

When Disobedience Is Filial and Resistance Is Loyal: The Lotus Sutra and Social Obligations in the Medieval Nichiren Tradition

Jacqueline I. Stone

The social dimensions of Lotus Sutra-related faith and practice in Japan have for the most part been embedded in larger Buddhist traditions of action for the sake of others. In premodern times, these included giving alms, to cultivate compassion and relieve the sufferings of the poor, as well as "building bridges and digging wells," traditional activities of *hi-jiri* or itinerant monks that both exemplified the bodhisattva ethos of helping others and benefited specific communities. Lotus Sutra devotion also overlapped the social aspects of Buddhist thaumaturgy and ritual performance. The Lotus, along with other scriptures, was traditionally recited and lectured on for the peace and prosperity of the country and was also used in memorial prayers for the dead—prayers believed not only to repay the sponsor's obligation to deceased relatives by leading them to enlightenment, but to protect the society of the living from the malign activities of vengeful ghosts.

The twentieth century saw the rise of "socially engaged Buddhism." Informed by modern insights into the constructed nature of human institutions, socially engaged Buddhism redefines delusion and suffering not merely as an individual matter, but as built into and perpetuated by the very structure of social institutions. Engaged Buddhists often regard the effort to reform social institutions along more egalitarian lines as an indispensable component of Buddhist liberative practice. In modern Japan, the civil resistance displayed by Nihonzan Myōhōji in the antinuclear cause, as well as the peace movements and refugee relief work sponsored by Rishō Kōsei-kai and Sōka Gakkai, both NGO affiliates of the United Nations, may be broadly considered as Lotus Sutra-related forms of socially engaged Buddhism. In these cases, too, faith in the Lotus Sutra has been assimilated to larger concepts of Buddhist social responsibility.

In the tradition of Nichiren Buddhism, however, we find the Lotus Sutra linked to a view of social responsibility that is distinctive. Nichiren (1222–82) numbers among the founders of the so-called “new Buddhist” movements of Japan’s Kamakura period (1185–1333). He is known for his exclusivistic doctrine that upholds faith in the Lotus Sutra alone and denies the soteriological efficacy of other Buddhist forms. Now in the degenerate, Final Dharma age (*mappō*), he taught, embracing faith in the Lotus Sutra and chanting its *daimoku* or title, *Namu Myōhō Renge-kyō*, is the sole vehicle of liberation. Moreover, because the practitioner as subject and his or her objective, the outer world, are from a Mahayana standpoint nondual, upholding faith in the Lotus Sutra was in Nichiren’s view not only a matter of personal salvation but also, in modern terms, the practitioner’s “social responsibility.” This essay aims at clarifying this social dimension of Nichiren’s teaching. It first examines the world view and doctrinal foundations upon which he defined exclusive faith in the Lotus as the only socially responsible stance for a Buddhist to adopt. It then explores how exclusive commitment to the Lotus Sutra was related to Nichiren’s view of individual obligations within the framework of *bushi* (warrior) society in medieval Japan, from which Nichiren drew most of his followers. Lastly, it considers how the medieval Nichiren Buddhist tradition viewed the practitioner’s obligations toward the country, as seen through its distinctive practice of “admonishing the state.”

World View and Doctrinal Foundations

Like many people of medieval Japan, Nichiren accepted the idea of an indivisible unity between the microcosm of the individual and the macrocosm of the greater universe. Within this unity, human ritual and moral actions were believed directly to affect the outer world. This premise underlay belief in the efficacy of esoteric rites performed for timely rainfall or good harvests, or the attribution of natural disasters such as drought or floods to human wrongdoing. In the influential Tendai Buddhist tradition from which Nichiren emerged, the moral unity of the individual and the world was schematized in terms of the “nonduality of dependent and primary [karmic] recompense” (*eshō funi*). In other words, the individual’s karma or actions—thoughts, words, and deeds—were thought to bear cumulative fruit in two simultaneous and interconnected modes: as the collection of physical and mental aggregates that form individual living beings, and as those individuals’ outer circumstances or container world. Thus the living subject and his or her objective world were held to be fundamentally inseparable—a relationship

that Nichiren likened to that of a body and its shadow.¹ Moreover, because all phenomena are from a Mahayana standpoint without independent substance, the ten realms of existence from hell to Buddhahood were said to interpenetrate, each of the ten realms encompassing the others within itself. Thus for one who achieves awakening, the present world is the Buddha’s pure land. For Nichiren, the inherence of the pure land in the present world was not merely a matter of philosophical or contemplative insight; when individuals realized enlightenment, he taught, their world would be materially transformed:

When all people throughout the land enter the one Buddha vehicle and the Wonderful Dharma [of the Lotus] alone flourishes, because the people all chant *Namu Myōhō Renge-kyō* as one, the wind will not thrash the branches nor the rain fall hard enough to break clods. The age will become like the reigns of [the Chinese sage kings] Yao and Shun. In the present life, inauspicious calamities will be banished, and people will obtain the art of longevity. When the principle becomes manifest that both persons and dharmas “neither age nor die,” then each of you, behold! There can be no doubt of the sutra’s promise of “peace and security in the present world.”²

This passage points to both continuities and breaks between Nichiren’s teaching and broader, contemporaneous currents of Buddhist thought. Teachings about the nonduality of this world and the Buddha’s pure land, expressed in such terminology as “the *sahā* world is the land of ever-tranquil light (*shaba soku jakkōdo*)” or “worldly truth embodies ultimate reality (*zokutai nishin*),” formed a standard doctrinal feature of both Tendai and Shingon esoteric Buddhist traditions. Similarly, belief in the apotropaic powers of the Buddha-Dharma to ensure harmony with nature and prosperity in the social sphere also was a common assumption underlying the sponsorship of esoteric rites for nation protection (*chingo kokka*). Nichiren’s distinctive reading of these ideas derived from his “single-practice” stance: The ideal Buddha-land could be realized in this world, but only by exclusive faith in the Lotus Sutra.

Like other figures prominent in the new Kamakura Buddhist movements, Nichiren took the advent of the *mappō* era as a mandate to abandon traditional Buddhist stances allowing for a plurality of practices according to the differing capacities and inclinations of individuals and to instead embrace an ethos of “exclusive choice” of a single practice, claimed to be universally valid, which was thereby invested with absolute status.

The first person to make this move had been Hōnen (1133–1212), founder of the Japanese Jōdo or Pure Land sect, who taught that now in

the evil age of the Final Dharma, men and women can no longer reach salvation through their own efforts but only by entrusting themselves to the compassionate power of the original vow of the Buddha Amida of the western pure land and repeating the *nembutsu*, or invocation of Amida's name. Nichiren objected both to Hōnen's extreme emphasis on "Other-power" and the locating of salvation in another world after death, but he too espoused the notion of a single, universally feasible practice: faith in the Lotus Sutra and the chanting of its *daimoku*. Nichiren upheld Tendai understanding of the Lotus as the supreme and final teaching of Śākyamuni Buddha, unique in promising Buddhahood to all. The sutra's title, in his view, encompassed in itself all Buddhist teachings and the seed of Buddhahood, reserved by the Buddha for the evil age of *mappō* when people would need it most.

Nichiren's Tendai contemporaries, too, held the Lotus Sutra to be all-inclusive, but generally took this to mean that, properly understood, any practice, such as chanting Amida Buddha's name or invoking the Bodhisattva Kannon, could be considered practice of the Lotus Sutra. Nichiren decried this interpretation as a confusion of the true and the provisional and rejected all other, "pre-Lotus Sutra" teachings as no longer suited to the present time of *mappō*. Like medicine that stands too long on the shelf and becomes poisonous, these other teachings and the practices based upon them were, in his view, not only soteriologically useless but positively harmful. For Nichiren, to willfully set aside or ignore the Lotus in favor of other, "lesser" teachings amounted to "slander of the Dharma" and would pull the practitioner down into the lower realms of rebirth.

He therefore taught his followers that one should not only embrace faith in the Lotus Sutra oneself, but spread that faith to others, assertively rebuking adherence to other, provisional teachings. This is known as *shakubuku*, the "harsh method" of propagating the Dharma by actively challenging "wrong views." Nichiren saw *shakubuku* as compassionate action that would enable others to form a connection with the Lotus Sutra and save them from both misfortune in this world and rebirth in the evil realms.

In practice, his criticism of other Buddhist forms brought down on Nichiren and his followers the anger of both religious and worldly authorities; he himself was twice exiled and once nearly beheaded, while some among his followers had their lands confiscated or were imprisoned. Yet Nichiren concluded that this opposition represented an opportunity to purify himself of his own slanders against the Dharma committed in past lifetimes. And in light of the Lotus Sutra's own statements that its devotees in an evil age after the Buddha's nirvana will meet with enmity, the hostility he encountered confirmed to him the validity of his position. He

and his disciples accordingly came to valorize meeting persecution for the Dharma's sake (*hōnan*) as a proof of one's faith and a guarantee of one's future Buddhahood.

This transcendent, soteriological side of *shakubuku* practice was at the same time inextricably intertwined with notions of responsibility to society and country. We have seen that Nichiren saw faith in the Lotus as the sole path by which the present world could be transfigured as the Buddha-land. Conversely, he regarded both the natural disasters and political upheavals of his day as directly attributable to the failure of his contemporaries to recognize the unique truth of the Lotus and embrace it exclusively. Over the course of his career he would come to interpret every significant event of his age in this light: The defeat of the Taira clan by the Minamoto in 1185 and the rise of *bushi* power, resulting in the establishment of the *bakufu* or warrior government in Kamakura; the retired Emperor Gotoba's defeat in his attempt to overthrow the Kamakura *bakufu* in the Jōkyū Uprising of 1221; and the Mongol invasion attempts launched against Japan in 1274 and 1281 for him all stemmed from rejection of the Lotus Sutra in favor of provisional teachings. In his famous treatise *Risshō ankoku ron* (Establishing the correct [Dharma] and bringing peace to the country), submitted in 1260 as a memorial or admonition to the retired shogunal regent, Hōjō Tokiyori, Nichiren blamed recent disasters—earthquakes, epidemics, and famines—on the spread of the exclusive *nembutsu* teaching of Hōnen, who had urged people to "close, discard, ignore and abandon" all teachings other than the Pure Land sutras as too profound for the limited capacity of beings of the Final Dharma age.

When the perverse is preferred and the true forgotten, won't the benevolent deities be angered? When the perfect [teaching] is rejected in favor of those that are incomplete, won't evil demons seize the advantage? Rather than perform ten thousand prayer rituals, it would be better to prohibit this one evil!³

In his later years, as Nichiren's position of exclusive devotion to the Lotus grew increasingly refined and focused, Zen, the *vinaya* revival movements, and both Shingon and Tendai esoteric traditions joined the *nembutsu* as targets of his criticism.

In sum, Nichiren shared with his contemporaries the assumption that human action, especially ritual action, affects the greater cosmos. He also embraced widespread strands of Buddhist thought, articulated especially within the Tendai school, about the inherence of the pure land in the present world. What was different in his case was the exclusive stance. Because, in his view, only the Lotus Sutra leads to enlightenment in the

Final Dharma age, it was not enough to embrace it oneself; one had also to teach others. And because the self and the outer world are nondual, the fact of individuals privately embracing or rejecting the Lotus Sutra had public consequences; thus *shakubuku*, the repudiation of provisional teachings, was both a religious and a social responsibility.

The Lotus Sutra and Filial Piety

Now let us consider how this social dimension of Nichiren's teaching affected his and his community's understanding of the practitioner's obligations in social relationships, specifically, the obligations of filial piety and loyalty. Since the Lotus was for Nichiren the only true teaching, all religious and worldly values had of necessity to be subsumed within it. In his major treatise *Kaimoku shō* (Opening the eyes), Nichiren argues that faith in the Lotus Sutra represents the highest form of filial piety:

Filial piety as the Confucians teach it is limited to this life. Because they provide no means to help one's parents in future lifetimes, the saints and sages of these outer teachings are such in name only. The heterodox paths [of India] are cognizant of past and future [lifetimes] but [likewise] provide no path by which to help one's parents [in future lifetimes]. It is the Buddhist path that enables one to help one's parents in their next life; thus its saints and sages merit the name. However, in the various sutras and schools of the Hinayana and Mahayana preached before the Lotus Sutra, it is difficult to attain the Way, even for oneself. How much more, to enable one's father and mother to do so! Now in the case of the Lotus Sutra, the [promise of] Buddhahood for mothers was revealed with the teaching that women [such as the Nāga princess] can become Buddhas, and the [promise of Buddhahood] for fathers was revealed with the teaching that evil men such as Devadatta can become Buddhas. This sutra represents the "classic of filial piety" of the inner scriptures.⁴

The notion that Buddhism embodied a superior form of filial piety, in that its promised benefits extend beyond this life, was by no means new. It represented an ongoing attempt on the part of Buddhist monastics to defend their celibate and world-renouncing institution in Indic or East Asian societies, where performing caste duties or carrying on the ancestral line were considered primary social obligations. Hence the appearance of sutras addressing this theme, such as the *Mo-ye ching*, which says that, after attaining Buddhahood, Śākyamuni at once ascended to the *trāyastriṃśa* heaven to preach the Dharma to his mother, or the *Hsin-ti kuan ching*, often cited by Nichiren as stating, "Abandoning one's obligations

and entering the Unconditioned is called the true repayment of obligations." What distinguishes Nichiren's view is the linking of filial piety to exclusive faith in the Lotus Sutra, representing the Lotus as embodying the only true way of filial piety by virtue of its promise of universal Buddhahood. This raises the question of what would happen if a practitioner's exclusive commitment to the Lotus Sutra—Nichiren's definition of true filiality—were to conflict with his or her parents' wishes, which conventional understanding demands that filial children must obey. Nichiren is quite explicit on this point:

In any matter, one who goes against his father and mother or who refuses to follow the ruler is deemed unfilial and incurs Heaven's punishment. However, should they become enemies of the Lotus Sutra, then disregarding the will of one's parents or ruler is filial conduct and repays one's obligation to the country.⁵

This statement is significant in that Nichiren's exclusive devotion to the Lotus Sutra opens up a religiously mandated ground for resistance to conventional social authority. This stance was to have repercussions for individuals within his community in his own lifetime and for the Nichiren Buddhist institution in the centuries after his death. Based on the evidence of Nichiren's letters, let us look at two cases among his early followers of individual devotees caught in a conflict between loyalty to parents or other immediate authority figures and faith in the Lotus Sutra.⁶

Ikegami Emon-no-tayū-no-sakan Munenaka was a warrior of Musashi Province. He and his younger brother (whom the Nichiren tradition names Munenaga) were early converts to Nichiren's teachings. Details concerning him are scarce; his family may have been direct vassals (*go-kenin*) of the Hōjō clan, who ruled the Kamakura *bakufu* as regents to the shogun. There is also a tradition that Munenaka served the *bakufu*'s Department of Works (*saji bugyō*). Munenaka's father (according to tradition, named Yasumitsu) was a lay patron of the prominent monk Ryōkan-bō Ninshō (1217–1303), a disciple of Eison (1201–90), a leader in the *vinaya* revival movement, and inheritor of Eison's Saidai-ji precept lineage. Ninshō was also valued by *bakufu* officials for his thaumaturgical powers as an esoteric ritual specialist. Nichiren, however, wrote that Ninshō and his followers were hostile to him and blamed Ninshō's machinations for his exile to Sado Island from 1271 to 1274 and the attendant persecution of his followers in Kamakura. Inevitably, perhaps, friction developed between father and sons over their differing religious commitments.

Around 1275 or 1276, Munenaka's father disowned him on account of his persistent refusal to abandon his allegiance to Nichiren. In warrior

families of the time, a father's authority was virtually absolute and his right to disinherit his children was supported by law. Disinheritance carried severe social and economic consequences. Nichiren, then living in reclusion on Mount Minobu in Kai Province, wrote to the two brothers and their wives instructing them how to approach the situation. First, he states unambiguously that the claims of the Lotus Sutra must transcend the claims of parents:

The Lotus Sutra is the eye of all Buddhas. It is the original teacher of the Lord Śākyamuni himself. One who discards even a single character or dot of it commits an offense greater than killing his father and mother a thousand or ten thousand times over or drawing blood from the bodies of the Buddhas of the ten directions. . . . In general, one should obey one's parents, but on the path of Buddhahood, not obeying them [when they oppose the Lotus] is surely the basis of filial piety.⁷

Second, Nichiren urges the brothers to see their conflict with their father in broader, soteriological terms as a specific instance of the struggle between delusion and the aspiration for enlightenment. Theirs, he suggests, is not an isolated case but part of a larger cosmic pattern, in which all who embrace the Lotus may be expected to meet great obstacles in their efforts to escape samsara and achieve Buddhahood:

This world is the domain of the devil king of the sixth heaven. Since time without beginning, all living beings have been his vassals. Within the six paths, he has not only built the prisons of the twenty-five realms to contain them, but made wives and children into shackles and parents and lords into nets that stretch across the skies. . . . He will enter the bodies of wives and children to deceive husbands and parents, or possess the ruler of the country to threaten practitioners of the Lotus Sutra, or enter fathers and mothers to harass filial children.⁸

The assertion that parents and rulers can function as demonic influences obstructing Buddhist practice radically relativizes the social claims of family and clan loyalty.

Third, having shown the brothers' conflict with their father to be part of a larger, cosmic drama, Nichiren undercuts the opposition between the two sides by constructing a narrative in which both father and sons are caught in the same causal chain: Their father now opposes their faith in the Lotus out of delusion, while they themselves must undergo this trial as the karmic effect of their own, similar deluded opposition to the Lotus in prior lifetimes:

In the past, we opposed practitioners of the true Dharma. Now we have instead come to embrace it ourselves, but because of the offense of having hindered others [in their practice] in the past, we should by rights fall into a great hell in the future. However, because the merit of practicing the true Dharma in this life is powerful, the great sufferings of the future are summoned [into the present] and encountered in lessened form. . . . To eradicate the offenses of slander against the Dharma committed in the past, you are now oppressed by parents with false views and live under a ruler who hates practitioners of the Lotus. . . . Never doubt but that you slandered the Dharma in past lifetimes. If you doubt it, you will not be able to endure the minor sufferings of this life, and if you should yield to your father's admonitions and abandon the Lotus Sutra against your intention, then not only will you yourselves fall into hell, but your mother and father will fall into the great Avici hell as well.⁹

In this narrative, the practitioner experiences the effects of Dharma slander from the past while his persecutor perpetuates it in the present. In Nichiren's reading, however, the one with faith in the Lotus Sutra can utilize the opportunity to purify himself of past offenses, and, by upholding it whatever the cost in worldly terms, liberate both himself and his persecutor. This view shifts agency from the father to the sons, who, in social terms, are the subordinate parties in the relationship and have the lesser authority.

Lastly, Nichiren urges upon the brothers a perspective from which all worldly vicissitudes are relativized: "No matter what misfortune may befall you, regard it as a dream and think only of the Lotus Sutra."¹⁰

Munenaka's father apparently relented and reinstated him once but then disinherited him again in 1277. Throughout this family ordeal, Munenaka seems never to have faltered; it is probable that he had left his father's house and was staying with his mother's family.¹¹ His father's rather drastic decision to disinherit him was made possible by the presence of the younger brother, who could perhaps be persuaded where the elder brother could not. This younger brother, known by his military title Hyōe-no-sakan, apparently wavered for a time, influenced perhaps by more conventional understandings of the loyalty due to a parent or by the unexpected opportunity to supplant Munenaka as his father's heir. This time, Nichiren's admonitions focused on the vacillating younger brother:

Emon-no-tayū-no-sakan [Munenaka] has again been disowned by your father. As I said to your wife, this was certain to happen. I told her that since you are unreliable, she had better be resolved. . . .

Since you consider only immediate matters, you will probably follow your father, and deluded people will praise your conduct . . . [But] if you follow your father, an enemy of the Lotus Sutra, and abandon your brother, a practitioner of the One Vehicle, is that being filial? . . . If you curry favor [with your father] for the sake of a trivial inheritance and fall into the evil paths on account of your faint-heartedness, don't blame me! . . . If by a hundred- or thousand-to-one chance you should decide to heed my advice, then confront your father and declare: "Because you are my father, I should obey you in all things, but because you have become an enemy of the Lotus Sutra, if I obey you in this, I would be unfilial. Therefore I will abandon you and follow my brother. If you cast him off, know that you cast me off as well."¹²

Nichiren goes on to quote the Nirvana Sutra to the effect that the number of parents one has had in successive lifetimes cannot be counted, not even if one were to cut up all the plants and trees in the world to make tallies. From this he concludes,

It is easy to obtain parents, but hard to meet the Lotus Sutra. Now, if you reject the words of a father, who is easy to come by, and stand by [your brother,] a friend of the Lotus Sutra, which is difficult to meet, then not only will you yourself achieve Buddhahood, but you will also lead [to Buddhahood] the father whom you rejected.¹³

This, Nichiren goes on to suggest, would parallel the example of Śākyamuni himself, who went against his father's will in abandoning his position as crown prince but went on to achieve enlightenment, becoming the Buddha and leading his parents to enlightenment as well.

This particular story had a happy ending. The younger brother decided to stand by the elder, and their father relented in the face of their joint resolve. Not long after, he, too, became Nichiren's follower. From his letters, we can see how Nichiren's exclusivistic approach to faith in the Lotus Sutra transformed his understanding of the received social ethic of filial piety. Obligations to one's parents are relativized by the higher claim of the Lotus Sutra. Nevertheless, this is a transfiguring, not a rejection, of filial piety. It is only at the conventional, social level that defying parents for the sutra's sake can be understood as unfilial; viewed from the premise of causality operating over past, present, and future lifetimes, such resistance is redefined as a more authentic form of loyalty and social responsibility. As historian Yutaka Takagi has pointed out, Nichiren's teaching transcends worldly ethics, but, at the same time, based on the premise of faith in the Lotus Sutra, reinforces them.¹⁴

The Lotus Sutra and Feudal Loyalty

"Loyalty," wrote Nichiren, "is filial piety extended beyond the family."¹⁵ In the *bushi* society to which most of his followers belonged, the relationship between a warrior in service and his immediate lord followed a model structurally similar to that of the family. How Nichiren saw exclusive commitment to the Lotus Sutra as affecting the obligations of this relationship may be seen from a series of letters he wrote to one Shijō Nakatsukasa Saburōzaemon-no-jō Yorimoto (d. 1296, also known as Shijō Kingo). Like Ikegami Munenaka, Yorimoto was an early lay convert to Nichiren's teaching. He was a vassal to Lord Ema Mitsutoki—and later, to Mitsutoki's son, Chikatoki—of the Nagoe branch of the ruling Hōjō clan. The bond between the Shijō and the Nagoe was a close one: Yorimoto's father had also served Mitsutoki, even accompanying him into exile to Izu Province in 1246 when Mitsutoki came under suspicion of plotting a rebellion. In turn, Mitsutoki had protected Yorimoto from the persecution aimed at Nichiren's followers in the wake of Nichiren's exile to Sado in 1271.

From the evidence of about forty extant letters, Yorimoto seems to have been particularly close to Nichiren. By Nichiren's own account, when he came near to being beheaded by *bakufu* authorities in 1271, Yorimoto accompanied him to the execution grounds, determined to commit *seppuku* and follow him in death.¹⁶ He also sent supplies to Nichiren while the latter was in exile on Sado and even contrived to visit him there. Yorimoto had some knowledge of medicine and treated Nichiren during the illness that plagued him in his last years. Nichiren also named Yorimoto's children.

However, as a warrior in service to the Hōjō who had twice ordered Nichiren's exile, it was perhaps inevitable that Yorimoto's religious commitments would come into conflict with his social obligations. Yorimoto made at least one explicit though unsuccessful attempt to persuade Lord Ema to embrace Nichiren's teaching. A 1274 letter from Nichiren commends him for this act:

Although your mind 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 sin of complicity [in slander of the Dharma]. But you have most admirably informed your lord about this teaching and recommended it to him. Even if he doesn't heed you now, you yourself have escaped offense. From now on, you had better be circumspect in what you say.¹⁷

Circumspection does not seem to have come easily for Yorimoto, a

quick-tempered man. Whether for this or other reasons, by 1276, friction seems to have developed between him and the head of the Nagoe clan. Judging from Nichiren's letters, Yorimoto was thinking of leaving his lord's service, a course of action that Nichiren opposed as disloyal to the very man whose material support had, however unintentionally, allowed Yorimoto to fulfill his social and religious obligations:

Whose aid kept me from starving to death in the province of Sado, and allows me to keep reciting the Lotus Sutra [here in reclusion] in the mountains? Yours alone. And as for what makes your assistance possible, it is due to the lay monk [Ema Mitsutoki]. . . . It is also because of his favor to you that you are able to care for your parents. No matter what may happen, should you abandon such a man? If he rejects you repeatedly, then there is nothing to be done, but you must not reject him, not even if it costs your life.¹⁸

The tension grew worse, however, exacerbated by ugly reports made to the lord by Yorimoto's fellow retainers, with whom he had come into conflict for unknown reasons. Then in the summer of 1277, a Tendai monk named Ryūzō-bō, newly arrived from the Tendai center on Mount Hiei near the imperial capital, was preaching in Kamakura. Sanmi-bō, a scholar-monk who was Nichiren's disciple, went to hear him preach and asked Yorimoto to accompany him. By Nichiren's account, after the sermon Sanmi-bō engaged Ryūzō-bō in debate and scathingly demolished his doctrinal interpretations before the assembled audience. Others, however, reported to Lord Ema that Yorimoto and his warriors had burst in wearing arms and disrupted the proceedings. In addition, the humiliated Ryūzō-bō enjoyed the support of the monk Ninshō, for whom Ema—like the father of Ikegami Munenaka—entertained deep respect. Angered, Lord Ema (at this point, probably the son, Chikatoki) sent Yorimoto a letter demanding that he write a pledge of loyalty, renouncing his exclusive faith in the Lotus Sutra and his allegiance to Nichiren.¹⁹ Yorimoto forwarded the letter to Nichiren at Mount Minobu along with one of his own, describing the affair and expressing his refusal to comply with his lord's demands. In response, Nichiren wrote, in the persona of Yorimoto, an elaborate defense, declaring Yorimoto's loyalty to Chikatoki but construed in a very different sense than what the lord was demanding. In this long document—the *Yorimoto chinjō*—Nichiren has Yorimoto explain why the highest expression of a warrior's loyalty to his lord is not unquestioning obedience but faith in the Lotus Sutra:

In the same letter you [Chikatoki] say: "To obey one's lord or parents, whether they are right or wrong, is exemplary behavior, ap-

proved by the Buddhas and *kami* and in accord with worldly virtue. Because this is the most important of important matters, I [Nichiren, in the persona of Yorimoto] will not venture to give my own view but will cite original texts. The Classic of Filial Piety says, "A son must reprove his father, and a minister must reprove his sovereign." Cheng Hsüan comments, "When a sovereign or father behaves unjustly and his minister or son does not admonish him, that will lead to the country's ruin or the family's destruction." The *Hsin-hsü* says, "One who does not admonish a ruler's tyranny is not a loyal retainer. One who does not speak from fear of death is not a man of courage." . . . I can only grieve to see my lord, to whom I am so deeply indebted, deceived by teachers of an evil Dharma and about to fall into the evil paths.²⁰

The text goes on to liken Ema Chikatoki to King Ajātaśatru, who took the depraved Devadatta, the Buddha's enemy, as his teacher, and Yorimoto, to the minister Jivaka, a devout Buddhist who admonished Ajātaśatru. "The great king disapproved of his minister's devotion to the Buddha, much as you are displeased with me." But perhaps, it continues, just as Jivaka ultimately converted Ajātaśatru to Buddhism, Yorimoto will save Chikatoki in the end. In view of Yorimoto's and his father's past service to the Nagoe and the family's past favor to him, Nichiren has him say, "How could I now think of you distantly? I will follow you even to the next life, and if I attain Buddhahood, I will save my lord as well."²¹

Chikatoki was not persuaded, and the situation deteriorated as Yorimoto fell further out of favor. Shortly after, Chikatoki confiscated Yorimoto's estates, and other retainers of the clan plotted against his life. Yet Nichiren continued to admonish him not to leave Chikatoki's service. At the same time, as he had with the brothers Ikegami, he urged Yorimoto to keep before him a perspective relativizing the successes and failures of this world: "A whole lifetime is like a dream. One cannot count on tomorrow. Even should you become the most miserable of beggars, don't dishonor the Lotus Sutra."²² The next year, Chikatoki fell ill and found himself obliged to call on Yorimoto's skills as a physician. Soon the samurai was restored to favor and new lands were granted to him.

Nichiren's letters to Ikegami Munenaka and Shijō Yorimoto show how he redefined the social obligations of filial piety and loyalty through the lens of exclusive faith in the Lotus Sutra. His advice in the two cases reveals a common structure. Loyalty to the Lotus takes precedence over loyalty to parents and lords; where the demands of worldly authority conflict with the demands of the practitioner's faith, he or she must defy

the former and uphold the latter. To this extent, Nichiren opened a ground for resistance to conventional social authority. This is not a denial of worldly loyalty or filial piety; rather, these social obligations, while refigured by commitment to the Lotus, are also reaffirmed in its light. However, Nichiren's exclusive faith in the Lotus refigures social obligations in a way that inverts hierarchy, according the greater agency to the person in the weaker or subordinate position in the social relationship of parent and child, or lord and vassal. The same principle would no doubt apply in other, hierarchially constructed social obligations, such as those of husband and wife. To a female follower, Nichiren once wrote, "No matter what sort of man you may marry, you must not follow him if he is an enemy of the Lotus Sutra."²³ Ultimate moral authority is shown to derive, not from socially determined relationships, but from faith in the Lotus Sutra.

"Admonishing the State"

The conflicts experienced by Ikegami Munenaka with his father and by Shijō Yoritomo with his lord were representative of the early stages of Nichiren's community, when virtually all followers were converts. After Nichiren's death, as his tradition became institutionalized, the Hokkeshū (as Nichiren Buddhism was then called) was in many cases the hereditary religious affiliation of entire families. Thus it grew less common for an individual believer to experience conflict with parents or other close social superiors over the issue of faith in the Lotus Sutra.

Where the potential for such conflict remained, however, was in the relationship of the Hokkeshū itself, or of its individual lineages, to persons in the highest positions of political authority. Nichiren had clearly established that loyalty to the Lotus Sutra should take precedence over loyalty to one's sovereign. "Having been born in the ruler's domain, I may have to follow him with my body," he wrote, "but I don't have to follow him with my mind."²⁴ More precisely, exclusive commitment to the Lotus Sutra—even if the ruler should oppose it—was in his view the highest form of loyalty to the country, for only faith in the Lotus could transform the present world into the Buddha-land. In this way, Nichiren's notion of the practitioner's obligation to the country paralleled that of obligations to parents and feudal lords. It was institutionalized in the practice of *kokka kangyō*, literally "admonishing and enlightening the state," a practice unique to the Nichiren tradition.

The practice of "admonishing the state" was initiated by Nichiren himself, who is considered to have done so on three occasions. The first time was in 1260, when he submitted his memorial or treatise of remonstra-

tion, the *Risshō ankoku ron*, to Hōjō Tokiyori, urging that other teachings—specifically Hōnen's exclusive *nembutsu*—be set aside in favor of the Lotus Sutra in order to stem the calamities then ravaging the country. In light of various scriptural passages about the disasters that afflict a country where the true Dharma is ignored or slighted, Nichiren also predicted that, were his advice ignored, two further disasters, internal strife and foreign invasion, would occur. A rebellion within the Hōjō clan in 1272 and the Mongol invasion attempts of 1274 and 1281 seemed to bear out his words. Elsewhere, Nichiren wrote that the suffering he witnessed in the wake of a great earthquake in 1257 and epidemics in 1259 prompted him to search the Buddhist scriptures for an explanation of the cause of, and solution to, these troubles. As we have seen, he concluded that the cause lay in "slander of the Dharma," which he interpreted as rejection of the Lotus Sutra. Because people had abandoned the true Dharma, the protective deities had abandoned the country. "In the end, there was no choice but to compile a treatise of remonstrance, which I called *Risshō ankoku ron*. . . . I did this solely to repay the debt I owe to the country (*kokudo*)."²⁵

Nichiren's second act of *kokka kangyō* occurred just prior to his arrest on the twelfth of the ninth month in 1271, when he was summoned before Hei (Taira) no Yoritsuna, deputy chief of the Bureau of Retainers (*samurai dokoro*) to answer for his criticism of the teachings upheld by prominent monks. "What I have said was out of concern for this country. If you wish to maintain peace in the realm, then summon those monks and hear them [debate] in your presence. Otherwise, if you punish me unreasonably on their behalf, the country will regret it later. In punishing me, you reject the Buddha's envoy."²⁶

The third time was in the spring of 1274, when he was released from his sentence of exile to Sado Island, returned to Kamakura, and was again summoned before Hei no Yoritsuna to advise on how to cope with the impending Mongol invasion. Nichiren's response—to abandon official patronage for all other forms of Buddhism and rely solely on the Lotus Sutra—was not a course that the *bakufu* was either inclined or able to implement. Following this encounter, Nichiren went into reclusion on Mount Minobu, citing the *Li-chi* (Book of Rites) to the effect that one who admonishes the ruler three times and is not heeded should withdraw.

"Admonishing the state" was for Nichiren an act of proselytizing, of rebuking Dharma slander, and of discharging loyalty to the "country" or society at large, based on the premise that the enlightenment of the Lotus Sutra was not purely subjective but would positively transform the land. This form of action was continued, even institutionalized, by Nichiren's later followers, in the spirit of attempting to complete what he

had initiated: the establishment of the Buddha-land in Japan through the spread of faith in the Lotus Sutra.

"Admonishing the state" generally took the form of submitting *mōshijō* (letters of admonition) to the ruler—the emperor or more frequently the shogun—or to his local representatives. *Mōshijō* typically restated the message of Nichiren's *Risshō ankoku ron*, emphasizing the difference between the provisional teachings and the Lotus Sutra and urging that support be withdrawn from all other forms of Buddhism and given to the Hokkeshū alone. Sometimes they requested sponsorship of a public debate with monks of other sects in order to demonstrate the superiority of the Lotus Sutra—an opportunity that Nichiren had sought in vain throughout his life. Often a copy of the *Risshō ankoku ron* itself was appended, or less frequently, a work of the writer's own composition conveying a similar message. Copies of *mōshijō* survive written by five of Nichiren's six leading immediate disciples, and *kokka kangyō* was also practiced enthusiastically by the third generation of Hokkeshū clerics. Examples include Niidakyō Ajari Nichimoku (1260–1333) of the Fuji lineage based in Suruga, veteran of many debates and memorializings, who died at age seventy-four en route to Kyoto to admonish the newly reinstalled Emperor Godaigo.²⁷ Jōgyōin Nichiyō (1298–1374) of the Nakayama lineage in Shimōsa also journeyed to Kyoto in 1334 to present a letter of admonition to Godaigo, requesting imperial sponsorship for a debate between the Hokkeshū and other sects. On presenting his letter, he was arrested and imprisoned for three days, giving him much satisfaction at having suffered persecution, even briefly, for the Lotus Sutra's sake.²⁸

The majority of *kokka kangyō*, however, occurred in the Muromachi period (1333–1573), the age of Ashikaga rule. Of the more than forty extant *mōshijō* dated between 1285 and 1596, most are concentrated during this time.²⁹ Among Hokkeshū branches in eastern Japan, going up to Kyoto to "admonish the state" came to be considered almost obligatory for any monk holding the position of chief abbot (*kanzu* or *betsuzu*) of the head temple of a lineage, in effect confirming him as a true Dharma heir to Nichiren, one who carried on the founder's work. Special respect accrued to those like Nichiyō who encountered hostility from the authorities as a result.

The Ashikaga shoguns were generally ready to allow Hokkeshū monks opportunities to preach and establish temples in Kyoto. However, as the country's de facto rulers, they had constantly to balance rival factions, including powerful daimyo and influential temple-shrine complexes, which were major landholders and political forces in their own right. It would have been impossible—assuming that any of the Ashikaga were sufficiently sympathetic—to endorse one form of Buddhism exclusively.

Thus repeated memorializing was sometimes forbidden. Since Nichiren had set a precedent by making three admonitions, Hokkeshū clerics determined to follow his example, thereby deliberately placing themselves in conflict with the authorities, and were occasionally punished. "Admonishing the state" could also be a source of tension, not only externally, between the Hokkeshū and government officials, but internally, between the tradition's radical and conservative factions.³⁰ In the process of institutionalizing, well-established Hokkeshū temples had found it expedient to modify Nichiren's strict exclusivism in the interests of accommodating their wealthy and aristocratic patrons. Despite the fact that *kokka kangyō* was impeccably orthodox, abbots of such temples often feared that extreme or repeated acts of admonition might anger the authorities and thus jeopardize their hard-won gains.

Accordingly, the most enthusiastic and persistent *kokka kangyō* practitioners tended to be monks who had broken away from more established Hokkeshū lineages to found new ones. Genmyō Ajari Nichijū (1314–92), who left the Nakayama lineage to establish his own school, criticized the Nakayama abbot, saying, "In the end, he never appealed to the emperor, nor even addressed admonitions to [officials] in the east, spending his life in vain,"³¹ thus suggesting the importance attached to *kokka kangyō* practice as conferring legitimization. Nichijū, founder of the Kyoto-based Myōmanji or Kenpon Hokke lineage, was a veteran of many *kangyō* who had memorialized the chancellor (*kanpaku*) Nijō Morotsugu, the shogunal deputy (*kanrei*) Shiba Yoshimasa, and other officials in Kyoto and Kamakura on multiple occasions.³² In 1391, he admonished the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu twice and was warned not to do so again. Seven years later, his disciples Nichinin and Nichijitsu memorialized Yoshimitsu again, and, according to the records of their lineage, were arrested and tortured. Another famous example is Kūonjō-in Nisshin (1407–88), who at one point was ousted from his own, Nakayama, lineage for his unrelenting purist stance that offended leading patrons. Nisshin preached throughout the country, established thirty temples, and memorialized high officials on eight occasions. Nisshin's defiance of the shogun Yoshinori's warnings against repeated acts of admonition and his fortitude under torture in prison are celebrated in the Edo-period *Record of the virtuous deeds of Saint Nisshin*.³³

The actions of these devoted remonstrators reflect their conviction in Nichiren's teaching that one should declare the unique truth of the Lotus Sutra, even at the risk of one's life, and that meeting persecution for the sutra's sake demonstrates the validity of one's faith and acts as a guarantee of future Buddhahood. Though sometimes opposed by more moderate factions within the Hokkeshū, their stance accorded with Nichiren's

example; consequently they enjoyed tremendous popularity among lay followers and were celebrated in the tradition's hagiographies. They also kept alive Nichiren's teaching of a religious and moral ground that transcends worldly authority and that accorded to those who "admonished the state" a status higher than the officials who persecuted them.

At the same time, while establishing one's Dharma credentials, *kokka kangyō* was also deemed an act on behalf of the country and society. Based as they were on the premise that natural disasters and social harmony reflect errors in religion, such admonitions on the part of Hokkeshū prelates were put forward most frequently during times of social disturbance. An example can be found in another veteran remonstrator, Shinnyo-in Nichijū (1406–86), contemporary with Nisshin, who composed a work of admonition titled *Collection on the Wonderful Dharma and the governance of the realm*,³⁴ which he is said to have presented to the shogun Yoshimasa in person in 1465.³⁵ Its introduction (*meiyasu*) makes clear the inextricable relationship that Nichijū and others of the tradition perceived among exclusive commitment to the Lotus Sutra, readiness to give one's life for its propagation, and loyalty to the country:

The Sutra of the Lotus Blossom of the Wonderful Dharma is cherished by the Buddhas and is the Dharma that nourishes the *kami*. It is the innermost secret and esoteric method for bringing peace to the realm and security within the four seas, for quelling disasters and subduing foreign enemies. The sutra promises "peace and security in this world and birth in a good place in the next". . . . However, the doctrines espoused by the various sects are deluded with respect to [the distinction between] provisional and true teachings, like confusing the sovereign with commoners; they deviate from our connection to the Buddha, like forgetting the relationship of parent and child. . . . If I failed to admonish this, I would be guilty of disloyalty to the country. . . . I do this solely for the sake of the Buddha-Dharma, for the sake of the ruler's law, and more broadly, for the sake of all living beings. I ask that you investigate this matter, and, if what I say proves unfounded, that you will at once put an end to my life.³⁶

Nichijū's time was one of political instability, as powerful daimyo increasingly threatened Ashikaga rule. In addition, over the preceding few years, several provinces had experienced widespread drought as well as flooding from storms, resulting in poor harvests and consequent famine. In 1461, an epidemic increased the death toll, and displaced persons streamed into the capital. Like Nichiren two hundred years before him, Nichijū saw the problem as fundamentally a religious one, and its solution in conversion to the Lotus Sutra. Like other practitioners of *kokka*

kangyō, in his own eyes, this insight gave him the authority, indeed the obligation, to admonish the country's ruler.

Conclusion

Understandings of the Lotus Sutra such as those found in medieval Tendai Buddhism that allowed for a plurality of practices tended not to generate social conflict, since virtually any form of practice could in theory be defined as practice of the Lotus. It was the exclusive nature of Nichiren's faith in the Lotus that potentially pitted child against parent, vassal against lord, and religious institution against worldly rule. At the same time, in a way that more inclusive readings of the Lotus could not, it explicitly established a source of moral authority transcending that of the social hierarchy—in the family, clan, or nation. However, it was not a simple denial of social obligations in the name of a transcendent reality, but a refiguring of them in such a way that the practitioner's religious and social responsibilities were ultimately identified.

After Nichiren's death, his exclusive approach to faith in the Lotus was not always easy to institutionalize, and at times the mainstream of the tradition adopted a more accommodating stance. Nevertheless, it remained as a resource within the tradition, capable of being revived at critical junctures. One example was the *fuju fuse* ("neither receiving nor giving") movement of the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century within the Nichiren tradition that condemned as a form of Dharma slander the acceptance of alms from non-believers in the sutra or the performance of religious services for them, regardless of their social status or political power. The *fuju fuse* movement offered sustained resistance to growing *bakufu* control of religion and was eventually banned, its adherents being martyred, exiled, or driven underground.³⁷ Or, in the twentieth century, during the Pacific War, at a time when the majority of Buddhist institutions of both Nichirenshū and other sects were actively supporting militant imperialism, one can point to individual Nichiren followers who risked their lives to uphold Nichiren's exclusivistic stance in defiance of state control of religion. These included several leaders of the small Nichiren denomination Honmon Hokkeshū who were arrested and imprisoned for statements in doctrinal publications subordinating the Japanese deities, Amaterasu and Hachiman, to the eternal Buddha of the Lotus Sutra, and Tsunesaburō Makiguchi (1871–1944), founder of the Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai, precursor to today's Sōka Gakkai, who was arrested and died in prison, having refused to have his followers enshrine in their homes the obligatory *kamifuda* or amulets of the imperial Ise shrine, as mandated by government order.³⁸ Neither the *fuju fuse* martyrs nor those

Nichiren Buddhists imprisoned during the Pacific War for opposition to government religious policy can in any way be said to represent the majority of Nichiren adherents of their times, nor can their resistance be deemed historically "successful" in the sense of altering the course of events. But they kept alive Nichiren's teaching that worldly authority can, and on occasion must, be defied in the name of the Dharma.

This teaching did not develop into a secular critique of social authority or a modern view of social responsibility. From a contemporary perspective, it seems relentlessly and naively monocausal to locate the source of all social problems in "slander of the Dharma" and to find their solution in exclusive faith in the Lotus Sutra. In a pluralistic age, religious exclusivism is often looked upon as socially irresponsible, because of its potential to aggravate conflict in an already divided world. Nichiren's exclusivistic stance in particular conflicts with deeply cherished presuppositions, often Western in origin, about Buddhism as a religion of "tolerance." Nevertheless, it is significant in having established an explicitly religious basis from which social authority could be critiqued and resisted—something rather rare in the history of Japanese Buddhism.

(Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Japanese are by the author.)

Notes

1. *Zuisō goshō, Shōwa teihon Nichiren Shōnin ibun* (hereafter STN) 1:873.
2. *Nyosetsu shugyō shō*, STN 1:733.
3. *Risshō ankoku ron*, STN 1:217.
4. STN 1:590.
5. *Ōshajō no koto*, STN 1:917.
6. The following discussion is indebted in part to Yutaka Takagi, *Nichiren to sono montei* (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1965), 221–53.
7. *Kyōdai shō*, STN 1:920–21, 928.
8. *Kyōdai shō*, STN 1:922, 923.
9. *Kyōdai shō*, STN 1:924–25.
10. *Kyōdai shō*, STN 1:933.
11. Yutaka Takagi, *Nichiren to sono montei*, 229, n. 15.
12. *Hyōe-no-sakan-dono gohenji*, STN 2:1402–3.
13. *Hyōe-no-sakan-dono gohenji*, STN 2:1405.
14. *Nichiren to sono montei*, 232.
15. *Hōmon mōsarubekiyō no koto*, STN 1:443.
16. *Shijō Kingo-dono goshōsoku*, STN 1:505.
17. *Shukun ni nyū shi hōmon men yodōzai ji*, STN 1:834.
18. *Shijō Kingo Shakabutsu kuyō ji*, STN 2:1187.
19. Although the evidence is not altogether clear, Takagi argues convincingly that

the head of the Nagoe clan at this time, with whom Yorimoto came into direct conflict, was probably not Mitsutoki but his son Chikatoki (*Nichiren to sono montei*, 250, n. 2).

20. *Yorimoto chinjō*, STN 2:1355–56.
21. *Yorimoto chinjō*, STN 2:1358.
22. *Shijō Kingo-dono gohenji*, STN 2:1362.
23. *Oto gozen goshōsoku*, STN 2:1100.
24. *Senji shō*, STN 2:1053.
25. *Ankoku ron gokan yurai*, STN 1:422.
26. *Shuju onfurumai goshō*, STN 2:962–63.
27. Nichiko Hori, ed., *Fuji shūgaku yōshū* 5:34.
28. *Ikki shoshū zengon kiroku, Nichirenshū shūgaku zensho* (hereafter NSZ) 1:447.
29. Hōyō Watanabe, *Nichirenshū shingyō ron no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Kokusai Bunka Shin-kōkai, 1976), 135–40.
30. See my "Rebuking the Enemies of the Lotus: Nichirenist Exclusivism in Historical Perspective," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 21/2–3 (1994): 231–59.
31. Cited in Takashi Nakao, *Nisshin: Sono kōdō to shisō* (Tokyo: Hyōronsha, 1981), 64.
32. For the activities of Genmyō Nichijū and his disciples, see Risshō Daigaku Nichiren Kyōgaku Kenkyūjo, ed., *Nichiren kyōdan zenshi* 1 (hereafter *Zenshi*) (Kyoto: Heirakuji Shoten, 1984), 214–27, and *Nichūn ki (Montō koji)*, NSZ 5:62–94.
33. *Nisshin Shōnin tokugyō ki*. On Nisshin's activities, see, for example, Takashi Nakao, *Nisshin: Sono kōdō to shisō; Zenshi*, 262–71; and Jacqueline Stone, "Priest Nisshin's Ordeals," in George J. Tanabe, Jr., ed., *Religions of Japan in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 384–97.
34. *Myōhō jise shū*
35. On Nichijū's activities, see *Zenshi*, 271–73.
36. *Myōhō jise shū narabi ni dōshimatsu kiroku*, NSZ 19:206.
37. On the *fūjū fuse* movement, see, for example, Eishū Miyazaki, *Fūjū fuse ha no genryū to tenkai* (Kyoto: Heirakuji Shoten, 1969), and Jeffrey Hunter, "The *Fūjū fuse* controversy in Nichiren Buddhism: The debate between Busshōin Nichiō and Jakushōin Nichūken," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin at Madison, 1989.
38. On the imprisonment of Honmon Hokkeshū leaders, see William P. Woodard, "The Wartime Persecution of Nichiren Buddhism," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, third series, vol. 7 (1959), and Shigemoto Tokoro, *Kindai shakai to Nichiren-shugi* (Tokyo: Hyōronsha, 1973), 202–06. On Makiguchi, see *Fuji shūgaku yōshū* 9:428–48.

A Buddhist Kaleidoscope: Essays on the Lotus Sutra

edited by
Gene Reeves

with a foreword by
Nichiko Niwano

KOSEI PUBLISHING CO. • *Tokyo*

The publication of this book was made possible by a grant from the Chūō Academic Research Institute, affiliated with Risshō Kōsei-kai, to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the institute.

Cover design by NOBU. The text of this book is set in a computer version of Palatino with a computer version of Optima for display.

First English edition, 2002

Published by Kōsei Publishing Co., 2-7-1 Wada, Suginami-ku, Tokyo 166-8535, Japan. Copyright © 2002 by Kōsei Publishing Co.; all rights reserved. Printed in Japan. ISBN 4-333-01918-4