the *daimoku* or title of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which in later times would become associated almost exclusively with his following. Scholars have long pointed out the similarity between Nichiren's *daimoku* and Hōnen's exclusive *nenbutsu*; both are simple invocations, accessible even to the unlettered, said to be uniquely suited to human capacity in the Final Dharma age and able to save even the most sinful persons.³² Some caution is in order here, as it would be an oversimplification to think that Nichiren put forth the *daimoku* solely as a counter to Hōnen's *nenbutsu*: The practice of chanting the title of the *Lotus Sūtra* predates Nichiren,³³ and the *Lotus Sūtra*, by virtue of its internal references to an evil time after the Buddha's nirvāṇa, was already associated with notions of the Final Dharma age. More importantly, the doctrinal basis in which Nichiren grounded the *daimoku*—the interpenetration of the dharmas and the realization of Buddhahood in one's present body—also differs markedly from Hōnen's teaching of aspiring to birth in the Pure Land solely by relying on Amida's vow. Yet his emphasis on a single, universally accessible practice that alone suits the capacities of all persons in the Final Dharma age does indeed appear to be a structure that Nichiren absorbed at least in part from Hōnen's teaching, even as he opposed its content. More precisely, one might say that he appropriated Hōnen's logic of exclusive practice and assimilated it to a *Lotus*-specific mode. The earlier unity of *Lotus* and Pure Land teachings had been broken by Hōnen's declaration of the exclusive *nenbutsu* and reinforced by his disciples' criticism of devotion to the *Lotus Sūtra*. Nichiren's teaching of exclusive *Lotus* devotion, reinforced by his accusations of Dharma slander leveled against Hōnen's followers, now brought the two teachings into mutual opposition. As Nichiren summed up the matter, "The *nenbutsu*

³¹ *Shoshū mondō shō* 諸宗問答鈔, *Teihon* 1:25. These two positions represent opposing poles of interpretation of the notion of *kaie* 開會, the opening and integration of all other teachings into the one vehicle of the *Lotus Sūtra*. From an absolute standpoint, once all teachings are "opened and integrated" into the *Lotus*, the distinction between "true" and "provisional" dissolves, and all practices become expressions of the one vehicle. But from a relative standpoint, the distinction between true and provisional is maintained; for Nichiren, who held the latter position, the opening and integration of all other teachings into the *Lotus Sūtra* meant that they were no longer to be practiced independently. See Stone, *Original Enlightenment*, 15, 169–70, 308, and the Japanese sources cited there.

³² E.g., Ienaga Saburō, *Chūsei bukkō shisōshi kenkyū*, 71–81.

³³ On the antecedents of Nichiren's *daimoku* practice, see Lucia Dolce, "Esoteric Patterns in Nichiren's Interpretation of the Lotus Sutra," 294–315, and Jacqueline I. Stone, "Chanting the August Title of the Lotus Sutra."

is the karmic cause for falling into the Avīci Hell. The *Lotus Sūtra* is the direct path of realizing Buddhahood and attaining the Way. One should quickly abandon the Pure Land sect and embrace the *Lotus Sūtra*, free oneself from birth and death, and attain awakening (*bodhi*)."³⁴

Nichiren's opposition to the exclusive *nenbutsu* not only provided him with the conceptual framework within which he began developing his teaching of *Lotus* exclusivism but also committed him to an adversarial path of rebuking "slander of the Dharma" that would shape his later thought and conduct, leading him in time to expand his criticisms to include other Buddhist forms as well. Eventually his opposition to perceived Dharma slander would pit him against the entire religious establishment and the government that patronized it and provoke the repeated persecutions that marked his tumultuous career.

A Nation of Dharma Slanderers

In 1256 a massive earthquake devastated the town of Kamakura, where Nichiren was living. The earthquake was the latest in series of recent calamities, including drought, famine, and epidemics. Prayer rites and government relief efforts brought no help. By his own account, Nichiren turned to the Buddhist sūtras to clarify the cause of these repeated troubles. There he found multiple passages predicting various disasters that will occur in a realm whose ruler fails to protect the True Dharma and instead allows it to be neglected or maligned. These scriptural predictions, Nichiren observed, were materializing in Japan at present. "When prayers are offered for the peace of the land and still the three disasters occur within the country, then one should know that it is because an evil teaching has spread," he wrote.³⁵ In a group of essays written between 1259 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 essays is his *Risshō ankoku ron* 立正安國論 (On bringing peace to the land by establishing the True Dharma), submitted as a memorial to the Bakufu in 1260. Here Nichiren argued that the offense of slandering the Dharma not only carries fearsome soteriological consequences for the perpetrator but has repercussions for society at large. Because the *Lotus Sūtra* and the esoteric teachings had been set aside in favor of the

³⁴ "Nenbutsu mugen jigoku shō," *Teihon* 1:34.

³⁵ *Shugo kokka ron*, *Teihon* 1:116.

nenbutsu, he said, the protective deities, no longer able to taste the sweet nectar of the Dharma, had abandoned the country, enabling demons to enter in their stead and bring destruction to the people. Passages from Nichiren's *Risshō ankoku ron* and other writings suggest that, by this time, the exclusive *nenbutsu* was not only gaining ground but had begun to displace other practices. For example, he wrote, people were cutting off the fingers of statues of Śākyamuni Buddha and reshaping them to form the mudrā of Amida, thus changing the identity of those images. Halls dedicated to the Buddha Yakushi Nyorai 藥師如来 had been converted to Amida halls. On Mt. Hiei, the ritual copying of the *Lotus Sūtra*, carried out for more than four hundred years, had been replaced by the copying of the three Pure Land sūtras, and the annual lectures on the teachings of the Chinese Tiantai (Jpn. Tendai) founder Zhiyi 智顗 (538–597) had been supplanted by lectures on the works of the Pure Land master Shandao, whom Hōnen had claimed as a patriarch of his Pure Land school. Chapels dedicated to the Japanese Tendai founder Saichō 最澄 (766/767–822) and other Tendai patriarchs were allowed to fall into disrepair, and lands once designated for their support had been confiscated and offered to halls newly erected for *nenbutsu* practice.³⁶ The spread of the *Senchakushū*'s message, in Nichiren's eyes, had in effect turned Japan into a nation of Dharma slanderers. "The world as a whole has turned its back upon the right; people give themselves entirely to evil," he wrote. "Rather than offering up those myriad prayers [for relief], it would be better to ban this one iniquity!"³⁷

Japan's dire situation, as Nichiren saw it, was the fault not only of Hōnen's followers but of government officials for supporting them. For that reason, he submitted the *Risshō ankoku ron* specifically to Hōjō Tokiyori 北條時頼 (1227–1263), the former regent to the shogun. Although formally retired from office, Tokiyori was at the time the most powerful figure in the Bakufu. Nichiren seems to have envisioned a return to the classic Buddhist ideal of state-saṅgha relations, in which monks advise the ruler and the ruler protects the saṅgha—if necessary, by purifying it of undesirable elements. To drive home both the gravity of the sin of slanderer the Dharma and the ruler's responsibility to hold it in check, he cites in his *Risshō ankoku ron* a provocative episode from the *Nirvāṇa*

Sūtra in which the Buddha recalls a prior lifetime when, as a powerful king, he once put to death a number of Brahmins who were maligning the Mahāyāna sūtras. "As a result of that act," the Buddha says, "I never thereafter fell into hell."³⁸ Nichiren quickly proceeds to clarify that he is not advocating killing anyone; slanderers of the Dharma can be effectively suppressed by the simple expedient of denying them material support. "Restraining persons who slander the Dharma and valuing monks who follow the correct way will assure stability within the country and bring peace to the world at large," he urges, and adds, "Now with all speed you must simply revise your faith and at once devote it to the single good of the true vehicle. Then the threefold world will all become the Buddha land, and how could a Buddha land decline?"³⁹ This last passage represents an early articulation of the causal relationship that Nichiren posited between the spread of faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* and the peace of the realm, which was to inform his mature vision of a Buddha land to be established in the present world.

The *Risshō ankoku ron* sounds a note of urgency in calling for the suppression of Dharma slander. Nichiren pointed out that already violent storms, crop failure, starvation, disease, and ominous celestial portents had occurred, just as the sūtras foretell. If the situation was not promptly rectified, then, judging by these scriptural predictions, two further disasters might be expected: internal revolt and foreign invasion. Both would surely occur, he warned, if the exclusive *nenbutsu* continued to spread unchecked.⁴⁰

As noted above, Nichiren's *Risshō ankoku ron* was by no means the first work composed in rebuttal to Hōnen's *Senchakushū*. Nichiren's claim that the exclusive *nenbutsu* had caused protective deities to abandon the country, leaving it vulnerable to demons, had, for example, already been advanced by Myōe in his 1212 *Zaijarin*.⁴¹ But by Nichiren's time, exclusive *nenbutsu* followers had gained considerable influence in Kamakura and evidently pressured their patrons in the Bakufu to silence Nichiren's objections. Nichiren writes that, not long after submitting the *Risshō ankoku ron*, he defeated in debate two leading Pure Land clerics in Kamakura, Nōan 能安 and Dōamidabutsu 道阿彌陀佛 (a.k.a. Dōkyō-bō Nenkū

³⁶ *Risshō ankoku ron*, *Teihon* 1:223; *Kaitai sokushin jōbutsu gi*, 1:12; "Nanjō Hyōe Shichirō-dono gosho" 南條兵衛七郎殿御書, 1:322–23.

³⁷ *Risshō ankoku ron*, *Teihon* 1:209, 217.

³⁸ *Da banniepan jing* (*Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*) 大般涅槃經, T no. 374, 12:434c20; quoted in *Risshō ankoku ron*, *Teihon* 1:220–21.

³⁹ *Teihon* 1:220, 226.

⁴⁰ *Teihon* 1:225.

⁴¹ Kamata and Tanaka, *Kamakura kyū bukkyō*, 47.

道教房念空, d. 1287), whose lay supporters then spread malicious rumors about him to local authorities. A mob attacked his residence, forcing him to leave Kamakura for a time. On his return, in 1261, he was exiled to the Izu peninsula, where he remained until 1263.⁴²

Nichiren's writings from the Izu period increasingly emphasize the *Lotus Sūtra* as the sole vehicle of liberation in the Final Dharma age. This was when he explicitly formulated his "five principles" (*gōgi* 五義), or five interrelated perspectives from which he argued the exclusive validity of the *Lotus Sūtra*: the teaching, human capacity, the time, the country, and the sequence of propagation. The first four together develop the claim that the *Lotus Sūtra* represents the complete and perfect teaching that alone guarantees the Buddhahood of all and suits the capacities of everyone living in the present time (*mappō*) and place (Japan). The fifth principle expresses Nichiren's conviction that to propagate in any particular country a teaching inferior to those that have already spread contravenes the Buddha's intent. Since the true teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* had been established in Japan by the Tendai founder Saichō, Nichiren maintained, to spread provisional teachings such as the *nenbutsu* was an offense against the Dharma.⁴³ Along with his growing emphasis on exclusive devotion to the *Lotus Sūtra*, Nichiren also worked to clarify more fully the offense of Dharma slander, which obstructs that devotion. His 1262 *Ken hōbō shō* 顯勝法鈔 (A clarification of Dharma slander) argues that "slander of the Dharma" entails failing to abandon an inferior teaching in favor of a superior one, or holding a lower teaching to be equal or even superior to a higher one. Definitions of "superior" versus "inferior" doctrines in Nichiren's view represented, not a historically contingent human evaluation, but a metaphysical principle that informed the sequence of the Buddha's preaching as set forth in the traditional Tendai *kyōhan*. Following the text of the *Lotus* itself, he insisted that "all buddhas of the three time periods [of past, present and future] observe the same order in expounding their teachings," first giving provisional teachings to cultivate their auditors' understanding and only at the end revealing the true and complete teaching that alone leads to Buddhahood for all.⁴⁴ One may

⁴² "Rondan tekittai gosho" 論談敵對御書, *Teihon* 1:274; *Shimoyama goshōsoku* 下山御消息, 21330.

⁴³ On Nichiren's five principles, see Stone, *Original Enlightenment*, 252–55.

⁴⁴ *Ken hōbō shō*, *Teihon* 1:259. Nichiren refers to the *Lotus Sūtra* passage: "Frankly discarding expedient means/... Like all buddhas of the three time periods/in their order of Dharma preaching,/now I too in the same way/preach the Dharma without discriminations" (*Miaofa lianhua jing*, T 910a19, 22–23).

know the superiority of the *Lotus*, Nichiren said, by the Buddha's words in its introductory scripture, "In these forty years and more, I have not yet revealed the truth."⁴⁵ Since, for Nichiren, only the *Lotus Sūtra* represented the true and perfect teaching, appropriate to the present time and place, within the context of Japan in his day only the *Lotus* could become the object of Dharma slander. For exponents of the provisional teachings represented by the Kegon, Sanron, Hossō, Shingon, Zen, or Pure Land schools to criticize one another's doctrines in order to promote their own, he said, does not amount to slander of the Dharma. But to assert that any of these teachings equals or surpasses the *Lotus Sūtra* most definitely does.⁴⁶

Nichiren also sought to convey the gravity of this sin. It is, he says, like the five heinous offenses (*gōgyakuzai* 五逆罪)—killing one's father, mother, or an arhat; causing the body of the Buddha to bleed; or fomenting disunity in the saṅgha—in that it leads to the Avīci Hell, or the Hell without Respite (*mugen jigoku* 無間地獄)—a place so terrible that the Buddha refrained from describing it in detail, because ordinary persons, on merely hearing of its sufferings, would vomit blood and die. But because the sin of Dharma slander works to block the path of Buddhahood for all living beings, it is a thousand times worse than the five heinous offenses. Moreover, the five heinous offenses, in Nichiren's opinion, were characteristic of the Buddha's age rather than his own. At present, he wrote, there is no Buddha in the world, so one cannot injure his person; there is no unity in the saṅgha, so one cannot disrupt it; and there are no arhats, so one cannot kill them. Of these five grave sins, only killing one's parents remains possible, and this offense is constrained by the sanctions of secular law. Today, he asserted, it is not for wrongdoings such as these but for the error of rejecting the *Lotus Sūtra* that people fall into the Avīci Hell.⁴⁷

Concern with the sin of Dharma slander and the perceived need to counter it also informed Nichiren's growing self-identification, during his banishment to Izu, with specific passages in the *Lotus Sūtra* that seemed to speak directly to his own situation in describing the difficulties of upholding the sūtra in a future evil age. The "Dharma Preacher" chapter of the *Lotus* says, "Hatred and jealousy toward this sūtra abound even

⁴⁵ *Wuliangyi jing*, T 9:386b1–2.

⁴⁶ *Ken hōbō shō*. See especially *Teihon* 1:256–72 *passim*.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 253–56. Nichiren does, however, acknowledge sins current in his own day that "resemble the five heinous offenses," such as destroying buddha images or votive stūpas, appropriating temple lands, or killing wise persons; those who commit these sins, he says, are born in one or another of Avīci's sixteen ancillary hells (254).

during the Buddha's lifetime; how much more so after his nirvāṇa!"⁴⁸ And the "Fortitude" chapter speaks of eminent monks, revered by the world at large, who will revile, persecute, and oust *Lotus* devotees and induce the authorities to take action against them. These passages may have reflected experience on the part of the sūtra's redactors, as followers of the minority Mahāyāna movement, in being ostracized by the Buddhist mainstream. But the sūtra casts these passages in the form of predictions, and Nichiren saw them as foretelling the slander of the *Lotus Sūtra* that had spread in Japan in his own time and the hostility that he himself encountered in rebuking it. At this point he began referring to himself as the *gyōja* 行者—practitioner or votary—of the *Lotus Sūtra*, one who, in opposing slander of the Dharma, incurs the very persecutions that the sūtra describes and thus confirms the truth of its words. Nichiren now claimed that he was reading the sūtra with his body (*shikidoku* 色読), not merely verbally reciting its words or mentally contemplating its teachings but actually living them in his conduct and experience. Nichiren's concept of "bodily reading" of the *Lotus Sūtra* was in effect a circular or mirror hermeneutic in which the *Lotus Sūtra* legitimized his own actions and his actions fulfilled the sūtra's predictions, sūtra and practitioner simultaneously reflecting, validating, and bearing witness to each other.⁴⁹

Pardoned in 1263, Nichiren return to Kamakura where he resumed his preaching activities. As his emphasis on the exclusive efficacy of the *Lotus Sūtra* increased, his polemical targets expanded. By now they were beginning to include not merely the exclusive *nenbutsu* but also the emergent Rishshū 律宗 or precept revival movement as well as the Zen 禅 and Shingon schools. All these forms of Buddhism fell within his understanding of "Dharma slander" as the rejection of a higher teaching in favor of a lower one. Like Saichō before him, Nichiren repudiated the full complement of the *shibunritsu* 四分律 or *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya* monastic precepts as "Hīnayāna"; since the Mahāyāna ordination platform and the "perfect precepts" (*enkai* 圓戒) of the *Lotus Sūtra* had already been established on Mt. Hiei, to return to full observance of the *vinaya* rules as the Rishshū revivalists urged amounted in his eyes to the offense of discarding the superior for the inferior. Zen teachers also maligned the Dharma, in his view, by rejecting the sūtras altogether as no more than "a finger pointing at the moon." The esoteric teachings too were only provisional Mahāyāna,

⁴⁸ *Miaofa lianhua jing*, T 9:31b20–21.

⁴⁹ Ruben L. F. Habito, "Bodily Reading of the *Lotus Sūtra*, 198–99.

and yet Kūkai 空海 (774–835), founder of the Shingon school, had explicitly ranked them above the *Lotus Sūtra*. Indeed, embracing any form of Buddhist devotion, other than to the *Lotus* alone, represented "slander of the true Dharma." Nichiren's rejection of the other Buddhist schools was summed up by his later followers in sloganized form as the so-called "four admonitions" (*shika kakugen* 四箇格言), drawn from various passages in his work: "Nenbutsu leads to the Avīci Hell, Zen is a devil, Shingon will destroy the nation, and Ritsu is a traitor."⁵⁰ By 1269, he would write that "all people of the entire country of Japan, high and low, without a single exception are guilty of slandering the Dharma."⁵¹

Nichiren now pressed this point with mounting urgency. Several years earlier, in the *Rishshō ankoku ron*, he had predicted that foreign invasion would ensue if people persisted in their slander of the Dharma. Now that prophecy appeared to be coming true. Word had reached Japan of the Mongol conquests that had toppled the Song dynasty in China and subjugated the Korean peninsula. In 1268, envoys from Kubilai Khan arrived demanding that Japan, too, submit to Mongol overlordship. These developments, according as they did with the scriptural predictions of calamities that would befall a country where the True Dharma is slighted, underscored for Nichiren the righteousness of his message. While the country readied its defenses against the threat of Mongol attack, he intensified his preaching, and his message of the unique salvific power of the *Lotus Sūtra* became increasingly intertwined with rebukes against the sin of Dharma slander. As both court and Bakufu began to sponsor esoteric prayer rites to repel the enemy, Nichiren's criticisms focused increasingly on *shingon*, by which term he designated the esoteric teachings and practices of both Shingon and Tendai schools. Esoteric rites, being based on provisional teachings, could only bring about still worse calamities, he asserted.⁵² He also insisted that the Buddhist tutelary deities, Brahmā and Indra, as well as Hachiman 八幡, the Sun Goddess Amaterasu Ōmikami 天照大神, and the other *kami* of Japan could not be relied on for protection; rather, these

⁵⁰ For the textual sources of the four admonitions and the reasoning behind Nichiren's criticism of these schools, see Asai Endō, "Shika kakugen." Nichiren's later work also expands his criticisms to include Pure Land teachers before Hōnen, such as Shandao and Genshin 源信 (942–1017), as well as the Tendai Buddhism of his day.

⁵¹ "Hōmon mōsarubekiyo no koto," *Teihon* 1:454.

⁵² See for example *Senji shō* 撰時抄, *Teihon* 2:1053. Nichiren faulted teachers of Tendai esoteric Buddhism for ranking the esoteric scriptures as equal or even superior to the *Lotus Sūtra*.

deities had deliberately instigated the Mongol attacks in order to reprove Japan's slander of the *Lotus Sūtra*. "The whole country," he wrote:

has now become the enemy of buddhas and *kami*. . . . China and Korea, following the example of India, became Buddhist countries. But because they embraced the Zen and *nenbutsu* teachings, they were destroyed by the Mongols. Japan is a disciple to those two countries. If they have been destroyed, how can our country remain at peace? All the people in Japan will fall into the Avīci Hell.⁵³

These themes continue throughout Nichiren's second exile (1271–1274), to Sado Island in the Japan Sea, and his subsequent period of reclusion at Mt. Minobu in Kai Province, up through the end of his life. Failing to convince the authorities of his views, he at last reluctantly concluded that only a disaster on the scale of foreign invasion could rouse his contemporaries from their error; compared to the long-term karmic retribution that results from slander of the Dharma, even Mongol conquest would, after all, be the lesser evil. "The destruction of our country would be grievous," he wrote.

But if [the invasion] fails to materialize, the people of Japan will disparage the *Lotus Sūtra* more and more, and they will all fall into the Avīci Hell. Should the enemy prove more powerful, the country may be destroyed, but slander of the Dharma will all but vanish.⁵⁴

The Choice of Shakubuku

In a letter written to his followers from Sado Island in 1272, Nichiren makes reference to disciples who had begun to doubt him or even parted ways with him when he was arrested and sent into exile under criminal sentence. He reports them as saying, "Nichiren is our teacher, but he is too obstinate. We will spread the *Lotus Sūtra* in a gentler manner."⁵⁵ One can well imagine that Nichiren's disciples might have urged him to moderate his attacks on other forms of Buddhism, if only for the purely pragmatic consideration of avoiding government suppression. Some indeed may have felt that he had brought his hardships on himself. Nichiren, however, saw his uncompromising stance as mandated by canonical references to proper discrimination between two methods of Dharma teaching: *shōju*

摂受, or leading others gradually without criticizing their present stance, and *shakubuku* 折伏, or assertively rebuking attachment to false views.⁵⁶ For him, the exigencies of his own time and place demanded the "harsh" method of teaching by *shakubuku*, over the more accommodating *shōju* approach:

When one must face enemies, one needs a sword, a staff, or a bow and arrows. When one has no enemies, however, such weapons are of no use at all. In this age, the provisional teachings have turned into enemies of the true teaching. 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 Sūtra*. With good reason, Tiantai [Zhiyi] said, "The *shakubuku* of the *Lotus Sūtra* is to refute the doctrines and principles of the provisional teachings."⁵⁷

Nichiren did allow that, even in *mappō*, the accommodative, *shōju* approach could be appropriate in a country where people are merely ignorant of the Dharma, but in a country where the true Dharma is actively maligned, only *shakubuku* would serve. Japan, in his view, clearly fell into the latter category.⁵⁸

Nichiren's choice of the *shakubuku* method meant that, for him, promoting faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* would of necessity entail rebuking "Dharma slander," or attachment to other teachings. And inevitably, his criticisms of other Buddhist schools invited punitive measures from the authorities. Banished to the bleak northern island of Sado, Nichiren represented his exile as something he had foreseen in the light of predictions in the *Lotus* and other sūtras and deliberately chosen with full knowledge of the consequences. He alone, he believed, had come to see clearly how people are deceived into abandoning the *Lotus Sūtra* in favor of provisional teachings and fall in consequence into the evil paths.

⁵⁶ While often associated with Nichiren, the word "*shakubuku*" is by no means his invention. A cursory search of the SAT *Daizōkyō* Text Database yields 1170 occurrences of the term *shakubuku* and 90 occurrences of *shakubuku* and *shōju* paired (accessed May 6, 2012, <http://zdzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/index.html>). Nichiren seems to have drawn particularly on the *Śrīmālā-devī-sūtra*, which describes these two methods as "enabling the Dharma to long endure" (*Shengman jing* 勝鬘經, T no. 353, 12:217c13), as well as the works of the Chinese Tiantai patriarchs Zhiyi and Zhanran 湛然 (711–782) (see "Shakubuku" in *NJ*, 172b–173a).

⁵⁷ *Nyosetsu shugyō shō* 如説修行鈔, *Teihon* 1:735–36; *Letters*, 68, slightly modified. The quote from Zhiyi is at *Miofa lianhua jing xuanyi* 妙法蓮華經玄義, T no. 1716, 33:792b17.

⁵⁸ *Kaimoku shō* 開目抄, *Teihon* 1:606.

⁵³ "Hōmon mōsarubekiyō no koto," *Teihon* 1:454–55.

⁵⁴ Itai dōshin no koto 異體同心事, *Teihon* 1:830.

⁵⁵ "Sado gosho," *Teihon* 1:618.

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. . . . But of these two courses, surely the latter is the one to choose.⁵⁹

On one hand, *shakubuku* was for Nichiren an act of bodhisattva-like compassion, carried out for others' sake. To rebuke another's slander of the Dharma was, potentially, to save that person from rebirth in the Avīci Hell. He explained:

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 灌頂 writes, "If one befriends another but lacks the compassion to correct him, one is in fact that person's enemy."⁶⁰

At the same time, meeting persecution for opposing enemies of the *Lotus Sūtra* embodied for Nichiren the bodhisattva's resolve to give up his life if necessary in defense of the Dharma. The sūtras tell of bodhisattvas of old who sacrificed eyes, limbs, even life itself for the Dharma's sake. For Nichiren, to rebuke slander of the *Lotus Sūtra* and endure the great trials that resulted was to follow in their footsteps.⁶¹

In addition to such lofty self-negating motives, Nichiren frankly acknowledged more interested reasons for his commitment to *shakubuku*. In his understanding, no matter how earnestly one might recite the *Lotus Sūtra* or how learned in its doctrines and meditative practices one might become, to seek Buddhahood without speaking out against Dharma slander was not only a futile undertaking but a betrayal of the buddhas and patriarchs. This reprehensible omission would in effect negate the merit of one's own practice and cause one to fall into the Avīci Hell together with those slanderers of the Dharma whom one had failed to rebuke.⁶²

⁵⁹ Ibid., 1:556–57; *Selected Writings*, 79, slightly modified.

⁶⁰ *Kaimoku shō*, 1:608; *Selected Writings*, 146, slightly modified. Guanding's statement is at *Da banniepan jing shu* 大般涅槃經疏, T no. 1767, 38:80b1.

⁶¹ See Jacqueline I. Stone, "Giving One's Life for the *Lotus Sūtra* in Nichiren's Thought"

⁶² For example, "Gassui gosho" 月水御書, *Teihon* 1:289–90; *Shōgu mondō shō* 聖愚問答鈔 1:385; "Sōya-dono gohenji" 曾谷殿御返事, 2:1254–55.

Nichiren illustrated this by analogy to the situation of a court official who serves with dedication for ten or twenty years but knowingly fails to report an enemy of the ruler; his lapse supersedes the merit of his long service, and in addition, he becomes guilty of a crime.⁶³ No threat of persecution, in Nichiren's view, could excuse failure to admonish Dharma slander:

When the Buddha himself has declared that the *Lotus Sūtra* is foremost, if one learns of a person who ranks it second or third, and fails to speak out because of fear of others or of the government authorities, then, [as Guanding says,] "One is in fact that person's enemy" and a terrible enemy to all living beings. . . . To speak out without fear of others, without flinching before society, is precisely what the [*Lotus*] *Sūtra* means when it says, "We do not cherish bodily life. We value only the supreme way." . . . Because I wish to avoid the offense of complicity in slander of the Dharma, because I fear the Buddha's reproach, 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.⁶⁴

Nichiren's stated reasons for adopting the *shakubuku* method thus unite compassion for others, concern for one's own karmic destiny, and response to the demands of loyalty and gratitude—both to the Buddha and the Dharma and, in a more worldly sense, to one's ruler and country.

Nichiren also addressed a different, soteriological objection to his preaching methods: namely, that assertively preaching the *Lotus Sūtra* to persons who are instead attracted to the *nenbutsu* or other teachings would simply cause them to denigrate the *Lotus* all the more and thus form the karmic cause for future bad rebirths. According to the sūtra itself, the Buddha himself had not preached the *Lotus* from the outset because living beings, mired in delusion, would fail to take faith in the sūtra and instead revile it, and in consequence would fall into the evil paths. Precisely because of the horrific retribution awaiting those who malign the *Lotus*, the Buddha admonishes, "I say to you, Śāriputra, . . . [When you are] in the midst of ignorant men, / Do not preach this scripture."⁶⁵ This raised the question: Wouldn't one do better to lead people gradually through provisional teachings as Śākyamuni Buddha himself had done, rather than insisting on immediately preaching the *Lotus Sūtra* to persons whose minds are not open to it? For Nichiren, however, the scriptural warning

⁶³ "Nanjō Hyōe Shichirō-dono gosho," *Teihon* 1:321–22.

⁶⁴ "Akimoto gosho" 秋元御書, *Teihon* 2:734, 1735; *Writings* 12017, 1019, modified. The quotation from Guanding is cited in n. 60 above. The sūtra passage is at T 9:36c18.

⁶⁵ *Miaofa lianhua jing*, T 9:56a8–10; Hurvitz, *Sūtra of the Lotus Blossom*, 80–81.

against preaching the *Lotus Sūtra* to the ignorant applied only to the Buddha's lifetime and to the subsequent two thousand years of the True and Semblance Dharma ages (*shōbō* 正法, *zōbō* 像法), when people still had the capacity to achieve Buddhahood through provisional teachings. Now in the Final Dharma Age, he argued, no one can realize liberation through such incomplete doctrines; therefore the Buddha had permitted ordinary teachers such as himself to preach the *Lotus Sūtra* directly, so that people could establish a karmic connection with it, "whether by acceptance or rejection." Here Nichiren invoked the logic of "reverse connection" (*gyakuen* 逆縁), the idea that even a negative relationship to the Dharma, formed by rejecting or maligning it, will nonetheless eventually lead one to liberation. Persons who have formed no karmic connection to the Dharma may perhaps avoid rebirth in the hells but lack the condition for attaining Buddhahood, while those who slander the Dharma nevertheless form a bond with it. Though they must suffer the terrible consequences of their slander, after expiating that offense, they will be able to encounter the *Lotus Sūtra* again and achieve Buddhahood by virtue of the very karmic connection to the sūtra that they formed by slandering it. Now in the Final Dharma age, Nichiren argued, most persons are so burdened by delusive attachments that they are already bound for unfortunate rebirths.

If they must fall into the evil paths in any event, it would be far better that they do so for maligning the *Lotus Sūtra* than for any worldly offense. . . . Even if one slanders the *Lotus Sūtra* and thereby falls into hell, [by the relationship to the *Lotus Sūtra* that one has formed,] one will acquire a hundred, thousand, ten thousand times more merit than if one had made offerings to and taken refuge in Śākyamuni, Amida, and as many other buddhas as there are sands in the Ganges River.⁶⁶

Thus in this age, Nichiren maintained, one should persist in urging people to embrace the *Lotus Sūtra*, regardless of their response, for the *Lotus* alone can implant in them the seed or cause that enables one to become a buddha.⁶⁷

Nichiren's choice of the assertive *shakubuku* method thus arose from his perception of Japan and his own era as a place and time when people as a whole rejected the only teaching that could lead to Buddhahood.

⁶⁶ Ken hōbō shō, Teihon 1:260–61. See also the discussion of this issue in *Hokke shōshin jōbutsu shō* 法華初心成佛鈔, 21424–26.

⁶⁷ On Nichiren's idea of the *daimoku* as the seed of Buddhahood, see Stone, *Original Enlightenment*, 270–71, and the Japanese sources cited there.

When considered in terms of karmic causality operating across present and future, the right course, he believed, could only be to preach this message without compromise, regardless of short-term consequences. Even if others might slander the *Lotus Sūtra* as a result of one's preaching, they would thereby form the karmic connection for attaining Buddhahood in the future. And even if the practice of *shakubuku* were to cost one's life, it would free one from the sin of complicity in others' acts of Dharma slander and prevent one's own fall into the Avici Hell. In addition, as Nichiren frequently pointed out in his later writings, opposition of the kind that he incurred was predicted in the *Lotus Sūtra* itself, which describes the hostility that its votaries will encounter in the evil age after the Buddha's passing. "Look around you in the world today," he wrote.

Are there monks other than myself who are cursed and vilified, or attacked with swords and staves, for the *Lotus Sūtra's* sake? Were it not for me, the prophecy made in this verse of the sūtra would have been sheer falsehood!⁶⁸

That his rebukes of Dharma slander invited persecution was not, in Nichiren's eyes, a reason to abandon the *shakubuku* method, but rather a sign that he had made the right choice in adopting it.

Rebuking Dharma Slander and Expiating Sin

Nichiren's second exile, to Sado, 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, many of whom had been arrested in his absence. His writings from the Sado period take an introspective turn and show him wrestling with the question of why, when the *Lotus Sūtra* promises its devotees "peace and security in the present life," he should have to encounter such hardships. In general, he said, people meet with contempt because they slighted 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 disparaging the Dharma that he now so implacably opposed.

⁶⁸ *Kaimoku shō*, Teihon 1:559; *Selected Writings*, 83, slightly modified. Nichiren alludes to a passage in the verse section of chap. 13 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which describes the trials that those who spread the sūtra will encounter in an evil age after the Buddha's nirvāṇa (*Miaofa lianhua jing*, T 9:36b21–37a1; Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus*, 204–7).

From the beginningless past I have been born countless times as an evil ruler who deprived the practitioners of the *Lotus Sūtra* 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 Sūtra*. In addition, countless times I cut off the heads of *Lotus Sūtra* practitioners.⁶⁹

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 in his present life:

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.⁷⁰

From this perspective, Nichiren's rebuking of slander of the Dharma was not only an act of compassion, to save others from the consequences of their present offense, but also an act of repentance, to expiate that very same offense on his own part in the past.

Toward the end of his period of exile on Sado, Nichiren even 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.⁷¹

Banished and despised, Nichiren was in this way able to conceive of and represent himself, rather than his tormenters, as the agent of his trials. In the same vein, he even expressed gratitude toward the eminent clerics

⁶⁹ *Kaimoku shō*, *Teihon* 1:602; *Selected Writings*, 139, slightly modified. See also *Sado gosho*, 1:616–17.

⁷⁰ *Kaimoku shō*, *Teihon* 1:602–3; *Selected Writings*, 139, slightly modified.

⁷¹ "Kashaku hōbō metsuzai shō" 呵責謗法滅罪鈔, *Teihon* 1:781; *Letters*, 285, slightly modified.

and government officials who had persecuted him, calling them his "best allies" in attaining Buddhahood.⁷²

Nichiren's Sado writings also show a growing identification with two specific bodhisattva figures who appear in the *Lotus Sūtra*. In that he strove to disseminate faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* in the *mappō* era, Nichiren saw himself as a forerunner of Bodhisattva Superior Conduct (Skt. *Viśiṣṭacāritra*, Jpn. *Jōgyō* 上行), leader of a vast throng of bodhisattvas who, in chapter 15 of the *Lotus*, emerge from beneath the earth and receive Śākyamuni Buddha's mandate to spread the sūtra in an evil age after his *nirvāṇa*. But in that he saw himself as expiating his own past offenses against the Dharma by enduring persecution, Nichiren identified with Bodhisattva Never Disparaging (Skt. *Sadāparibhūta*, Jōfukyō 常不輕) described in chapter 20 of the *Lotus*, who had persevered despite opposition in spreading the Dharma. This bodhisattva (eventually revealed as the Buddha Śākyamuni in a prior life) was dubbed "Never Disparaging" because he bowed to everyone he met, saying, "I respect you all deeply. I would never dare disparage you. Why? Because you will all practice the bodhisattva path and succeed in becoming buddhas!" 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 Sūtra* 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.⁷³

Nichiren read the story of Never Disparaging in a way that reflected—or perhaps even prompted—his understanding of his own ordeals as expiation of past acts against the Dharma. In his reading, Never Disparaging, like Nichiren himself, had spread by means of *shakubuku* a teaching embodying the essence of the *Lotus Sūtra* 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*, a fate that Nichiren certainly believed awaited his own enemies. In the *Lotus Sūtra* text, the phrase "after expiating this sin" clearly refers to those who maligned and attacked Never Disparaging and who, after expiating the grave offense of their Dharma slander, were able to reencounter him and achieve supreme awakening through the *Lotus Sūtra*. But even while accepting this reading,

⁷² *Shuju onfurumai gosho* 種種御振舞御書, *Teihon* 2:973.

⁷³ *Miaofa lianhua jing*, T 9:50c16–51b1; Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus*, 280–82.

Nichiren offered another, in which 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," Nichiren wrote. "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."⁷⁴ In this way, Nichiren interpreted the scriptural account of Never Disparaging in terms of 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 his future Buddhahood. He 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.⁷⁵

The "Never Disparaging" chapter tells of a *Lotus* practitioner who met great trials in spreading the sūtra 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 via the *Lotus Sūtra* in a vast soteriological drama of sin, repentance, and the realization of Buddhahood. Those who malign a practitioner of the *Lotus Sūtra* must undergo repeated rebirth in the Avīci Hell for countless kalpas. But because they have formed a "reverse connection" to the sūtra by slandered it, after expiating their offense, they will eventually be able to encounter the *Lotus* again and attain Buddhahood. By a similar logic, the practitioner who suffers their harassment must encounter this ordeal precisely because he himself maligned the *Lotus Sūtra* in the past. 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 too will attain Buddhahood. In short, whether by embracing or opposing it, all who encounter the *Lotus Sūtra* eventually "succeed in becoming buddhas."

Eliminating Dharma Slander in One's Personal Practice

In keeping with his understanding that he himself had slandered the Dharma in the past, Nichiren often cautioned his followers that this offense had to be countered not only in others but also in oneself. Like a number of other Buddhist teachers of his time, Nichiren did not accord morality a central role in his soteriology. He accepted as a given the traditional Buddhist ethic with its prohibitions on killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and false speech, but he did not stress observance of the moral precepts as a condition for liberation. He seems to have believed that persons of genuine faith would not do evil gratuitously ("One who chants [the *daimoku*] as the sūtra teaches will not have a crooked mind");⁷⁶ he also maintained that ordinary, unavoidable wrongdoings would be outweighed by the merits of embracing the *Lotus* and would not pull the practitioner down into the evil realms.⁷⁷ "Whether or not evil persons of this latter age attain Buddhahood does not depend upon whether their sins are heavy or slight but rests solely upon whether or not they have faith in this sūtra," he wrote.⁷⁸ This assurance, however, assumed that practitioners had fully eliminated any slander of the Dharma on their own part. Traces of this offense might remain even in the actions of committed devotees, and, if unchecked, could obscure the merits of their practice and topple them into the evil realms in lifetimes to come. Nichiren likened this to a leak sinking even a seaworthy ship or a small ant hole eroding the embankments between rice fields, and urged followers to "bail out the water of Dharma slander and disbelief, and reinforce the embankments of faith" in their personal practice.⁷⁹

Nichiren's letters to his followers suggest multiple ways in which a *Lotus* devotee might still be implicated in Dharma slander. One obvious way was by engaging in other practices. Nichiren was highly critical of "the kind of the *Lotus* practitioner who chants Namu-myōhō-enge-kyō at one moment and Namu-Amida-butsu at the next," an act he likened to adulterating rice with excrement.⁸⁰ Even after becoming Nichiren's followers, some individuals evidently continued to repeat the *nenbutsu*

⁷⁶ "Myōmitsu Shōnin goshōsoku" 妙密上人御消息, *Teihon* 2:1166.

⁷⁷ For example, *Shugo kokka ron*, *Teihon* 1:128. See also Stone, *Original Enlightenment*, 297–98.

⁷⁸ "Hakii Saburō-dono gohenji" 波木井三郎殿御返事, *Teihon* 1:749.

⁷⁹ "Abutsu-bō-ama gozen gohenji" 阿佛房尼御前御返事, *Teihon* 2:1110.

⁸⁰ "Akimoto gosho," *Teihon* 2:1730.

⁷⁴ "Tenjū kyōju hōmon" 轉重輕受法門, *Teihon* 1:507; *Letters*, 161, slightly modified.

⁷⁵ "Teradomari gosho" 寺泊御書, *Teihon* 1:515; *Letters*, 170, slightly modified.

together with the *daimoku*. Viewed in light of the mainstream religious culture of the day, this was unexceptional behavior; engaging in multiple practices was the norm, and all religious acts were viewed as meritorious deeds that would further one's eventual enlightenment. Movements such as Hōnen's and Nichiren's, demanding exclusive commitment to a single religious form, were minority exceptions, and one imagines that some among Nichiren's followers simply failed either to grasp his exclusivist message or to embrace it wholeheartedly. Fears about social consequences also made some reluctant to declare themselves openly as Nichiren's followers, and he worried about the karmic retribution they would have to face. "There are many such cases even among my disciples and lay followers," he once confided in a personal letter.

You have surely heard about the lay monk Ichinosawa 一谷入道. Privately he is my follower, but outwardly he remains a *nenbutsu* devotee. What can be done about his next life? Nonetheless, I have [copied out and] given him the *Lotus Sūtra* in ten fascicles.⁸¹

A *Lotus* devotee could also become implicated in the sin of Dharma slander by tolerating, overlooking, or declining to admonish this offense on the part of others. Many of Nichiren's followers, both monastics and lay believers, had family members or other associates who did not share their faith. In Nichiren's view, even if one did not slander the *Lotus Sūtra* oneself, one participated in that offense simply by belonging to a family or even a country whose members disparage the Dharma and making no effort to correct them. He appears to have urged such individuals to make at least one decisive attempt to convert family or associates who did not embrace the *Lotus*. For example, to one lay follower, he wrote,

If you wish to escape the offense of belonging to a house of Dharma slanderers, then speak to your parents and your brothers about this matter. They may oppose you, but then again, you may persuade them to take faith.⁸²

And to another:

Although your heart is one with mine, your person is in service elsewhere [i.e., to a vassal of the ruler, who opposes Nichiren.] Thus it would seem difficult for you to escape the offense of complicity [in slander of the Dharma].

⁸¹ "Abutsu-bō-ama gozen gohenji," *Teihon* 2:1109. Ichinosawa evidently never became a fully committed devotee, and Nichiren continued to express concern for his postmortem fate after Ichinosawa's death ("Sennichi-ama gozen gohenji" 千日尼御前御返事, 2:1547).

⁸² "Akimoto gosho," *Teihon* 2:1738.

How admirable that you have nonetheless informed your lord about this teaching! Even though he may not accept it now, you yourself have escaped offense. But from now on, you had better be circumspect in what you say.⁸³

The "offense of complicity" (*yodōzai* 与同罪) was a term found in the legal codes and warrior house rules of the day. It designated those cases when, although not personally guilty of the crime, someone has knowledge of treasonous or other criminal behavior but fails to speak out or to inform the authorities.⁸⁴ Nichiren imported this term into a Buddhist context to describe *Lotus* devotees who kept faith themselves but failed to admonish the Dharma slander of those around them. It appears in letters to his warrior followers, who were probably already familiar with this concept in its legal sense.

The requirement that one speak out against others' disbelief posed a particular hardship for those devotees whose social superiors—parents or feudal lords—actively opposed their faith. Followers in this position found themselves caught between their commitment to the *Lotus Sūtra* and a social ethos of filial devotion and loyalty, which demanded obedience to parents and rulers. A few such cases are known to us from Nichiren's letters. The father of the warrior Ikegami Munenaka 池上宗仲 disowned him for his allegiance to Nichiren, forcing Munenaka's younger brother Munenaga 宗長, also a *Lotus* devotee, to choose between upholding his faith in solidarity with his brother or abandoning it in order to seize the unexpected opportunity to supplant Munenaka as his father's heir. Another follower, Shijō Kingo 四條金吾, incurred the displeasure of his lord, Ema Chikatoki 江間親時, who confiscated part of Shijō Kingo's landholdings and came close to ousting him from his service altogether on account of his association with Nichiren.⁸⁵ The husband of a woman known as the lay nun Myōichi-ama 妙一尼 had his small landholding confiscated for the same reason.⁸⁶ Nichiren was keenly aware of the emotional and social costs to those who followed him against the wishes of superiors, and his surviving letters show the pains he took in guiding disciples who confronted such situations. In general he counseled them that, while abandoning one's practice of the *Lotus Sūtra* in conformity to social

⁸³ "Shukun ni nyū shi hōmon men yodōzai ji" 主君耳入此法門免与同罪事, *Teihon* 1:834.

⁸⁴ See *NJ*, 413c-d, 740c-d.

⁸⁵ For more on these two cases, see Takagi Yutaka, *Nichiren to sono montei*, 221-53, and Jacqueline I. Stone, "When Disobedience Is Filial and Resistance Is Loyal," 267-74.

⁸⁶ "Myōichi-ama gozen goshōsoku" 妙一尼御前御消息, *Teihon* 2:1001.

dictates about the obedience owed to superiors might seem prudent from a short-range view, that course would only confirm those superiors in their present error and amount to slander of the Dharma on one's own part, causing all parties involved to fall into the Avīci Hell. True loyalty or filial piety, Nichiren insisted, was to maintain one's faith without compromise and declare it to lords or parents who opposed it. In so doing, one would free oneself from complicity in Dharma slander and be able to eradicate the karmic consequences of one's own slanders against the Dharma committed in prior lifetimes. At the same time, efforts to convert one's persecutors—even if their immediate response should be hostile—would establish a karmic connection between them and the *Lotus Sūtra*, enabling them to attain Buddhahood at some future point. Thus Nichiren appropriated to his *Lotus* exclusivism the values of filial piety and loyalty in a way that could in some cases legitimate, or even mandate, an individual's defiance of those values in their more conventional sense of obedience to parents and rulers. His stance on this issue in effect empowered devotees in a weaker or subordinate position by identifying their agency—expressed in the act of “rebuking Dharma slander”—as enabling the eventual Buddhahood of the social superiors who opposed them.

Nichiren also stressed to his followers, as he had to himself, the importance of recognizing present suffering as both the consequence of past slander of the Dharma and also as an opportunity to eradicate it. To the Ikegami brothers, urging them to stand fast in the face of their father's opposition, he wrote, “Never doubt but that you slandered the Dharma in past lifetimes. If you doubt it, you will not be able to withstand even the minor sufferings of this life. . . .”⁸⁷ He also applied this principle to personal tribulations that did not stem from external pressures. To his follower Ōta Jōmyō 太田乗明, a warrior turned lay monk who was suffering from painful skin lesions, he wrote:

Although you were not in the direct lineage [of the Shingon school], 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 offense of slandering the Dharma. [But] the wonderful Dharma that you now embrace surpasses the moon-praising *samādhi* (*gatsuai zanmai* 月愛三昧) [by which the Buddha cured King Ajātaśatru of

⁸⁷ “Kyōdai shō” 兄弟抄, *Teihon* 1:924–25.

the vile sores resulting from his sins]. How could your disease not be cured and your life extended?⁸⁸

In this way, Nichiren stressed that present trials are not only retribution for past slander of the *Lotus Sūtra* but also an opportunity to eradicate this offense in toto, receiving its karmic consequences far more lightly and over a much shorter period of time than would otherwise be the case. Like the doctrine of karmic causality more broadly, this perspective ultimately attributes suffering—illness, in Ōta Jōmyō's case—to the sufferer's own prior deeds. However, in linking the cause of affliction to slandering the *Lotus Sūtra* and its eradication, to upholding the sūtra, Nichiren invested the concept of karmic causality with a specifically *Lotus*-centered soteriological meaning, one thus directly connected to his followers' immediate practice. This may have encouraged them not only to persevere in their own faith despite personal hardships and afflictions but to redouble their commitment in spreading it to others.

Lastly, eliminating Dharma slander in oneself seems, in Nichiren's view, to have entailed treating fellow practitioners with respect. Stressing the sūtra's admonition that speaking a single word against its devotees is worse than abusing Śākyamuni Buddha to his face for an entire kalpa, he admonished:

Remember that those who uphold the *Lotus Sūtra* should never abuse one another. Those who uphold the *Lotus Sūtra* are all certainly buddhas, and in slandering a buddha one becomes guilty of a grave offense.⁸⁹

Conclusion

Among the complaints leveled against him by his contemporaries, Nichiren once wrote, was that he overemphasized doctrinal categories (*kyōmon* 教門)—presumably, at the expense of meditative practice (*kanjin* 觀心).⁹⁰ Taken collectively, his extant writings do indeed devote considerably more space to clarifying the distinction between true and provisional teachings than to explicating the practice of chanting the

⁸⁸ “Ōta Nyūdō-dono gohenji” 太田入道殿御返事, *Teihon* 2:1117–18. The “moon-praising *samādhi*” by which the Buddha healed King Ajātaśatru appears in the *Da banniepan jing*, T 12:480c27–481b15.

⁸⁹ “Matsuno-dono gohenji” 松野殿御返事, *Teihon* 2:1266. The sūtra passage to which Nichiren refers is at *Miaofa lianhua jing*, T 9:30c29–31a3.

⁹⁰ “Teradomari gosho,” *Teihon* 1:514.

daimoku, the form of meditative practice that he advocated—although within his community, the latter may have been conveyed primarily through oral instruction. Nichiren's emphasis on "doctrinal categories" both reflected and informed his conviction, reached early on, that only the *Lotus Sūtra* leads to Buddhahood now in the Final Dharma age. Because it 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. 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." This was not in his view an ordinary sin such as taking another's life or property but an infinitely more terrible act that cut off the possibility of Buddhahood both for oneself and others and led to countless rebirths in the Avīci Hell. So appalling was this evil in his eyes that he could convey its magnitude only by analogy to exaggerated forms of the most reprehensible worldly offenses; slandering the *Lotus Sūtra*, he said, was worse than killing everyone in all the provinces of China and Japan or murdering one's parents a hundred million times.⁹¹ Thus in his understanding, asserting the unique truth of the *Lotus Sūtra* and denouncing slander of the Dharma were inseparable aspects of correct Buddhist practice.

Nichiren's admonition to remonstrate against Dharma slander worked both to maintain devotion to the *Lotus Sūtra* in an exclusive mode and to encourage its propagation. Had he not taken this stance, pitting himself against all other Buddhist forms and urging his disciples to do likewise, in all probability his following would not have long survived him, let alone emerged as an independent sectarian tradition, but would have been reabsorbed into the larger religious culture. Devotion to the *Lotus* alone and the accompanying mandate to counter "slander of the Dharma" were central to the self-definition of the Hokkeshū 法華宗, as the medieval Nichiren tradition was known. We see this vividly in the hagiographic accounts of those Hokkeshū monks who, following Nichiren's example, carried out the practice of "admonishing the state" (*kokka kangyō* 國家諫曉) by petitioning the emperor, the shogun, or lesser officials to cease patronage of other Buddhist schools and to support faith in the *Lotus* alone. Such acts of remonstrance were often occasioned by natural disasters or other crises, which Nichiren's followers, like their teacher before them, perceived as collective retribution for the sin of slighting the

true Dharma. Yet, like Nichiren's *Lotus* exclusivism itself, a thoroughgoing opposition to "slander of the Dharma" proved difficult to institutionalize. As the Hokkeshū became firmly established in medieval Japanese society, compromises were often made with the shrines and temples of other schools and with local religious practice in order to win patronage and avoid persecution. Still, a purist "*Lotus* only" stance and the rejection of "Dharma slander" remained official ideology and were periodically revived by Hokkeshū leaders eager to launch reformist movements within the tradition or to legitimize newly founded lineages. Such figures sometimes leveled charges of "Dharma slander" not only at other Buddhist schools but at rival branches within the Nichiren tradition, thus bolstering their own claims to superior orthodoxy and fidelity to Nichiren's example.⁹²

Aggressive *shakubuku* was discouraged by government religious policy during the early modern period (1603–1868) but resurfaced with vigor in the late nineteenth century. And in Japan's modern and contemporary periods as well, one finds examples of Nichiren Buddhist followers committed to rebuking "slander of the Dharma." No doubt the best known example is the postwar Sōka Gakkai 創価学会, which began as a lay organization of the Nichiren Shōshū 日蓮正宗 sect of Nichiren temple Buddhism before a schism separated the two in 1991. In the immediate aftermath of the Pacific War, Sōka Gakkai leadership attributed the human misery brought about by militant imperialism and Japan's defeat to karmic retribution for widespread slander of the *Lotus Sūtra*, and embarked on an aggressive proselytization campaign. Sōka Gakkai youth division members sometimes challenged Buddhist priests of other sects and the leaders of other religious movements to confrontational public debates, and, in the name of "clearing away Dharma slander" (*hōbō barai* 謗法払い), new converts were required to remove from their homes all religious appurtenances belonging to other traditions.⁹³ Since the 1970s, however, Sōka Gakkai has gradually adopted a more moderate stance and today even engages in interfaith dialogue. At the same time, another former Nichiren Shōshū affiliate and rival movement, Kenshōkai 顕正会, has emerged as representative of the hardline Nichirenist position, promoting a rigorous *Lotus* exclusivism and the elimination of "Dharma slander" for the welfare of Japan and the world. Kenshōkai now numbers among the fastest

⁹¹ *Kaimoku shō*, *Teihon* 1:604: "Kyōdai shō," 1:920.

⁹² On the practice of "admonishing the state," see Watanabe Hōyō, *Nichirenshū shingyōron no kenkyū*, 135–57, and Stone, "Rebuking the Enemies of the *Lotus*," 237–40.

⁹³ Kiyooki Murata, *Japan's New Buddhism*, 99, 105–6.

growing religious movements in Japan, a fact that should give pause to anyone tempted to assume that exclusivistic religious orientations could have but little appeal in the contemporary developed world.⁹⁴

Still, when one takes into account the more than forty temple organizations, lay societies, and new religious movements within Nichiren Buddhism today, moderates appear to predominate; the majority of Nichiren Buddhist adherents do not engage in confrontational *shakubuku* or publicly denounce other forms of Buddhism as "Dharma slander." But the decision to set aside a literal reading of Nichiren's mandate to rebuke adherence to other teachings—whether made as the result of conscious deliberation or not—is informed by factors other than the chiefly prudential considerations that led many pre- and early modern devotees to relax or even abandon Nichiren's exclusive truth claim. One such factor is the modernist ethos of religious tolerance, along with the accompanying conviction that faith is a matter of personal choice in which others should not interfere. Another is the humanistic turn, rooted in Enlightenment perspectives, that sees religion as grounded, less in cosmology and metaphysics than in culture and history. Yet another is the influence of the text-critical study of sacred scriptures. Modern Buddhological scholarship has shed light on the processes of scriptural compilation, calling into question the status of the sūtras in general and the Mahāyāna in particular as a direct record of the Buddha's preaching. Doctrinal classification schemas that purport to uncover a comprehensive design or graded sequence in the Buddhist teachings have been shown to represent, not historical realities, but retrospective constructions. Those embracing modernist perspectives of this kind find it hard to sympathize with, let alone embrace, the idea that one form of religious devotion alone could be valid and all others lead to hell—a place they are unlikely to believe in, except perhaps in metaphorical terms.

The question of how contemporary Nichiren Buddhist practitioners with modernist commitments reinterpret their tradition is an intriguing one, but addressing it properly would demand a serious ethnographic investigation; here I can offer only cursory impressions. Some individuals occasionally call for a reinterpretation of Dharma slander according with

⁹⁴ Little scholarly research on Kenshōkai has been conducted as yet. For introductory information, see the group's website <http://www.kenshokai.or.jp> and the two informational pamphlets provided for download by the Nichirenshū Gendai Shūkyō Kenkyūjo. 日蓮宗現代宗教研究所 <http://www.genshu.gr.jp/DPJ/booklet/booklet.htm> (both accessed May 6, 2012).

contemporary outlooks, and a few have even attempted to offer doctrinal justifications for so doing, for example, by invoking Nichiren's assertion that the choice between *shōju* or *shakubuku* must depend upon the times.⁹⁵ For the most part, however, such re-readings proceed in an unofficial, non-explicit fashion within the practice of ordinary devotees, who, like followers of any religion, tend to minimize or ignore uncongenial elements of their received tradition and stress those that for them are most relevant—such as the value of Nichiren Buddhism as their family religion, the efficacy of the *daimoku* as a practice for self-cultivation, or Nichiren's aim, variously interpreted, of realizing an ideal Buddha land here in this world. There may also be some reluctance to tamper in any official way with a teaching that has been formative of traditional Nichiren sectarian identity. At the same time, informal conversations with priests and lay believers of multiple Nichiren Buddhist groups suggest to me that at least some practitioners privately consider the mandate to oppose "slander of the Dharma" to be a major obstacle to the wider recognition of Nichiren's teaching as a legitimate form of Buddhism—a tradition often represented in modernist readings as an especially "tolerant" religion. The condemnation of all Buddhist forms except devotion to the *Lotus Sūtra* as "Dharma slander" alienates outsiders, who see it as dogmatic self-righteousness, while insiders with more fundamentalist leanings tend to view the external criticisms that it provokes, not as a reason to reconsider their adversarial stance, but rather as a validation of it, in that such criticism seems to bear out scriptural prophecy that those who spread the *Lotus Sūtra* in the latter age will meet hostility. It is ironic that Nichiren's implacable opposition to the "sin of Dharma slander," which in no small measure enabled his small following to take shape and develop as an independent school, should become a hindrance in contemporary times. But it is not an isolated case; the thorny hermeneutical problems of reinterpreting an exclusive truth claim in light of the modernist ethos touched upon above are by no means limited to Nichiren Buddhists.

The frequent characterization of Nichiren as "intolerant" in both scholarly and popular literature stems from precisely that ethos. Purely as a descriptor, the term is accurate enough; to use the contemporary expression, Nichiren had "zero tolerance" for the practice of other teachings.

⁹⁵ For an example of a re-reading of Nichiren's four admonitions by a North American Nichiren Buddhist minister, see <http://fraughtwithperil.com/ryuei/2011/09/27/the-four-admonitions/> (accessed May 6, 2012).

But the category of "intolerance" is grounded in a particular set of normative modernist assumptions about religion that did not exist in medieval Japan; criticisms leveled again Nichiren by his contemporaries were based on very different grounds. Dismissing Nichiren as intolerant thus obscures the interpretive context within which he understood slander of the *Lotus Sūtra* to be the most frightful of sins. This aspect of his thought, which I have attempted to retrieve in this essay, is difficult to grasp—not because it is doctrinally complex, but because it is embedded in a view of reality so different from that which dominates intellectual discourse today. Nonetheless, the modernist stance is far from universal, and religious convictions such as Nichiren's, that embracing any but one particular teaching is an appalling evil to be opposed at all cost, have neither vanished from the world nor ceased to bring about far-reaching consequences. Beyond the narrower desire of the historian of Japanese Buddhism to "get Nichiren right," that fact alone makes his concept of "slander of the True Dharma" as the worst of sins worth making an effort to understand.

Bibliography

Abbreviations

BD	Mochizuki Bukkyō daijiten
Letters	Burton Watson and others, trans., <i>Letters of Nichiren</i>
NJ	Nichirenshū jiten
Selected Writings	Burton Watson and others, trans., <i>Selected Writings of Nichiren</i>
T	Taishō shinshū daizōkyō
Teihon	Shōwa teihon Nichiren Shōnin ibun
Writings	Gosho Translation Committee, <i>Writings of Nichiren Daishonin</i>

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RITUAL FAULTS, SINS, AND LEGAL OFFENCES: A DISCUSSION ABOUT TWO PATTERNS OF JUSTICE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Daniela Berti¹

Legal scholars have shown how the history of contemporary criminal procedures in the West is bound to religious history and in particular to medieval Christianity. They argue, for example, that the jury trial is a consequence of the decline in practices based on God's judgment as revealed through the procedure of the ordeal. Once the judge, and not the deity, had to make the final decision regarding the guilt or innocence of the accused, the jury trial was introduced as a way of sparing the judge the full responsibility of passing judgment and of allowing him to share this responsibility with the jurors.² In his work on the theological roots of the criminal trial James Q. Whitman goes even further, arguing that one of the crucial legal rules of contemporary criminal procedure, "reasonable doubt", is to be seen as a vestige of a very widespread pre-modern anxiety about judging and punishing.³ The author shows how the original function of reasonable doubt was not, as it is today, to protect the accused, but to protect jurors against the potential mortal sin of convicting an innocent defendant. The rule of reasonable doubt was, he argues, a "technique of moral comfort", aimed at protecting the judge from damnation.⁴

In India the religious dangers attendant upon judging had been mentioned in Sanskrit texts since the early centuries of the common era. Phyllis Granoff has shown, for example, that while certain texts warned the king that he must punish the guilty lest he take on himself the offender's sin, other texts warned him that in punishing the innocent, he would

¹ This work is part of the ANR (Agence Nationale de la Recherche, France) programme, "Justice and Governance in India and South Asia," <http://just-india.net>.

² J. Fitzjames Stephen, *A History of the Criminal Law of England* (London: Routledge, 1996). On this topic see also Robert Jacob, "Le serment des juges," in *Le Serment*, ed. Raymond Verdier (Paris: CNRS, 1991).

³ James Q. Whitman, *The Origins of Reasonable Doubt. Theological Roots of the Criminal Trial*. (Yale: Yale University Press, 2008).

⁴ Whitman, *The Origins of Reasonable Doubt*.

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