

## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin.* Tokyo: Nichiren Shoshu International Center, 1986. 5 vols.

The first impression any reader will have of these five volumes is that Nichiren was obviously an extremely prolific writer. While there is some scholarly debate about what should or should not belong in this canon, it is clear that Nichiren devoted much time to his writing and, true to his character, produced many works of a very lively nature. This literary accomplishment is enhanced by that of the Goshō Translation Committee, which not only did the translations but also included various introductions, annotations, commentaries, glossaries and appendices. Nichiren's writings can now be accessed in quantity through these five volumes, and his life and thought can be measured more fully by his own words.

The usual image of Nichiren as a self-righteous, self-proclaimed prophet remains unchanged. Nichiren's insistence that he is the only possessor of the truth is repeated throughout his works with the net effect of strengthening the common image of himself as a supremely confident person. He is hardly the self-effacing man free of his ego. In his own, sometimes bombastic, words, Nichiren shows himself to be a paragon of individualism, self-certain, and fully aware of his own unique personality.

The popularity of this man and his religion for so many centuries calls into question the image of Japanese Buddhist masters as models of serene reservation based on the teaching of the emptiness of things and the self. The theory of emptiness has remained mostly that: an important theory which has fed the intellectual life and writings of scholar/monks in the past, and continues to find its champions. When, however, we face the challenge of understanding Japanese Buddhism as lived by most people, then the writings of Nichiren are far more useful than the learned treatises on emptiness and the other doctrines which Buddhists themselves are almost proud of describing as abstruse.

The personality we encounter in the *Major Writings* provides an important clue to the dynamics of Japanese Buddhism. Especially as seen through his letters but also in his more technical writings as well, Nichiren emerges as a person who is loyal to and appreciative of the many ordinary people who helped him. Few of the other great masters come across in their writings as more caring and thoughtful. These personal bonds were often forged under the ex-

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treme conditions of persecution and exile, and Nichiren did not forget to express his gratitude even as he wrote to instruct as much as to thank. To the "boat manager" Funamori Yasaburo, he acknowledged receipt of rice dumplings and other goods, and recalled, "... having been exiled, I arrived at a beach I had never even heard of before. When I left the boat, still suffering from seasickness, you kindly took me into your care. What destiny brought us together?"<sup>1</sup> These are innocuous words, perhaps of no great profundity, but it is in these words of a close personal relationship, a social structure highly personalized, that we find the pulse of Japanese Buddhism. It is an exercise in the obvious to say that Japanese Buddhism is not just a system of ideas and rituals but an interdependence of persons as well, and Nichiren's many expressions of personal thanks throughout his writings remind us of that which, precisely because it is obvious, is easy to overlook.

Nichiren was keenly aware of his personal concern for his followers. In comparing himself to Chih-i and Saichō, two of the very few Buddhist masters he regarded highly, he felt himself to be inferior in terms of scholarly ability. But in two other areas, he felt that he could "put them to shame."<sup>2</sup> The first was his "wealth of compassion for others," and this is certainly evident in his writings as long as the "others" were his followers and not his enemies. Nichiren divided the world between those whom he loved and those whom he did not. The great emphasis Nichiren placed on compassion for his group of followers was a natural consequence of the importance he placed on himself. They were an extension of him, and like him could be defined with his characteristic lack of ambiguity apart from the rest of the world that did not accept them. And uppermost in Nichiren's mind was the grand theme that runs throughout his works: persecution. His ability to endure persecution was the second area in which he felt he could put Chih-i and Saichō to shame. In much of his writings, Nichiren was preoccupied with the meaning of oppression, for while it was painful to suffer censure and exile, it was also a joy to fulfill the prophecies of the *Lotus Sutra* concerning persecution, which establishes the righteousness of the persecuted.

Nichiren writes not only about who is right and wrong but also about what is true and false. There is a refreshing clarity to his writings and it is not difficult to understand Nichiren. While he is not totally without contradictions and technical obscurities, he is by and large free of the mystifying language of, for example, being two but not two. Nichiren's definition of the truth is extremely clear, and is often couched in the lively imagery of his cosmology. The underlying assumption of the *Risshō Ankoku Ron*, for example, is that

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<sup>1</sup> *The Izu Exile*, vol.2, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> *The Opening of the Eyes*, I, vol. 2, p. 118.

the world is controlled by spiritual powers which respond not only to good and evil but to orthodoxy and heresy as well. It is not enough to be *morally* correct; one must also be *doctrinally* right if the gods are to bless instead of curse in anger. Nichiren did not invent this assumption, for he inherited it from sutras such as the *Daijuku Sutra*, which declares that if the teaching of the Buddha is in danger of perishing and no one tries to rescue it the world will suffer from high grain prices, warfare and pestilence.<sup>3</sup> The graphic, magical connection between the decline of the teachings and the social and natural state of the world is not a conclusion resulting from the imaginative hand of Nichiren but is rooted in Mahāyāna scriptures.

The truth is specifically identified with the *Lotus Sutra*. It is a truth that need not be comprehended intellectually, but must be practiced through the *daimoku*, the chanting of the sutra's title. This is the essence of Nichiren's teaching and practice based on the mysterious power of the sutra. It is not necessary to understand the sutra, for believing in it is fully sufficient. This is true not only for the *Lotus Sutra* but for all of Buddhism itself: "Though a person has no knowledge of Buddhism, if he has pure faith, then even though he may be dull-witted, he is to be reckoned as a man of correct views."<sup>4</sup> Faith is to be expressed in the practice of chanting the title of the sutra, and all of the "mystic (*myō*)" power of the *Lotus Sutra* will bring about unprecedented results such as the salvation of women. Other sutras are called "great (*dai*)," but only the *Lotus Sutra* is mystic.

The preeminence of the *Lotus Sutra* meant that the other sutras were less than fully true. One of the main concerns of the *Opening of the Eyes* (I) is the establishment of the proper relationship between the *Lotus Sutra* and all other religious writings. This is Nichiren's equivalent of the classification of teachings which other Buddhist writers used to assert the superiority of their chosen text over other writings. For Nichiren, the Confucian and the Indian non-Buddhist writings do not possess the truth but they all serve a preparatory function in that they refer to the Buddha or his coming. As far as the Buddhist teachings in China and Japan are concerned, the record is one of confusion and contradiction. All of the schools teach different doctrines, and even the "teachings expounded by the Buddha Śākyamuni during the first forty or so years of his teaching differ markedly from those expounded in the *Lotus Sutra*."<sup>5</sup> The Buddha's preaching of the *Lotus Sutra* negated all the previous sutras and thus he was "called the great liar."<sup>6</sup> There is a "contradiction in

<sup>3</sup> *Risshō Ankoku Ron*, vol. 2, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> *The Daimoku of the Lotus Sutra*, vol. 3, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Opening of the Eyes*, vol. 2, p. 85.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

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the words of the Buddha," for "his own saying are at variance with themselves."<sup>7</sup> To the analytical mind of the non-Buddhist scholar Tominaga Nakamoto centuries later, this very same observation about the discrepancies between the sutras, including the *Lotus Sutra*, would lead to the conclusion that they could not all have come from the same source. For Nichiren the contradictions point out that the one true teaching of the *Lotus Sutra* stands in opposition to all the rest.

The background commentaries provided by the editors give useful information on the circumstances of each writing. The basic contents are also succinctly summarized. The information goes beyond the writings of Nichiren and includes the interpretations of Nichiren Shōshū. The most significant point centers, not surprisingly, around the personal identity of Nichiren himself. A variety of passages are taken to mean that Nichiren was the original Buddha himself. When, for example, Nichiren denies that he is the Bodhisttva Jōgyō, "superficially this seems like a mere expression of humility;" but "he is really indicating that he is the original Buddha."<sup>8</sup> In this deification of a historical person we can see another trait of Japanese Buddhism, more clearly exemplified, perhaps, in the case of Kūkai.

What we have then is a rich treasury of materials for the study of Nichiren and the Nichiren Shōshū interpretation of him. In the 118 essays and letters of Nichiren packed into more than 1,500 pages, we find the lively imagery, magical cosmology, assertive personality, compassionate caring, doctrinal condemnations, religious persecution, and mystic text of Nichiren and his Buddhism.

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*DŌGEN'S MANUALS OF ZEN MEDITATION.* By Carl Bielefeldt. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989. Pp. 259. ISBN 0-520-06056-3.

This work by Bielefeldt on Dōgen's meditation manuals—the *Fukan zazen gi* ("Universal Promotion of the Principles of Seated Meditation") and three other writings—is by far the most thorough and rigorous analysis of the subject matter available thus far in Dōgen studies. Bielefeldt goes further than all others in reconstructing the historical origins of Dōgen's Zen; his revisionist

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>8</sup> Vol. 1, p. 167.