The Keynote of Nichiren's Understanding of Buddhism

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1. Revival of Reviving Śākyamuni's Buddhism and Nichiren's View on the Lotus Sūtra

Nichiren (日蓮, 1222-1282) respected Dengyō-Daishi Saichō (伝教大師最澄, 767-822), and he tried to map out a scheme for salvation, directly linking people to Śākyamuni Buddha, with the idea of 'Integrated Buddhism' by T'ien-t'ai Ta-shih Chih-i (天台大師智顗, 538-597). Nichiren considered the line of teachers starting from the Buddha to Chih-i and then to Saichō (the Buddha → Chih-i → Saichō) as the lineage which transmitted the orthodox teaching of the Buddha, and he respected them as *San-goku San-shi* (三国三師, 'Three Teachers over the Three Countries'). Later, he arrived at a conviction that he had established a foundation for the ten-thousand years of Mappō age (the Period of Degenerated Law, 末法, *Saddharma-vipralopa*), as he directly inherited the teaching of the three masters. Thus, he conveyed the conviction to his followers, by mentioning the word *San-goku Shi-shi* (三国四師, 'Four Teachers over the Three Countries'), adding his own name to the end of the previous list. Though there are 700 years of temporal gap between Chih-i and Nichiren, Nichiren placed Chih-i's understanding of Buddhism at the base of his thought.

Viewing it from formalistic standpoint, it may indicate that Nichiren inherited *Tendai-Shū* (天台宗). However, having the consciousness of honoring orthodox Tendai made him consider that Chih-i and Saichō were the inheritors of the Lotus Sūtra only in *Zobō* age (the Period of Imitative Law, 像法, *Saddharmapratirupaka*). It is to say, it was the idea of *Mappō* that made Nichiren to make such positioning of himself. In the prevalence of the thought of Pure-land Buddhism in Japan, it was considered that the 7th year of *Eishō* (1052 A.D.) corresponded to the 2001st year since the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha, and that the *Mappō* age had started.

In the situation that the entire Japan was seeking the refuge in Pure-land Buddhism

from the fear of living in *Mappō* age, Nichiren questioned the tendency. Having the master T'ien-t'ai's idea of 'Integrated Buddhism' at the base, he further considered that the lord Buddha had preached the Lotus Sutra for the salvation of the people in very *Mappō* period. The idea bridged Nichiren's understandings of Buddhism and his recognition of the then actual society.

From such standpoint, the questions and criticisms on Saichō's attitude of *Shi-shū-yūgō* (四宗融合, Amalgamation of Four Sects) arose. The idea of *Shi-shū-yū-gō* meant to unify *En-gvō* (円教, the teachings of the Lotus Sutra), *Mikkyō* (密教, Shingon Esoteric Buddhism), *Zen* (禅, Zen tradition), and *Kai* (戒). After criticizing Pure-land Buddhism, Nichiren successively criticized the four sects of *Zen*, *Shingon*, and *Ritsu*. At this point, we realize that it was the Pure-land Buddhism that Nichiren vehemently criticized at first, while utilizing the process to ascertain the essence of the Lotus Sūtra. We may be able to comprehend that the reason why Nichiren criticized *Zen*, *Shingon* and *Ritsu* after the Pure-land Buddhism was to make clear that the Lotus Sūtra was the *dharma* for the *Mappō* period.

2. Supremacy of the Lotus Sūtra and the Cruxes of Nichiren Buddhism

There is a critical view to state that the central aim of Nichiren's religion was to illustratively demonstrate the supreme nature of the Lotus Sūtra over other scriptures and other sects' thoughts. If we view from such standpoint, it may be true that there are many educational texts compiled by Nichiren's immediate successors reflecting such strong tendency. The *Kin-kō-shū* (『金綱集』) by Nikō (日向), one of the six Nichiren's immediate disciples, is the best example. It consists of ten chapters: the first is on *Kegon-shū* (華嚴宗), the second is on three *Hīnayāna* schools (小乘三宗, i.e., *Kusha* [俱舍], *Jōjitu* [成実] and *Ritsu* [律]), the third chapter is on *Mahāyāna* Buddhism (方等之事), the fourth and fifth chapters are on Pure-land Buddhism (淨土宗), the sixth is on *Shingon* (真言宗), the seventh chapter is on *Zen* (禪), the eighth chapter is on *Hossō* sect (法相宗), the ninth chapter is on *Sanron* sect (三論宗) and the tenth chapter is on the Lotus Sūtra (法華經之事). Thus, from the first to ninth chapters are the compilation of controversial points and evidences supporting the criticisms. On this point, it is said that the idea reflected in *Ichi-dai-go-jī-zu* (一代五時図) and *Ichi-dai-go-jī-kei-zu* (一代五時鶏図), which are said to have drafted

by Nichiren himself for the aid of lectures, provided the basis of the text, and that there are many passages in Nichiren's writings reflecting the same idea.

The fact that such criticisms on other sects were the central theme of his discussion signifies that Nichiren fundamentally inherited the nature of T'ien-t'ai Ta-shih's classification of many sūtras for the total grasping of various traditions in Buddhism.

Standing on such basis, Nichiren's theory for placing the Lotus Sūtra as the supreme sūtra did not allow him to just repeat the long tradition which the Tendai School was proud of. Rather, Nichiren questioned the ways of praising of the Lotus Sūtra during the Heian period, and he sought for the path that can overcome the defects. In the literature of the period, like *Genji Monogatari* of Murasaki Shikibu, basing on the phrase 'Hokekyō Sai Dai Ichi' (法華經最第一), the path of praying for the solution that overcomes the hardships of daily life, with the help of the power of the merits of the Lotus Sūtra, was commonly propagated. Such basic tendency of the religion based on esoteric ritualistic prayers was not the monopoly of the Lotus Sūtra. We can see the same tendency in Buddhism throughout ancient and medieval period of Japan. However, Nichiren posed a fundamental question to the fact that the Lotus Sūtra faith in Heian Period stood in the same foundation.

The characteristic of Nichiren's view on the Lotus Sūtra lies in his understanding that the lord Buddha, as his future prediction (未来記), left the Lotus Sūtra for the people of the *Mappō* age. Further, the present author wish to consider that the reason why Nichiren's characteristic world of the acceptance of the Lotus Sūtra developed is due to the fact that Nichiren conceived the Sūtra as 'difficult to believe and comprehend' (難信難解), thus containing the highest teaching.

Behind the idea, there existed Nichiren's 'Go-gi' classification (五義, Five Classification for attaining the eternal teaching of the Lotus Sūtra). The reason why Nichiren studied Buddhism from the standpoint of the 'Go-gi' was due to his aim of reviving Buddhism in *Mappō* period. As the prerequisite to it, the total and systematic grasping of Buddhism was necessary, reflecting the basic attitude of T'ien-t'ai Ta-shih.

At the root of Nichiren's attitude to aim for the total and systematic grasping of Buddhism with 'Go-gi classification', there existed a fact of the prevalence of Pure-land Buddhism. Nichiren critically states that Pure-land Buddhism was formed and

developed by T'an-luan (曇鸞), Tao-ch'o (道綽) and Shan-tao (善導) in China. In Japan, Yōkan's *Ōjō-jū-in* (永観『往生拾因』) and Genshin's *Ōjōyō-shū* (源信『往生要集』) provided the foundation, and the explosive spread of Honen's *Sen-chaku-hongan-nenbutsu-shū* (法然『選択本願念仏集』) made Pure-land Buddhism spread all over Japan. Nichiren held doubt in the fact that the Pure-land Buddhism advocated the idea of 'Yen-li Hui-t'u Hsin-ch'iu Ching-t'u' (厭離穢土 欣求淨土). As a result, he came to a conclusion that the absolute eternal *Sahā*-world ('*Hon-ji no Shaba Sekai*', 本時の娑婆世界) of the Eternal Śākyamuni (久遠釈尊), who exists keeping in touch with the very actual *Sahā*-world, was the target goal of the followers of the Lotus Sūtra who overcome the sufferings. In the process of attaining the supreme conviction, Nichiren made use of the 'Go-gi' classification as the basis for the total grasping of Buddhism.

'Gogi' means 'to know the teaching (*Kyō*, 教)', 'to know the ability of the audience (*Ki*, 機)', 'to know the times' (*Ji*, 時)', 'to know the nation' (*Koku*, 国, i.e., the venue) and 'to know the order of the spread teachings' (*Jo*, 序). On the basis of these five categories of analysis, Nichiren reached the conclusion that '*Honmon no Hokekyō*' (本門の法華經: the understanding of Buddhism based on the *Kuon Shakuson* [久遠釈尊, Eternal Śākyamuni] preached in the Honmon section) is the ultimate truth. Normally, for the understanding of it, according to a certain scholar, Nichiren is said to have critically examined the development of Buddhism from the five factors of 'Kyō', 'Ki', 'Ji', 'Koku' and 'Jo'. The scholar concludes the realization of the importance of the '*Honmon no Hokekyō*' is the result of Nichiren's such inquiries. The late Dr. Kyōkō MOTAI suggested that such inquiries based on 'Gogi' could be consistently noticed in Nichiren's works from the early stage of his carrier¹⁾.

Thus, Nichiren made the following three as the most important pillars of his doctrine: (a) The worship and respect to the Eternal Śākyamuni, (b) the confirmation of the actual situation of the country in which the law spread, and (c) the confirmation of the salvation and religious practices for attaining it. The three are in other words, (a) '*Honmon no Honzon*' (本門の本尊), (b) '*Honmon no Kaidan*' (本門の戒壇) and (c) '*Honmon no Daimoku*' (本門の題目), known as the '*San-Dai-Hihō*' (三大秘法, the three great secret *dharmas*).

3. Positive Nature of Nichiren Buddhism and its Bases

In the first and the second sections, we discussed on the nature of Nichiren Buddhism. The purpose of this section is to elucidate the religious moments and psychological or internal nature of them that the Nichiren Buddhism promoted.

For the understanding of Nichiren Buddhism, much importance has been placed on Nichiren's gradual acquisition of consciousness of being a prophet of the Lotus Sūtra, owing to his encounter with repeated religious repressions after the writing and submission of *Risshō-Ankoku-Ron* (『立正安国論』) to the then Kamakura Shogunate. As a result, the central theme for the understanding of Nichiren Buddhism came to be placed in the feeling of mission that 'Nichiren the Messenger of the Lord Buddha' or 'Nichiren the Buddhist Prophet of the Lotus Sūtra' upheld.

However, as is stated by Dr. Masaharu ANESAKI, in his "*Tsumi ni kansuru Nichiren Shōnin no Kaihō*" (「罪に関する日蓮聖人の懷抱」 in 『宗教研究』 vol. 1, no. 1), the awareness of sin lay at the root of Nichiren's religion. As Christianity admonishes that the betraying the God as the deadly sin, and that the ethical sins in everyday life as minor ones, it is advised in Nichiren Buddhism that 'Hobo-zai' (謗法罪, the sin of abusing Buddhist *dharma*) is the sin which has to be most avoided. The idea of the sin of abusing Buddhist *dharma* and the word 'Hobo' often appeared in scriptures. However, prior to Nichiren, it is significant to note that the word was taken rather lightly in the context of merely 'abusing and slandering' in ordinary sense. Whereas in Nichiren's interpretation, it is considered to be equal to the sin of destroying the Buddhist *dharma*, which is far more heavier than the sin of 'Gogyaku' (五逆, Five heinous sins). Nichiren repeatedly discussed on this as the major issue in his various writings, ever since he composed *Risshō Ankoku Ron*.

It was this recognition of the sin of 'Hōbō' that fostered and ushered in the active nature of Nichiren Buddhism²⁾. It was this recognition of sin of 'Hōbō' that ushered in the formation of the 'consciousness of his being a Buddhist prophet of the Lotus Sūtra'. However, the present author considers the factor that ushered in the formation of such consciousness was the idea of escape from the fear of 'Dajigoku' (墮地獄, falling into the hell). After the submission of *Risshō-Ankoku-Ron*, for about ten years, Nichiren had to undergo the 'Shi-dai Hō-nan' (四大法難, Four

Major Religious Repressions). In the process, the rise of the awareness of being a Buddhist prophet took place, which culminated in his recognition of being a messenger of the Lord Buddha. In fact, it is well known that Nichiren's upheld religious belief is well revealed in the writings like *Kai-Moku-Shō* and *Kanjin-Honzon-Shō*.

However, we should not forget about the opportunities that put force to Nichiren's early activities, and that ultimately ushered in the formation of his profound religious world. The core of *Risshō Ankoku Ron* (in 1260, Nichiren 39 years old) and *Shugo Kokka Ron* (『守護国家論』, in 1259, Nichiren 38 years old) is the criticism against Honen's *Sen Chaku Hongan Nenbutsu Shu*. And, we have *Nenbutu Sha Tsui hō S enjō no Koto* (『念仏者追放宣状事』, in 1259, at 38 years old³⁾), which Nichiren himself is said to have copied down the five pieces of criticism against Jōdo-Kyō from the side of traditional Buddhist schools. These show Nichiren's severely critical attitude against Pure-land Buddhism. At the same time, in *Ken-Hōbō-Shō* (『顕謗法鈔』, written in 1262, Nichiren 41 years old), we find sentences like '*hachidai jigoku no inga wo akirakani suru*' ('Making clear the causes and effects of the Eight Great Hells') which are the extracted passages from Genshin's *Ōjō-Yō-Shu*⁴⁾.

Moreover, in his later days, Nichiren retrospectively mentions, "Nichiren had a thorough knowledge of the contents of the works by Shan-*tao* and Honen, even at the age of 16 or 17." Inversely speaking, it indicates a fact that Nichiren seriously tackled the problem of finding means to overcome the thought of *Mappō*, and that, by denying Pure-land Buddhism, he came to the conviction for the attainment of salvation by the of people in *Mappō* age with the new interpretation of the Lotus Sūtra that places importance on the philosophical significance of *Hon-mon* section.

4. Concluding Remark

As we have discussed above, Nichiren's Hokke Buddhism started and developed as the proposition of liberating people from the fear of '*Da-jigoku*' (falling into the Hell) which overwhelmed the entire medieval Japan. Moreover, it may be pointed out that its assertion of the liberation from '*Da-jigoku*' rested in the understanding which structurally went directly against that of the Pure-land Buddhism. If we list up the major characteristics of Nichiren Hokke Buddhism and Pure-land Buddhism, they can be classified as the following :

[Pure-land Buddhism]

- ① Vows and Practices (願行) 'Onri Edo, Gongu Jodo'
(*Yen-li-hui-t'u Hsin-ch'i'u-ching-t'u*, 厭離穢土 欣求淨土)
- ② The Buddha to take refuge in (歸依仏) *Amitābha* Buddha of the Western direction
- ③ Pure-land (淨土) *Anyō Jōdo* Pure-land (*An-yano-cing-t'u*, 安養淨土)
in the West = *Sukhāvātī*

[Nichiren Hokke Buddhism]

- ① Vows and Practices (願行) Placing importance in actual world
→ 'Ima honji no shaba sekai' (今本時の娑婆世界)
- ② The Buddha to take refuge in (歸依仏)
Śākyamuni Buddha of Eternal Life (久遠の仏陀釈尊)
- ③ Pure-land (淨土) Pure-land of the Vulture Peak in this very world (娑婆即寂光土),
(The Pure-land where the Lotus Sūtra is eternally preached.)

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- 1) Kyoko MOTAI, "Gogi no Taikei teki Kosatsu" in his *Kanjin-honzon-shō Kenkyū Josetsu*.
 - 2) Kyoko MOTAI, "Nichiren Shonin no Hōbō to yu u koto" in his *Kanjin-honzon-shō Kenkyū Josetsu*. Hōyō Watanabe, "Shōnin Kyōgaku ni okeru Hōbō no igi", chapter 1 section 2 of the *Nichiren-shū Shingyōron no Kenkyū*; Shinjō HARA, *Nichiren Shōnin ni okeru Tsumi no Kenkyū*.
 - 3) Pictorial Record Section No. 7 of *Shōwa-teihon-Nichiren-shōnin-ibun*, p. 2258.
 - 4) Hōyō WATANABE, 'Hōbō Dagoku Oboegaki', *Risshō Daigaku Nichiren Kyōgaku Kenkyūjo Kiyō*, vol. 4.

〈Key Words〉 Nichiren, *Kin-kō-syū*, *Risshō Amkoku Ron*, *Go-gi*, *Go-gyaku*, *Mappō*,
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