How Nichiren Understood the Buddha in His Kanjin honzon shō:  
The Buddha Whom He Looked Up To and Who Was Observed in His Mind

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1. The foundation of Buddhism is samādhi (三昧). It is the process whereby we deepen our peace of mind and unite a scattered mind. Zen 観禅 (Skt, dhyāna) and yoga 瑜伽 are practices to pacify the mind by concentrating on one object to attain a stage of total clarity and focus.

This is the Buddhism of practice. On the other hand, Mahāyāna Buddhism developed as Buddhism of faith. Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212) read the Commentary of Amitāyurdhyāna Sutra (観無量寿経疏) by Shandao 善導 and was inspired by its statement, “concentrate to chant the name of Amitābha Buddha.” Hōnen insisted on exclusive faith and devotion directed to Amitābha Buddha and spread Pure Land Buddhism (浄土宗).

On the contrary, Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1282) insisted on devotion to Śākyamuni Buddha who is the Eternal Buddha described in the Lotus Sutra. He devoted himself to upholding the daimoku 題目, Namu myōhō renge kyō 南無妙法蓮華経. To uphold the daimoku was to advocate a type of ‘Buddhism of faith.’ He revealed his own understanding of kanjin 観心 (spiritual contemplation) for the age of mappō 末法 (the Latter Age of Degeneration), after the Buddha, in his Nyorai metsugo gogohyakusai shi kanjin honzon shō 如来滅後五百歳始観心本尊抄 (the “Kanjin honzon shō”) ‘The first time in the fifth 500-year period after the death of Śākyamuni Buddha’ means that the treatise is an inquiry into the possibility of salvation through Buddhist faith more than 2000 years after Śākyamuni Buddha’s passing away.

What Nichiren discusses in the first kanjin part of Kanjin honzon shō is the teaching of spiritual contemplation. The Grand Master Tiantai Zhiyi 天台大師智顕 (538–598) identified spiritual contemplation with realization of the principal of ichinen sanzen 一念三千 (3,000 worlds contained in one thought-moment) in his Mohe zhiguan 摩訶止観. 2) However, Nichiren presented a different idea and revealed his intention to establish a new theory of practice whereby salvation is attained through the Eternal Buddha Śākyamuni.
Nichiren then explained in the part in the same treatise about the honzon 本尊 (focus of devotion) the importance of devotion to the Eternal Sakyamuni Buddha. What he said in relation to devotion to the Lotus Sutra was that entering the world of faith in the realm of the Eternal Buddha was the way sentient beings in mappō were supposed to practice Buddhism.

When we talk about Nichiren, everybody thinks of his activities and of his power to overcome persecutions. They don’t give any thought to his spiritual practice. I will now discuss his philosophy with reference to past research on Nichiren’s thought.

The most important thing to keep in mind regarding how Nichiren approached Buddhism is that it had to do with devotion to the Eternal Buddha. When we discuss this issue, we have to pay attention to two points.

#1 How to express devotion to the Eternal Buddha,
#2 How to confirm that there is the world of the Eternal Buddha in the minds of ordinary people in mappō. In order to realize the meaning of acceptance, we should find out how to correctly believe and practice.

The purpose of this essay is to show that the inner core of Nichiren Buddhism is found in both of these points. As you may know, we can find many answers for #1 “how he devoted himself to the Eternal Sakyamuni Buddha” in Nichiren’s main works. We also find details regarding this in diagrams he inscribed. In regard to #2, many scholars have pointed out that it was based on his theory of bonshin gubutsu 念心具仏 (mind of ordinary person possesses the Buddha inside) in his Kanjin honzon shō. This will show that both #1 and #2 are too close to be divided and to confirm the meaning of the Lotus Sutra as a book of prophecy.

2. To begin with, it is clear that Sakyamuni Buddha is the essential teacher of Buddhism as Nichiren depicted in his diagrams. It came from goji hakkyō 五時八教 (five periods and eight teachings) by Zhiyi. Zhiyi categorized all of the Buddha’s teachings into five periods and eight teachings to classify all the sutras he had studied. It is clear that the starting point of Nichiren’s view of Buddhism was to carry forward this view, Let me share three kinds of evidence.

#1 The Shōwa Teihon Nichiren Shōnin Ibun 昭和定本蓮聖人遺文3) (“Shōwa Teihon”) has a section for Nichiren’s diagrams. When looking at Ichidai goji zu 一代五時図4) and, Ichidai goji keizu 一代五時図目,5) we notice that Nichiren inherited the views of Zhiyi...
and understood their profound meaning. We also notice that Nichiren divided the Buddha’s lifetime into five periods consisting of the Avatamsaka, Āgama, Vaipulya, Prajñā, and Sad-dharma-Puṇḍarīka/Parinirvāṇa periods. All of the Buddha’s teachings fall into those five categories. We are able to see that the Buddha preached ever profounder teaching as he got older.

#2 The Ichidai goji keizu⁶ explained that Śākyamuni Buddha possessed “the three virtues of master, teacher and parent.” As the Buddha’s teaching progressed, the spiritual implications of the three virtues deepened. Finally, we can understand that true possession of the three virtues can be found only when the Buddha revealed his eternity. The Ichidai goji keizu diagram depicts this, Nichiren talked about the revealing of the Buddha’s eternity in Kaimoku shō 開目抄,⁷ Kanjin honzon shō, and other major works. Once he understood the general meaning of all the sutras in these terms, Nichiren realized their true import.

#3 With the true import understood, Nichiren knew that an “easy practice” could be found within the Lotus Sutra. That view underlies Nichiren’s understanding of Buddhism. For example, in connection with Nichiren’s critique of Pure Land Buddhism, in his Shugo kokka ron 守護国家論⁸ he recommends that one accept Buddhism with ichinen zuiki 一念随喜 (a single moment of rejoicing upon hearing a phrase of the Lotus Sutra), goji tenden 五十展転 ([great merit received by the] 50th person in succession [who rejoices upon hearing the sutra]). That recommendation was derived from chapter XVII of the Lotus Sutra. I don’t know why, however, he did not talk about it in his other major works until he described it clearly in his Shishin gohon shō 四信五品抄.⁹

Nichiren emphasized that the Lotus Sutra was bestowed as a book of prophecy for the multitudes in mappō in his Kaimoku shō. In addition to that, he tried to transform the ichinen sanzen doctrine and jikkai gogu 十界互具 (mutual possession of the ten worlds) doctrine of Tiantai into a doctrine of salvation for beings of poor capacity in mappō in his Kanjin honzon shō. This was the “easy practice” of the Lotus Sutra with shishin gohon (the four stage of faith and five stages of practice) as the theoretical basis for it.

Secondly, devotion to Śākyamuni Buddha is not a one-sided relationship of beings respecting the Buddha. The mutual relationship between Śākyamuni Buddha and the beings of poor capacity in mappō is developed because the Buddha takes the initiative in offering to save them.

As is generally known, Nichiren said in his Kanjin honzon shō, “For those who are inca-
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In Kanjin honzon shō, Nichiren broached the possibility that sentient beings in mappō have the Buddha world in their ordinary minds when he wrote about the origin of the ichinen sanzen doctrine in the Mohe zhiduan. This was in response to the questions he previously raised, “Does the world of humanity also have the mutually possessed ten worlds?” and “Does the world of humanity have the world of the Buddha inside?” He raised this point again and again. As a result, he said in the kanjin part of his Kanjin honzon shō that the world of the Buddha is in our minds. And then, he explained in the honzon part of it that establishing Śākyamuni Buddha as the honzon assures salvation for sentient beings in mappō. He described the essentiality of disclosing the true meaning of the Lotus Sutra in mappō in the rutsū 流通 (propagation) part of his treatise.

Needless to say, Zhiyi said that wisdom and practice is very important to attain Buddhahood like having eyes to see the path, and explained the essence of the Lotus Sutra in his Fahua xuan yi 法華玄義 and Fahua wenju 法華文句. He utilized the framework of goji hakkyō during the Buddha’s lifetime in his interpretation of each word and phrase of the sutra. He also insisted on the importance of practice in his Mohe zhiduan in addition to such analytical investigation for wisdom. Nichiren highly regarded Zhiyi’s achievement, He said that the Buddha’s will in India was carried forward by Zhiyi in China and Dengyō 伝教 in Japan. He praised that lineage. In addition to them, Nichiren identified himself as a
practitioner of the *Lotus Sutra* in *mappō* and a manifestation of Jōgyō bosatsu 上行菩薩 (Superior Practice Bodhisattva), leader of innumerable bodhisattvas from underground described in the essential section of the *Lotus Sutra* and therefore named them the *sangoku shishi* 三國四師 (four teachers in three countries) as below. In doing this he declared the meaning of his profound mission as the successor to the previous three teachers.

Sākyamuni Buddha → Zhiyi → Dengyō → Nichiren

From that point of view, Nichiren repudiated the practice of *Mohe zhiguan* by Zhiyi as a practice for the past and named Zhiyi’s *ichinen sazen* as *ri no ichinen sazen* 理の一念三千 (ichinen sanzen in principle). Nichiren said that *ichinen sazen* with Namu myōhō renge kyō was *ji no ichinen sazen* 事の一念三千 (ichinen sanzen in actuality). He insisted that the five characters of the title of the *Lotus Sutra* had the *gojū gengi* 五重玄義 (five great meanings): 1) meaning of the title of the sutra, 2) the purpose of the sutra, 3) the essential teachings of the sutra, 4) the influence of the sutra and 5) the value of the teachings of the sutra. When we uphold the *daimoku*, Namu myōhō renge kyō, we uphold the teaching with the merit of the five great meanings, so that everything involves the bestowal of the *ingyō katoku* 因行果徳 (causal practice and fruition of virtue) of Sākyamuni Buddha. (That’s why the part about the upholding and bestowing of the *Kanjin honzon shō* is very important.)

3. Therefore, the topic of *bonshin gubutsu* is one of the most important for Nichiren. He developed that discussion gradually in the *Kanjin honzon shō* in order to come to the conclusion that the beings of poor capacity in *mappō* can also be saved.

All researchers can agree that the *Kanjin honzon shō* can be divided into three parts: 1) “*kanjin*” part, 2) “*honzon*” part and 3) “*rutsū*”15) part.

Needless to say, in the beginning of the *Kanjin honzon shō*, Nichiren cites the teaching of *ichinen sanzen* found in *Mohe zhiguan* as follows:

The “3,000 existences contained in one thought-moment” (ichinen sanzen) doctrine was first expounded by the Grand Master Tiantai in his *Great Concentration and Insight* (*Mohe zhiguan*), fascicle 5, (chapter 7). According to him:

A mind by nature contains ten realms of living beings. Since these ten realms contain one another, there exist 100 realms in one mind. Each of these 100 realms, furthermore, consists of “three factors,” that is to say, living beings, the land on which they live, and the five elements of living beings. It also possesses “ten aspects.” Thus, 30 modes of existences are in one realm and 3,000 modes of existence in 100 realms. In short, 3,000 modes of existence are contained in a mind at any
given moment.\textsuperscript{11}"

This praise expresses the entire point of \textit{Kanjin honzon shō}. Zhiyi sought the ultimate concentration and insight of Buddhism and wrote \textit{Mohe zhiguan}. Nichiren sought Zhiyi’s most important point for the purpose of finding the salvation for sentient beings in \textit{mappō} by the Eternal Śākyamuni Buddha which was described in the essential part of the \textit{Lotus Sutra}. That’s why Nichiren quoted phrases from \textit{Mohe zhiguan}. That was a key point.

What Nichiren tried to establish in his \textit{Kanjin honzon shō}, is that the \textit{Lotus Sutra} is a prophetic book that brings salvation to sentient beings at the beginning of \textit{mappō}. It is 2,220 something years after the Buddha’s \textit{parinirvāṇa}. Now, I will talk about its soteriology.

I said that the \textit{Kanjin honzon shō} contains three parts: “\textit{kanjin},” “\textit{honzon}” and “\textit{rutsū},” This is made clear in the first part where he discussed how \textit{ichinen sanzen} is the ultimate teaching of Zhiyi in the first chapter and the differences between one thousand aspects contained in one hundred realms and \textit{ichinen sanzen} in the second chapter. He also discussed the “mutual possession of ten worlds revealed in the \textit{Lotus Sutra} in the third chapter. His discussions are: 1) “what is \textit{kanjin},”\textsuperscript{12} 2) “how the \textit{Lotus Sutra} talks about mutual possession of ten worlds,”\textsuperscript{13} and 3) “the difficulty of believing in the mutual possession of ten worlds.” During these discussions, he spoke of how each of the ten worlds, from hell to the world of the Buddha, are usually perceived as existing separately. However, he said that those ten worlds contained each other and therefore the world of the Buddha is found even in the minds of ordinary people. He continued to discuss 4) “the world of humanity has the ten worlds within it.” And then, he talked about 5) “the fact that the world of humanity has the world of the Buddha within it” in the seventeenth of thirty queries and responses. There are queries and responses as follows:

The Buddha’s words on the “mutual possession of ten realms doctrine are all clear, but it is difficult to believe that the realm of the Buddha is contained in our vulgar minds. However, if we do not believe in this now, there is no doubt what we will become \textit{issendai} 一舎提 (Skt. \textit{icchantika}). We beseech you, please to have great compassion and help us believe in it to save us from falling into the Hell of Incessant Suffering.\textsuperscript{14}

The first answer for this question is to confirm that Śākyamuni Buddha took an oath to save all sentient beings in chapter II of the \textit{Lotus Sutra}, It is clear that sentient beings and the Śākyamuni Buddha are connected with \textit{ichidaiji no innen} 一大事の因縁 (the one great purpose for the Buddha’s appearance). In addition to that, “man’s capacity to understand and
believe the teaching of the Buddha” can be of two kinds. First, there are those who attain Buddhahood by seeing the Buddha in person and listening to him preaching the *Lotus Sutra*. Secondly, there are those who attain Buddhahood by means of the teaching of the *Lotus Sutra* without seeing the Buddha. Moreover, Nichiren said that not only many bodhisattvas with superior capacity, but also those others who listened to the Mahāyāna sutras were able to attain Buddhahood planted in them by the Great Universal Wisdom Buddha (大通智勝佛) 3,000 dust-particle *kalpa* (三千塵點劫) ago or by Śākyamuni Buddha five-hundred dust-particle *kalpa* in the past.

He continued to explain that the “mutual possession of the worlds” doctrine was as difficult to maintain as it was to see fire in a rock or a flower in wood. This was difficult to believe, but we could not help but believed in it because of the evidence for this.

He said that Never-Despising Bodhisattva, described in the chapter XX of the *Lotus Sutra*, put his hands together in respect and bowed to anyone he met because whenever the bodhisattva saw a man, he saw a Buddha in him. Born to the human world, Prince Siddhārtha, young Śākyamuni, became the Buddha. These examples should be enough to convince everyone to believe that “the world of Buddha exists in the world of humanity,” and in the teachings of the “mutual possession of ten realms” and “3,000 worlds contained in one thought-moment.”

In the next forth chapter, “The meaning of upholding the five characters of the *Lotus Sutra*—practical ichinen sanzen,” Nichiren covers the following topics: 1) “doubt of possessing the Buddha in the minds of ordinary people,” 15) 2) “only three teachers in the three countries know that ordinary person possesses ichinen sanzen,” 16) 3) “seed of ichinen sanzen,” 17) and 4) “attaining Buddhahood by upholding the *Lotus Sutra*. 18) The *Lotus Sutra* says, “The duration of my life, which I obtained by the practice of the Way of Bodhisattva, has not yet expired. It is twice as long as the length of time as previously stated.” 19) He understood that what the sutra said was that our minds meant minds in the world of bodhisattva.

4. Let me ask what *samādhi* means again. A dictionary 20) says that it is a state of calming down, when one is not scattered, but instead concentrating upon one object; or, the practice to be in that state. However, there are different levels of the practice. They are the four stages of meditation (*dhyāna*) from the first to the fourth, the four *samapatti* (attainments) from the attainment of the boundlessness of space to the boundlessness of neither percep-
tion nor non-perception, and the three samādhi of the empty, the signless, and wishless.

We may say that the history of Buddhism is the history of the theory and practice of sa-
mādhi. Zhiyi sought a way to practice contemplation and entered into the Great Concentra-
tion and Insight. He claimed that he achieved the ultimate practice of contemplation. Later,
monks of the Tiantai school continued his tradition. Under the circumstance of Buddhism
in the Kamakura period, Nichiren realized that the meaning of “concentration” is action
from the world of the Eternal Śākyamuni Buddha towards ordinary people in mappō. It was
a new interpretation of “spiritual contemplation of concentration” as a form of Buddhism
of faith.

I talked about the “mind of ordinary people possesses the world of the Buddha” as the
basis of a system of Buddhism of faith without discussing it in detail. However, the Bud-
dhism of faith is based on spiritual contemplation and transforms itself. In later times,
some monks of the Nichiren school have tried the ordinary way of practicing contempla-
tion. I think it is important to discern the meaning of spiritual contemplation as transformed
into Buddhism of faith in order to ask what Nichiren Buddhism was originally intended to
be.

1) The treatise revealing the spiritual contemplation and the most venerable one for the first time in
the fifth 500-year period after the death of Śākyamuni Buddha.
2) The great concentration and insight.
4) The diagram of the five periods of the Buddha’s teaching, Shōwa Teihon, p. 2233, p. 2399.
5) The diagram of the five periods of the Buddha’s teaching [Note: Zu and Keizu are synonyms],
Shōwa Teihon, p. 2358.
6) Shōwa Teihon, p. 2358.
7) Open your eyes to the Lotus teaching.
8) The treatise on protecting the nation, Shōwa Teihon, p. 109. This book was written at the age of
38, one year before Risshō ankoku ron 立正安国論.
9) Shōwa Teihon, p. 1295-.
10) Shōwa Teihon, p. 720.
11) Shōwa Teihon, p. 702.
12) Shōwa Teihon, p. 704.
13) Shōwa Teihon, p. 704-.
14) Shōwa Teihon, p. 706-.
15) Shōwa Teihon, p. 707-.
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16) Shōwa Teihon, p. 709–.
17) Shōwa Teihon, p. 710–.
18) Shōwa Teihon, p. 711–.
20) Iwanami Bukkyō Jiten 岩波仏教辞典.

〈Key words〉 Nichiren 日蓮, Kanjin honzon shō 視心本尊抄, Zhiyi 智顕, Mohe zhiguan 摩訶止観, ichinen sanzen 一念三千

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