Nichiren's View on 'Time':
Historical and Absolute Time

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(1) Historical and Absolute Time in Nichiren Buddhism

Among the founders of Kamakura New Buddhism, Nichiren (1222-1282) was the last master to found a sect that was later called Nichiren Shū. As Nichiren's religious activities started with the presentation of Risshō-Ankoku-Ron to Kamakura Shogunate, historians of Japanese Buddhism and Buddhist scholars tended to pay too much attentions to his active nature and to his religious nature arising from his experiences of religious repression. However, all the religions pay attention not only to men in reality, but also to the merger with the absolute time. During the first 11 years from the submission of Risshō-Ankoku-Ron at his 39th year (1260) to the Ryū-kō-Honan Repression at his 50th year (1271), through the four major religious persecutions, Nichiren deepened his own recognition as a 'Prophet of the Lotus Sutra'. As many of his biographies observe Nichiren's active nature, and his understanding of history and time from such standpoint, and thus, they seem to be not properly treating the problem of the venue of the merger with the Absolute Time in Nichiren's thought.

(2) "Ima-Honji" in Kanjin-Honzon-Shō and the Absolute Time

It is certain that the word "Ima-Honji" in Kanjin-Honzon-Shō has been understood to denote that the idea of unity with to the absolute lies in the crux of Nichiren's thought. However, as Nichiren had particularly short and strong writing expression style, it is hard to say if his intricate thought in mind was thoroughly reflected in the writings. Such tendency can also be applied to Kanjin-Honzon-Shō also. Due to repeated religious repressions, Nichiren appears to have believed that minute parts of his thought could only be revealed in the public debate organized by the then ruling kings. It may sound absurd from modern point of view. However, Nichiren appears to have considered the relationship between T'ien-t'ai
Chih-I and Yuan-Ti in China or Dengyo Daishi and Emperor Kanmu in Japan as the ideal relationship between a Buddhist thinker and the ruler, and he appears to have considered that the sublimation of Buddhism and realization of peace in nation can be established through same kind of relationship in Kamakura.

Nichiren sent *Kanjin-Honzon-Shō* from Sado Island to Toki Jōnin in Shimousa country. It reads in the accompanying letter called *Kanjin-Honzon-Shō-Soe-Jō*: “About the teaching of ‘Kanjin’, a work has been written to note the understanding of Nichiren, which is to be sent to Ohta Jōmyō, Soya Kyōshin and to other followers. As the work contains precious teaching Nichiren conceived at the cost of his own life, cherish it as the secret teaching. When you can find a clue to the understanding of it, please explore the deep meaning of it.

In fact, this work mainly intends to question. And the answers are not thorough. It reveals something that are not heard of before. People may get puzzled with those things they hear and watch. Even if you show it to other people, you should never read it with three or four people sitting together. More than 2220 years have passed since the parinirvana of the Buddha Śākyamuni, the heart of this work revealing the future predictions of the Lotus Sūtra has never been dealt with anywhere. Therefore, despite the Mongol threat and internal discontents, Nichiren dared to describe this teaching at this beginning of the fifth five hundred years period, the very beginning of Mappō period, expecting the realization of Śākyamuni’s future predictions.” Paying such cautions, Nichiren often describes that he holds occasions to make clear his own understandings of Buddhism. At the same time, we feel here Nichiren’s intention of revealing his new state of mind.

(3) Recognition of Historical ‘Time’ in Nichiren Buddhism

The foundation of ‘Historical Time’ in Nichiren’s religion will be (a) the accord of ‘*Koto*’ [時] and ‘*Kokoro*’ [心]. It is to make clear the ultimate relationship between the reality taking various forms and the spirit.

As has been mentioned at the outset, religion deals not only with the actuality but also with the problems of the eternal and the unity with the absolute time. Putting aside the realistic policies of various religious organizations, the idealistic tendency of various sects can be summarized as follows: ①Zen appears to consider the unity with the Absolute Time, transcending Historical Time, as most important, as it shows the way to reach Buddha’s ultimate state of mind by transcending reality; ②The thought of *Avatāṃsaka-sūtra* seems
to show a tendency to place importance in the unity with the Absolute Time, as it attempts to show the universal nature of the existence of the Buddha through 'light', identifying the true source of the light as the Virocana Buddha; ③ As for the Shingon Esoteric Buddhism, it also stands fundamentally in the same ground as the case of ②. If we examine other sects, while all of them aiming at the realization of the unity with the Absolute Time, we may be able to see that there are some differences in the manner of placement of importance on realistic Historical Time.

In this way, it may be said that (b) the concept of Mappō provided a great impact on Japanese Buddhism. It was Pure Land Buddhism that unleashed a new trend, basing on the concept of Mappō. In the last phase of Heian period, facing the anxieties among the aristocrats due to the arrival of Mappō period, Honen advocated that there are two ways, i.e. Shō-dō-mon (Sacred Gate) and Jōdo-mon (Pure Land Gate), to Buddhism, and that only the Jōdo-mon is the teaching for the Mappō period. We may be able to consider that the idea of adoption of only the Jōdo-mon for Mappō, though the three periods of Shō-bō, Zō-hō and Mappō were recognized, signifies the fact that the recognition of historical time in the actual society was not carried out.

Nichiren, in turn, from the standpoint of (a) the Accord of 'Koto' and 'Kokoro', carried out (c) the recognition of the then time in the Japanese history, and he interpreted the reasons for the so called five disorders in Mappō, i.e., that of the epoch, thought, greed, peoples' nature and of life, as the reconfirmation of the idea of Mappō itself. He reinterpreted the word Mappō not as the time of the 'Extinction of Buddhist Dharma' but as (d) the time for the emergence of the 'Great Pure Dharma'. Nichiren considered the emergence of the 'Great Pure Dharma' as inevitable, and he interprets the arrival of Mappō as the realization of the 'future predictions' of the Buddha. It is from such a point of view that Nichiren writes in the beginning of Sen-ji-Shō, "When we learn Buddhist Dharma, we should first learn times." The traits of religious activities of Nichiren show that such recognition of historical time exists at their base. Therefore, even the idea of Mappō, a way of grasping time, has been considered as a truly realistic historical recognition.

When Nichiren writes "Ima Hon-ji" in Kanjin-Honzon-Shō, it is not to take up the idea of the Absolute Time, disregarding the observances of historical present. However, from the interpretation of Mappō mentioned above, it seems that Nichiren considered the present in Mappō is supported by the 'Hon-ji' of the Absolute Time.
(4) The Problem of ‘Bon-Shin-Gu-Butsu’ in Kanjin-Honzon-Shō

It has been considered that Kanjin-Honzon-Shō is composed of three parts, namely Kanjin-dan (Section on Observation on Mind), Honzon-dan (Section on the nature of the buddha) and Guzu-dan (section on the preaching of the true Dharma). To understand the word “Ima Hon-ji” that only appears in this work, we may have to take account of the intention of the entire organization of the work.

Kanjin-Honzon-Shō is composed of thirty questions and answers. Till about the 17th question, the meanings of Jikkai-Go-Gu (十界互具) and Ichin-Nen-Sanzen (一念三千) were dealt with. As they are dealing with the question if the Jikkai-Go-Gu and Ichin-Nen-Sanzen can be established in the root of a human being, the discussions have to have a universal meaning. In conclusion, the basis for the search of ‘Kanjin’ and for the investigation into Ichin-Nen-Sanzen is to provide answer to a question if an ordinary man can hold the Buddha World within his own mind or not. As has been pointed out by Prof. Motai, Nichiren confirmed the basis of Kanjin by saying, “Kanjin is to see the Ten Dharma World by observing one’s own mind. This is what we call Kanjin.” Then, he takes up a big theme by saying, “Without seeing the splendid mirrors of the Lotus Sūtra and Mo-ha-chih-kuan of Tienn-tai Ta-shih, one shall not know the Ten Dharma Worlds, Hundred Dharma Worlds, One Thousand Realities and the truth of Ichin-Nen-Sanzen (Nichiren Shōnin Ibun Shōwa Teihon, p. 704)”. However, he further repeats the question and answer sessions on the issue:①First, the answers for the questions like, “Where in the Lotus Sūtra is it mentioned, and elucidate the interpretation of Chih-I on it? “ are described ; ②Then, he lists the question, “Though it may be probable to see six sense organs between oneself and other persons, can we really make sure the existence in ordinary man the Ten Dharma Worlds equipped within the Buddha World and within the other Dharma Worlds?” As an answer to it, he points out the idea of ‘Nan-Shin-Nan-Ge (難信難解, ‘Hard to believe and understand’) appears in Dharmabhānaka parivarta of the Lotus Sūtra and Roku-Nan-Ku-I (六難九易, ‘Six difficulties and Nine Ease’), And then he lists the interpretations of Chih-I, Kuan-Ting, Saicho and etc. ; ③He then questions, though the intention of sūtra can be understood, whether facial expressions of a man is limited to the facial expressions of a man in Human World or not. He mentions that at least the Six Realms from the hell to the heaven are reflected in the expression of a man; ④Even if the stage is recognized, he further answers to the
Nichiren’s View on ‘Time’ (H. WATANABE)

question if the Four Sacred (四聖) appear or not. Finally, he opines that the very fact that the common men in Mappō period believe in the Lotus sūtra itself is the evidence for the equipment of Buddha Dharma World within Human World; He further continues: “We can understand the Buddha’s words that Ten Dharma Worlds are equipped in us. But we cannot grasp the confirmation that the Buddha Dharma World is equipped in our inferior mind.”

Such search for the Bon-Shin-Gu-Butsu was summarized in the eighteenth question, which had a note saying that it should be hidden secretly. In the answer, it is discussed that the true meaning will be revealed in the differences between the Lotus Sūtra and other sūtras.

In the nineteenth question the idea of Ichi-Nen-Sanzen Butsu-Shu (一念三千仏種) was mentioned. Then, in the twentieth question, it is described that the two aspects of the Dharma, i.e., (a) the religious practices as Bodhisattvas that led to the Buddhahood (the cause) and (b) the state of Buddha World shown as the completed Buddha of Eternal Life (the fruit), are equipped in the five characters of Myō-Hō-Ren-Ge-Kyō. Thus, it is revealed that two aspects of merits of (a) the Buddha’s religious practices as Bodhisattvas (the cause) and (b) the completed Buddha World (the fruit) are automatically equipped to the person if the common man cherish and maintains the five characters (Showa Teihon, p. 711). Besides, in the answer, a quotation from Ma-ka-shi-kan-bu-gyo-den-guketsu by Myō-raku has been cited: “We have to know the followings. One’s own body, the country we live in, they all exist in the Three Thousand Dharma World existing in the fraction of thought in our mind. Therefore, when the Buddha attained enlightenment, Buddha’s body and his fraction of thought spread in the world to guide the universe (Showa Teihon, p. 712).” Such words were mentioned to confirm that (1) by the maintenance of the five characters of Myō-hō-ren-ge-kyo merits arising out of the Buddha’s religious practices as bodhisattvas and the fruit of becoming a Buddha is bestowed to a common man in Mappō period, as the merits are inherently equipped in the five characters (the notion characteristic to the Lotus Sūtra), and that (2) even the body of the common man and the entire world are governed by the truth of Ichi-Nen-Sanzen. Therefore, if we observe it from other side, by the truth of Ichi-Nen-Sanzen, Buddha’s attainment of enlightenment means that his body, his thought and the Dharma World spread over the Dharma World. Thus, the problem of ‘Kanjin’, which had so far discussed in the context of internal mind, came to declare that the truth of

— 506 —
Nichiren’s View on ‘Time’ (H. Watanabe)

Ichi-Nen-Sanzen is the basis for the notion that Buddha spread all over the Dharma.

(5) ‘Ima-Honji’ and ‘Jōjū-no-Jōdo’ (Eternal Pure Land)

Following above discussion, it was elucidated that the pure lands appeared in the sūtras prior to the Lotus Sūtra cannot evade the impermanent changes: "The Buddha revealed many pure lands during the fifty years of his preaching and guiding populace during the period from his attaining enlightenment and revealing Rengezō pure land which is the world of the Avataṃsaka-sūtra and to his parinirvāṇa in the Sāla grove. The first world of the Avataṃsaka-sūtra which signifies the state of Vairocana Buddha; Mitugon pure land of Mahāvairocana Buddha; the pure land which was made to appear in the air after purifying the Sāla world for three times, appearing in the Apparition of Stūpa Chapter of the Lotus Sūtra; the Sāla grove that appears as three pure lands of Bon-Shō-dōgo-do, Hōben-u-yo-do, Jippō-mushōged-do, or four adding Jō-jakkō-do according to the spiritual nature of the observer, mentioned in the Zō-hō-ketsu-gi-kyō. In the great cycle of the Four Great Kalpas of Formation, Maintenance, Decay and Nothingness, they are the changing forms of Hōben-u-yo-do, Jippō-mushōge-do and Jō-jakkō-do, belong to the kalpa of Formation, thus appearing as An-yō-jōdo of Amitabha, Jōruri-jōdo of Vaiśajaguru, and Mitsugon-jōdo of Mahāvairocana. However, if the Buddha preaching such pure lands once performs parinirvāṇa, these Buddhas also disappear. Even these pure lands also disappear (Showa Teihon, p. 712)."

The above quotation is the evaluation of various pure lands described in various sūtras to make clear the significance of Jōjū-no-jōdo (The Eternal Pure Land). The fact if the ‘Lord’ had attained the ultimate state or not seems to be the criteria of the judgment, which may be indicating the supreme nature of the state of Kuon-jitsu-jo-no-Butsuda (the Buddha of Eternal Life). There seems to exist Buddhist tendency to take up the problem of the depth of state the Lord (the Buddha) reached for the basis of pure lands to be objective existences.

In any case, it is in the following context that the phrase ‘Ima-Honji’ appears. It is in the context of clarifying Jōju-no-jōdo in contrast to Mujō-no-do (Impermanent Land). In this way, we come to know that Nichiren’s recognition of Absolute Time is to be understood as the idea of time in accordance with the spatial nature of the Jōju-no-jōdo. When we remember the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha’s providing of continuous guidance and bodhisattvas’ religious practices from the endless past is depicted in its Introductory Chapter. Then, in
Nichiren’s View on ‘Time’ (H. WATANABE)

the Seventh chapter on Ancient Devotion, we have the story of Sixteen Princes’ entering Buddhist life and mastering the teaching of the scripture under the Tathāgata Mahābhijñājñānabhibhu in the eons past. Further, in the Chapter of the Duration of the Life of Tathāgata, we have the episode of the Buddha’s intention to rescue common men by the revelation of his eternal life. We can observe such cause and effect episodes of Buddha’s eternal guidance in the Lotus Sūtra.

Regarding the ‘Ima-Honji’, we have many works like, Roku-nai-keimō of Ankoku-in-Nichikō (1622-96). In modern period, scholars like Simizu Ryūzan, Yamakawa Chiō, Mochizuki Kankō, Motai Kyōkō and Asai Endō have dealt with the problem. Besides, the section of ‘Ima-Honji’ in Nichiren-shu Jiten, published by Nichiren sect, sums up the past works well. These detailed discussions well confirm the idea of ‘Eternal Now’, and they display the fundamentals of Nichiren Buddhism. However, I doubt if we are really understanding and accepting the idea of ‘Eternal Now’ in Kanjin-Honzon-Shō properly in practice and in our sentiment, without being influenced by the active nature of Nichiren’s religion. At the base of the concept of ‘Ima-Honji’, there exists the idea of pure land of ‘Ima-Honji no Shaba Sekai’ (The Sahā World of Eternal Now). While many of the pure lands exist in other places, in the Lotus Sūtra, the conversion of Shaku-do (迹土) and Hon-do (本土) takes place with the revelation of the teaching of the Lotus Sūtra, thus Sahā World becoming Hon-do and other pure lands becoming Shaku-do. There, it is stressed that the Buddha’s Hon-do appears in the very Sahā World where we actually live in. Thus, Nichiren’s religion is based on the philosophy that even the path in questing for the Hon-do of Eternal Buddha transcending the reality cannot achieve without the reality.

We thus know that Nichiren’s religion is not governed by a mere reality for reality principle. It is based on the quest for the Kuon-no-Hon-do (the Eternal Pure Land). The phrase ‘Ima-Honji’ has to be understood in the light that the real time in Sahā World is made to appear in the ‘present’ of Mappō. Then, the recognition of historical reality and the appearance of Hon-ji is carried out simultaneously.

(KeyWords) Nichiren, Ichi-Nen-Sanzen, Bon-Shin-Gu-Butsu, Ima-Honji, Sahā Wold

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