

The Life of **Nichiren Daishonin**

Nichiren Daishonin declared Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to be the ultimate law on 28 April 1253. Twenty-six years later, on 12 October 1279, he inscribed the Dai-Gohonzon, a great mandala dedicated to the happiness of all humankind. He died in 1282, having devoted his life to the study, reformation and propagation of Buddhism.

The young Zennichimaro (splendid sun), as he was named at birth, was born into extraordinarily turbulent times in Japan. Not only was there social unrest with fighting between rival warrior clans, there were also natural catastrophes such as the great earthquake which struck the capital, Kamakura, in 1257. To add to the problems, the Mongols were threatening to invade. Society was in disarray, as was the land, and Buddhist sects were confused about which of the many different teachings were correct.

It seems that Zennichimaro was a deep thinker from an early age. He was later to write, 'Since childhood, I, Nichiren have never prayed for the secular things of this life but have single-mindedly sought to become a Buddha.'¹ On another occasion he said:

Ever since my childhood I have studied Buddhism with one thought in mind. Life as a human being is pathetically fleeting. A man exhales his last breath with no hope to draw in another. Not even dew borne by the wind suffices to describe this transience. No one, wise or foolish, can escape death. My sole wish has therefore been to solve this eternal mystery. All else has been secondary.²

Zennichimaro was the son of a fisherman. His parents must have

sensed his potential as they sent him to study at the local temple at the age of eleven. There, he prayed to become the wisest man in Japan. In response to his seeking mind, he became enlightened to the essential nature of life which enabled him to distinguish between truth and illusion. He set out to study all the Buddhist teachings from the age of fifteen, when he became a priest.

Shakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism in India, had predicted three time periods during which Buddhism would develop and change after his death. During the first thousand years, he said, people would be able to attain enlightenment through his teachings. In the second millenium, Buddhism would become dominated by ritual and formality, gradually losing its power to lead people to enlightenment. This duly happened around the sixth to ninth centuries AD when many temples were built in China and Japan.

According to the Japanese Buddhist tradition, the third period, known as the Latter Day of the Law, began in 1052. At this time, Shakyamuni had said, Buddhism would decline and a new teacher would appear to spread the true law, suitable for the people of that age, which would last 'ten thousand years and more'. The Buddhist sects of the time were therefore afraid that the attainment of Buddhahood would no longer be possible through their traditional methods of practice. New schools sprang up. The Jodo sect, also known as Nembutsu, was the most popular of these among the common people. It claimed that belief in a higher power was the only way to salvation and that chanting the name of a Buddha called Amida would enable rebirth in a Western Paradise, removed from this world. Zen also gained influence at this time, mostly among the warrior class. It advocated abandoning all the written texts and concentrating on personal effort under the guidance of a teacher. Both were attempts, though at opposite ends of the scale, to simplify Buddhist practices which had become extremely complex and beyond people's capability.

It was widely accepted at that time, as it probably was in

medieval Britain, that the actions and beliefs of the people were reflected in the environment. Thus, if people were practising the correct religion, they would expect to be rewarded with good weather, peace and harmonious social conditions. It was blatantly obvious that this was not the case in Japan, in these times of huge difficulties. These are described by Nichiren Daishonin in one of his writings:

In recent years, there are unusual disturbances in the heavens, strange occurrences on earth, famine and pestilence, all affecting every corner of the empire and spreading throughout the land. Oxen and horses lie dead in the streets, the bones of the stricken crowd the highways. Over half the population has already been carried off by death, and in every family someone grieves.³

Nichiren Daishonin travelled extensively to study at all the temples which were centres of learning. He was confident, with his enlightened life-condition, that he could find documentary evidence for the correct Buddhist teaching for the Latter Day of the Law.

He returned after his travels to the temple of his education, Seicho-ji, and gave a lecture declaring Nam-myoho-renge-kyo (see p.79) to be the teaching for this time. It was then that he took the name Nichiren (sun-lotus). At the same time, he vociferously refuted the four prevalent Japanese Buddhist sects, which included Zen and Nembutsu. Because of this, he is sometimes described by other Buddhist sects as 'belligerent', or even 'militant', although he never bore arms. He was certainly full of conviction that Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the heart of the Lotus Sutra, is the ultimate Buddhist teaching and the only way to enlightenment in this turbulent age of the Latter Day of the Law. He based his conclusions on documentary proof (the Lotus Sutra), theoretical proof (the study of doctrine) and actual proof (the fact that it works).

A law this easy to embrace and this easy to practise was taught for the sake of all mankind in this evil age of the Latter Day of the Law.⁴

It is important to understand that Nichiren Daishonin's overriding concern was for the welfare of the people; he could see clearly that misleading philosophies lead to misery. His declaration that all people, equally, can attain Buddhahood here and now, deeply upset the priests and people in authority who wanted to retain their power. His denunciation of authorities which used people for their own misguided ends was unequivocal. However, one has only to read his letters to his followers to see that his compassion towards ordinary people was truly great.

His statements drew upon him a lifetime of persecutions. He knew, however, that he was carrying out his purpose in life as the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law and fulfilling the predictions of Shakyamuni. These predictions were quite specific, detailing the persecutions which would befall the votary of the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Day of the Law, including exile on more than one occasion. Nichiren Daishonin was exiled twice: to the peninsula of Izu and to the island of Sado. Both banishments were meant to ensure his certain death. Nichiren Daishonin wrote, 'Had it not been for the advent of Nichiren in the Latter Day of the Law, the Buddha would have been a great liar.'⁵ To Nichiren Daishonin, there was no greater happiness than to establish the universal law. The persecutions were an inevitable part of his purpose in life:

I think I have practised the Lotus Sutra twenty-four hours each day and night. I say so because, having been exiled on the Lotus Sutra's account, I now read and practise it continuously whether I am walking, standing, sitting or lying down. For anyone born human, what greater joy could there be?⁶

Every time Nichiren Daishonin entered a debate with other sects, or wrote to the government, he was persecuted anew. Despite this, he continued the propagation of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and won many followers. They, too, were subjected to harassment by the authorities. The most serious was the Atsuhara Persecution, when twenty peasant-farmers were arrested and tortured in an attempt to

make them give up their faith. They refused. Three of them were later executed. Because of their strong faith, Nichiren Daishonin knew he could rely on his disciples to protect the law in the future. It was then that he inscribed the Dai-Gohonzon, dedicated to the happiness of all humankind, the fulfilment of his lifelong purpose. Thanks to him, and the fortitude of his disciples, the ultimate law for this age has survived and been passed down to this day.

Now in the second year of Koan (1279), it is twenty-seven years since I first proclaimed the true teaching at Seicho-ji temple ... The Buddha fulfilled the purpose of his advent in a little over forty years; T'ien-t'ai took about thirty years, and Dengyo, some twenty years. I have repeatedly spoken of the indescribable persecutions they suffered during those years. For me it took twenty-seven years and the persecutions I faced during this period are well known to you all.⁷

1 *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Vol. 3, pp. 238-9.

2 *Nichiren Daishonin Goshō Zenshu*, p. 1404.

3 *Major Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 3.

4 *Major Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 222.

5 *Major Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 240.

6 *Major Writings*, Vol. 5, p. 7.

7 *Major Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 239.