On the Righteousness of the *Lotus Sutra* and Criticism of the Pure Land Teaching in Nichiren’s *Risshō ankoku*ron

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**Introduction**

The immediate reason for the writing of the *Risshō ankoku*ron 立正安国論 was a successive series of strange phenomena in the skies and calamities of nature that occurred during the years 1257 through 1260. Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–82) searched the scriptures for reasons for these calamities and ways to eliminate them. His discussions from prior works such as the *Sainan kōki yurai* 災難興起由來 (The cause of misfortunes), the *Sainan taijishō* 災難対治釈 (Treatise on the elimination of calamities), the *Shugo kokkaron* 守護国家論 (Treatise on protecting the nation), and others were woven into the *Risshō ankoku*ron—"The treatise on bringing peace to the nation by establishing the True Dharma." It was presented to Hōjō Tokiyori 北条時頼 (1227–63), a monk and former Regent (and de facto ruler) of the Kamakura Shogunate, on July 16, 1260, as a document of warning and counsel. Tokiyori was devotee of Buddhism, which may have been a motivation for Nichiren to present the *Risshō ankoku*ron to him.

In the *Risshō ankoku*ron, Hōnen’s 法然 (1133–1212) *Senchaku hongan nembutsushū* 選択本願念仏集 (Passages on the selection of the nembutsu in the original vow, also known as the *Senchakushū*) and other sutra commentaries are summarized, and the Pure Land teaching is extensively criticized. In this, Nichiren placed himself among the initial critics of Hōnen’s Pure Land Buddhism, including Jōshō 定照, Kōin 公胤 (1145–1216), a priest of the Tendai school at the Onjōji 間城寺, and Kōben 高弁 (1173–1232) of the Kegon school. Domestic disturbances (自界破逆難) and foreign invasions (他国侵逼難) are also predicted in the text, and the need for devotion to the *Lotus Sutra* is suggested. However, Nichiren did not discuss the *Lotus Sutra*’s philosophy and doctrines in detail. It is thought that this was because he was hoping to instigate an open confrontation and public forum to do so.
The Risshō ankokuron consists of a dialogue in the form of nine questions from a traveler (depicted as a supporter of governance by sage rulers, presumed to be Hōjō Tokiyori), the corresponding nine answers by his host, a master of a hermitage (depicted as an advocate of government guided by Buddhist Dharma, presumed to be Nichiren), and a final statement showing the transformation of the guest's way of thought. If one looks at it as being constructed in the traditional three-stage makeup of Buddhist writings, Preface, Main Discourse, and Epilogue, the first eight question-and-answer dialogues comprise the Preface, the ninth exchange is the Main Discourse, and the guest-traveler's expression of understanding at the end comprises the Epilogue.

In the Preface, the Risshō ankokuron speaks of the causes and reasons of calamities, the elimination of disasters, doctrines and people that slander the Dharma, and prohibitions against the slandering of the Dharma. In manifesting that the hardships of the nation will be prevented by withdrawal from nembutsu, this stage is the "refutation of wrong views." The Main Discourse, the ninth question-and-answer dialogue, is the stage of the "revelation of the truth," in which domestic disturbances and foreign invasions are forecast, and the need for devotion to the Lotus Sutra is encouraged. The Epilogue, a concluding statement by the guest-traveler, is the stage of resolution—his expression of comprehension and acceptance of what the master has said.¹).

Criticism of Hōnen's Pure Land Buddhism

To begin with, I will look at Nichiren's criticism of Hōnen's Pure Land Buddhism in the eight question-and-answer dialogues that make up the Risshō ankokuron's Preface.

The causes of disasters are discussed in the first exchange, as a visitor calls upon a master at his place of residence and inquires about the reasons for the recent series of famines and epidemics that have brought unrest to society. The mode of the discussion is to ascertain whether or not the ups and downs of the realm are reflections of the mind and spirit of the people living in it, as the master relates that the people of the world have turned against the true teaching and have embraced unworthy doctrines, that all of the guardian deities have abandoned the country and returned to the heavens, that the sages who propagate the correct doctrine have also gone, and that the onset of successive calamities has followed:

A traveler came to lament: "In recent years, strange phenomena in the sky, natural calamities on
earth, famines, and epidemics have occurred and spread over all the land of Japan. Oxen and horses lie dead at crossroads and the streets are filled with skeletons. Many people have perished and everyone has been touched by grief." 2) 

The master answered: "...I searched through some of the sutras and came to the conclusion that the cause of national calamities comes from all the people being against the right Dharma, siding with false dharmas. Therefore, protective deities and sages abandoned the country, and will not return. This has allowed various evils and devils to invade, causing disasters and calamities." 3) 

In the second exchange, the master cites references from four revered sutras that address reasons for disasters and calamities—passages from the Sutra of the Golden Splendor (Jingguangming jing 金光明経) regarding the Four Heavenly Kings declining to protect the nation; passages from the Sutra of the Great Assembly (Daji jing 大集経) regarding perishing of the Dharma and prevention of its perishing; passages regarding the circumstances of ruling from the Sutra of the Benevolent King (Renwang jing 仁王経); and a passage from the Sutra of the Medicine Master (Yaoshi jing 薬師経). The master notes that of "the three calamities and the seven disasters," only domestic disturbances and foreign invasions have not yet occurred. He warns that these two calamities are likely to arise before long if the true teaching is not embraced and faith in it is not renewed: 

The citations above, from the four sutras... make it clear that not holding the True Dharma is the source of calamities... Nevertheless, the blind, disturbed, not knowing what is the true teaching will indiscriminately put faith in false teachings. As a result, the people will abandon many Buddhas and sutras, having no intention of upholding them. So the gods who protect the country and the sages who teach the true teaching will abandon the country. This will allow evil demons and heretical doctrines to move in, causing calamities and difficulties. 4) 

The third interaction is a discussion of the nature and circumstances of slandering the Dharma. On the surface, it looks like Buddhism is thriving and flourishing. The master acknowledges that the guest has correctly pointed out that, "Buddhist temples stand in rows, and libraries of sutras are everywhere, while Buddhist priests are as numerous as bamboo stalks and reeds or rice and hemp plants." 5) The master then says, "In reality, however, the priests are all flatters and crooked in mind." 6) Citing passages from the Nirvana Sutra (The "Nature of the Tathāgata" and the "Bodhisattva Highly Virtuous King" sections), the Lotus Sutra (chapter 13, Encouragement to Keep Faith), and the Sutra of the Benevolent King, the master implies that Buddhism is being destroyed from within by the existence of such wrong monks. 

The fourth exchange finds the master depicting Hōnen as a "slanderer of the Dharma" as
he discusses and criticizes Hōnen’s statements that appear in several of the sixteen chapters of Hōnen’s *Senchakushū*. He points out that Hōnen criticized the Buddha for ceasing to teach the methods of contemplative and practical meditation and said that the *nembutsu* is the only teaching that shall never cease to be taught. The master judged that Hōnen’s conclusions were based on false interpretations by the various sages, that his conclusions go against the canons of the Pure Land which ensure that all those who call the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life will be reborn in his Pure Land “except those who have committed the five rebellious sins and slandered the True Dharma,” and that Hōnen had not grasped the *Lotus Sutra*’s warning that those who slandered it will “fall into a hell of incessant suffering.” ⁷

Somewhat annoyed by now, the guest initiates the fifth exchange by counter-arguing that the late great teachers had probably attained paradise by means of the *nembutsu* practice, that, among those great teachers, Hōnen’s wisdom “was as bright as the sun and moon, and he exceeded his predecessors in virtue... So some people call him [the reincarnation of] Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta (Jp. Daiseishi bosatsu 大勢至菩薩, Gainer of Great Strength Bodhisattva).” ⁸ In rebuttal, the master cites from several texts, including the *Great Concentration and Insight* (*Mohe zhiguan* 摩訶止覩), the *Historical Records* (*Shiji* 史記), and the *Annotations on the Treat Concentration and Insight* (*Zhiguan fuxing chuanhong jue* 止覩輔行伝弘決). Taking into consideration the “current situation of Japan,” the master says:

In view of these events in China, we can see that Pure Land Buddhism is the source of troubles in Japan today. Hōnen was actively propagating his faith in the Buddha of Infinite Life during the reign of ex-Emperor Gotoba, in the Kennin Era (1201–04). And as we all know, the ex-Emperor failed in his attempt to reassert the imperial authority to rule... and died in exile on the Island of Oki. Pure Land Buddhism as the cause of calamities has been proved in the great T'ang Empire as well as in Japan. You should not have any doubt about it.⁹

The guest, somewhat appeased, begins the sixth interaction by pointing out that there is no precedent for priests to present appeals to the government. The master then cites a passage of admonition from the Long Life Span Chapter of the *Nirvana Sutra*:

Suppose there is a monk, to all appearances “good,” who encounters a destroyer of the dharma but does not take any measures in accusing him, chasing him out, or punishing him. You had better know that such a man is not a “good” monk at all but an enemy of Buddhism. On the other hand if he accuses the destroyer of the dharma, chases him out, or punishes him strictly, such a man is My
disciple, one who truly hears Me.  

Not wanting to be accused of being an opponent of Buddhism, the master says that he must take that message to heart and act accordingly, and shows that his actions would not be without precedent:

During the Gennin Era (1224–25) the temples of Enryaku-ji on Mt. Hiei (比叡山延暦寺) and Kōfuku-ji in Nara (奈良興福寺) repeatedly appealed to the imperial court to suppress the Pure Land Buddhism... Hōnen and his disciples were banished to remote provinces. They have never been pardoned.  

Having come to accept some of the points from the examples and texts of teachings from the sutras, the guest calmly opens the seventh exchange by asking for specific ways to confront and manage disasters and calamities. In response the master cites extensively from the Nirvana Sutra, refers to the Sutra of the Benevolent King and also to Chapter 3, Parable, of the Lotus Sutra, and concludes by declaring: “If you wish to bring about the tranquility of the empire as soon as possible, first of all, you had better put a ban on the slanderers of the True Dharma throughout the nation.”

Referring to some of the sutra passages that the master had cited regarding ways of getting rid of slanderers of the True Dharma, the guest begins the eighth exchange by making known his doubts over the seemingly contradictory nature of the passages:

Killing slanderers of the True Dharma, as is preached in the Nirvana Sutra, seems to be a warning against slandering the True Dharma. Nevertheless, does it not violate the commandment preached in the Sutra of the Great Assembly? I can hardly believe that such is the proper course to take. How can I justify it?

The master stated in response: “What the Nirvana Sutra means is not that we should ban disciples of the Buddha at all, but that we should solely chastise slanderers of the True Dharma.” He then suggests a method for eliminating disasters:

The present Śākyamuni Buddha preaches not to give offerings to such slanderers... Therefore, if all the countries in the world and the four kinds of Buddhists (monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen) all stop giving offerings to the wrong priests who slander the True Dharma, putting all their faith instead in the defenders of the True Dharma, we can eliminate the calamities and disasters.

Prophecies and Encouragement

The ninth exchange, the Main Discourse, contains predictions of foreign invasions and
domestic disturbances, along with Nichiren's advocacy of the need for faith in the Lotus Sutra of the True Dharma. Here we find the Risshō ankokuron's main theme—that a Buddha-land can be established in this world, on earth, through practicing the True Dharma. This aspiration of Bringing Peace to the Nation by Establishing the True Dharma constitutes the core of Nichiren's Buddhism throughout his lifetime.

The guest, edified by the master's cordial arguments and teachings regarding opposition to and management of slanderers of the Dharma, expresses his understanding:

There are various schools of Buddhism, each with a doctrine hard to comprehend, I have many questions and cannot tell which is right or which is wrong. Nevertheless, Saint Hōnen's [Senchakushū] does exist, asserting that all the Buddhas and sutras should be "abandoned, closed, set aside and cast away."...As a result sages and protective gods have abandoned our country, causing famine and epidemics to spread all over it... Thanks to you, I am now free from my earlier prejudices, and can see and hear things clearly... After all, peace and tranquility of the nation is what the one person above, as well as all the people below, desire and pray for. 15)

The master applauds the guest's comprehension and trust, refers to several sutras to indicate forthcoming foreign invasions and natural disasters, and urges the guest to take up the "true and sole teaching" (jitsujo no ichizen 実乗の一善) 16):

If you wish to bring about peace in our country and pray for happiness in this life, as well as in the future, then waste no time. Think hard and take the necessary measures to thoroughly deal with slanderers of the True Dharma. Why do I say this? It is because five of the seven disasters predicted in the Medicine Master Sutra have already taken place, leaving just two still to occur: foreign invasion and domestic disturbance. 17)

You should promptly discard your false faith, and take up the true and sole teaching [of the Lotus Sutra] at once. Then this triple world 18) of the unenlightened will all become Buddha lands. Will buddha lands ever decay? All the world in the universe will become Pure Lands. Will Pure Lands ever be destroyed? When our country does not decay and the world is not destroyed, our bodies will be safe and our hearts tranquil. 19)

Of course, the Lotus Sutra, the "true and sole teaching," was described elsewhere [in the Kaimokushō 開目抄] by Nichiren as "the highest peak within the range of the spiritual cultures of Confucianism, non-Buddhist teachings, and Buddhism," 20) but that point was not discussed in detail here. And although Nichiren did, in earlier exchanges, state that the Lotus Sutra is the essence of all the sutras expounded in the lifetime of Śākyamuni Buddha, it has been thought that specifics and particulars regarding the Lotus Sutra's doctrines and ideologies were not discussed in the Risshō ankokuron out of Nichiren's hope to insti-
gate a public debate.

Resolution

The master's lectures have transformed the guest's mind. He expresses remorse for his misguided thinking to this point, declares that he will have faith in the master's words, and quickly seek ways to deal with those who slander the True Dharma. More than acting solely for himself, he vows to inform others of the errors of their ways:

Let us first secure tranquility in this life, and then try to attain Buddhahood in future lives. I not only believe in this but also will try to lead others in correcting their misconceptions.\(^1\)

Conclusion

Nichiren considered the *Lotus Sutra* to be the most supreme of Śākyamuni Buddha's teachings, and he believed Śākyamuni Buddha came to save all the people of the Sahā (娑婆) world. By contrast, Hōnen insisted on Birth in the Pure Land of Utmost Bliss through the mercy of Amitābha Buddha. Nichiren felt that, except for the Pure Land sutras, Hōnen had denied all other Mahāyāna sutras, and except for Amitābha Buddha, he had denied the various other Buddhas, bodhisattvas and deities. Thus, in accord with instructions he found in the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Nirvana Sutra*, and others, Nichiren criticized Hōnen's Pure Land Buddhism.

The ten sections of the *Risshō ankokuron* (nine question-and-answer exchanges, and the traveler's resolution) have been examined in the in the format of Preface, Main Discourse, and Epilogue. In line with this, the Preface consists of an extremely detailed criticism of Pure Land Buddhism. However, even though the phrase, "The *Lotus Sutra* is the essence of all the sutras expounded in the lifetime of Śākyamuni Buddha," appears in some of the dialogues in the text, it is found that the great righteousness of the *Lotus Sutra*, expressed as the "one true vehicle, the single good doctrine," is merely mentioned in passing within the Main Discourse. These points seem to reconfirm the purpose of the *Risshō ankokuron*, which was to focus on criticizing Hōnen's *Senchakushū*. Then, upon receiving a summons from Hōjō Tokiyori, the former Regent of the Kamakura Shogunate, Nichiren could realize a face-to-face dialogue on the details of his religious perspective.

\(^1\) This treatise is the compilation of research for a yearlong lecture series on the *Risshō ankokuron*
On the Righteousness of the Lotus Sutra and Criticism of the Pure Land Teaching in Nichiren’s Risshō ankokuron (G. SEkloo) (31)


3 ) Writings of Nichiren Shōnin, Doctrine 1, pp. 107–8.

4 ) Writings of Nichiren Shōnin, Doctrine 1, p. 113.

5 ) Writings of Nichiren Shōnin, Doctrine 1, p. 114.

6 ) Writings of Nichiren Shōnin, Doctrine 1, p. 114.

7 ) Writings of Nichiren Shōnin, Doctrine 1, pp. 120–22.

8 ) Writings of Nichiren Shōnin, Doctrine 1, pp. 123–24.

9 ) Writings of Nichiren Shōnin, Doctrine 1, p. 127.

10 ) Writings of Nichiren Shōnin, Doctrine 1, p. 128.

11 ) Writings of Nichiren Shōnin, Doctrine 1, p. 129.

12 ) Writings of Nichiren Shōnin, Doctrine 1, p. 134.

13 ) Writings of Nichiren Shōnin, Doctrine 1, p. 136.

14 ) Writings of Nichiren Shōnin, Doctrine 1, pp. 136–37.

15 ) Writings of Nichiren Shōnin, Doctrine 1, p. 137.

16 ) Also: “the one true vehicle; the single good doctrine.”

17 ) Writings of Nichiren Shōnin, Doctrine 1, p. 138.

18 ) Triple world: the realm of desire, the realm of form, and the realm of non-form.

19 ) Writings of Nichiren Shōnin, Doctrine 1, p. 142.


21 ) Writings of Nichiren Shōnin, Doctrine 1, p. 142.

〈Key words〉 Risshō ankokuron, Lotus Sutra, Nichiren

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