



*Shogo Kanayama*

## **Nichiren: from History to Legend, through Politics and Religion**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Often along the centuries a historical figure would acquire a status larger than life, tales of courage and glory. The personality that I intend to focus on is Nichiren, the founder of one of the six major Buddhist sects in Japan, who was born in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and whose career marked not only the religion, but also the political life in that period. For more than 700 years, Nichiren has been regarded as a major religious leader. The various realistic and fabulous stories attributed to him in his biographies represent the focus of my paper. The main question I seek to address here is how the collective psyche/unconscious changes a great figure into a mythical hero? I am also interested in exploring the mechanisms at work behind this metamorphosis and how we can explain not only the belief in the miraculous, but also the need to believe and the intentional inclusion in the story of supernatural elements.

### **KEYWORDS**

Japanese Religion; Buddhism; Nichiren; Lotus Sutra; Faith; Illusion.

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Often, the life of historical figures whose name is transmitted along the centuries takes on an aura of legend and in many cases, the line between real history and legend becomes blurry, the real facts behind the legend sinking into the depths of time. Nichiren, the subject of this paper, is the founder of one of the six major Buddhist sects in Japan, a character who lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, preaching faith in the Lotus Sutra and advocating religious reforms. He became so involved in confrontations with the representatives of other sects, that he was eventually sentenced to exile and had more than once close brushes with death.

Buddhism, founded by Gautama Sidhartha during the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, spread East towards China, where the sutras were translated and interpreted, then it penetrated Japan in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century via Korea. At that time, the imperial house constituted itself into a protector of Buddhism, which led to the development in Nara of six sects whose purpose was to protect the country through religious devotion. At the same time, deep in the mountains of Yoshino, Katsuragi and Ikoma, Shugen practitioners focused on reading sutras and acquiring the magical techniques that allowed them to cast rain charms or cure diseases.

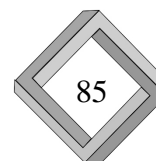


However, during mid 8<sup>th</sup> century, Dōkyō, a priest belonging to the Hōsō Sect, under the patronage of Empress Kōken, aimed at the Imperial Throne, a gesture representing only one of the problems related to the increased involvement of Buddhist priests into political affairs and the secularization of the religious world. As a result, in 794 Emperor Kammu moved the capital to Kyoto and attempted to reform both the political and the Buddhist worlds. At the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Saichō founded the Tendai Sect on Mount Hiei, while Kūkai established the Shingon Sect on Mount Koya, and the esoteric Buddhism spread in Japan. The 11<sup>th</sup> century saw the decline of the Imperial House; the warrior class coming into power was followed by various disturbances. The increasing political instability was accompanied by numerous natural calamities and epidemics, the period being seen as *mappō*, the last and decadent Dharma prophesied by Buddhism. According to Buddhist theories, *mappō* represents the age after the death of Buddha when the influence of his teachings starts to decline, the society is tormented by upheavals and eventually Buddhism itself becomes extinct. Some records considered year 1052 (2000 years after the death of Buddha) as the first year of the *mappō* period.

As a result, new Buddhist sects which tried to find a way of dealing with this apocalyptic vision appeared, and most of them preached escape from the lay world and respect for the religious commandments. One of these was the Pure Land Sect, which advocated the earnest and continuous recitation of Amida's name and the prayer for rebirth in the Pure Land. Then, at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when political power was in the hands of Minamoto no Yoritomo, Eisai and Dōgen contributed to the spreading of Zen Buddhism, which had been imported from China.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of February, 1222, in the house of a fishermen in the village of Tōjōgō, Awa County (present day Chiba Prefecture), the boy who would later become Nichiren was born. As it is usually the case with the birth of major religious figures, Nichiren's birth was surrounded by auspicious signs. Despite the fact that it was winter, in February that year lotus flowers bloomed near the shore, while many sea breams gathered near the surface of the sea and when the baby's first cry was heard, a pure water spring gushed forth in the garden. The three places where these auspicious signs manifested themselves are nowadays known as Renge-ga-fuchi (The Lotus Pool), Tai-no-ura (Bream Bay) and Tanjō-sui (Birth Water). Bream Bay in particular has been preserved across the ages, as the sea bream was seen as having a blood relationship with Nichiren, and thus the sea bream fishing has been strictly forbidden. The sea bream usually lives in the depths and is not in the habit of appearing in shoals, yet even today passengers of pleasure ships have the chance of observing the fish as they gather near the surface of the water, attracted by the sound of oars banged against the sides of the ship. The phenomenon has yet to be explained by scientists, while that particular spot was declared in 1922 a "Natural Memorial Place", one of the few places in the world where shoals of sea breams can be observed. In 1967 it became a Special National Natural Memorial Place.

At the age of 12 Nichiren started his studies in Buddhism at the famous Tendai temple Seichōji, becoming a priest at the age of 16, under the guidance of Dōzenbō, a priest of the Pure Land Sect. He continued his studies in the esoteric teachings of the Tendai Sect and the mainstream Pure Land Sect, but during this process he started having doubts regarding the Buddhist world where various sects were based on various sutras, despite the fact that the truth preached



by Buddha should have been one and only under any circumstances. In order to ascertain the true meaning of Buddha's preaching, Nichiren prayed to the main bodhisattva worshipped at Seichōji, Ākāśagarbha, to turn him into the "wisest man in Japan" and performed *gumon-jihō*, an esoteric ritual which is supposed to strengthen the memory, for 21 days.

The day the ritual was completed, the bodhisattva appeared to Nichiren in the flesh and gave him a jewel meant to make his wisdom and knowledge shine as bright as Venus, which is seen as an embodiment of Ākāśagarbha. The jewel passed through Nichiren's sleeve and entered his body, and Nichiren started vomiting blood and lost his consciousness, collapsing on the spot. He later remembered the episode, mentioning that when he regained consciousness, he felt miraculously refreshed in body and mind, and able to comprehend all the sacred writings. After that revelation day, Nichiren spent the next 16 years either confined on Mount Hiei, striving to read the whole Buddhist scripture, including the various commentaries and interpretations pertaining to it, or visiting Kyoto and Mount Koya in order to study the history and precepts of the different sects. At the same time, he tried to gain knowledge on worldly affairs as well. Thus he came to understand the truth contained in the words of the *Nirvana Sutra* – "To follow the law, not to follow persons", which meant to follow the teachings of the sutras which are regarded as complete and final, not to follow the provisional teachings. In the *Buddha of Infinite Life Sutra* he found a similar concept – "For more than forty years I did not reveal the full truth", that is, all of the sutras preached before the *Lotus Sutra* contain only the provisional teachings of the Buddha, whereas the *Lotus Sutra* contain the full truth. Finally, at the age of 32, Nichiren reached the conclusion that the *Lotus Sutra* contained the true teachings of Buddha.

Nevertheless, the condition of Buddhism in Japan had changed since its introduction and the adoption by Prince Shotokutaishi and Emperor Kōmyō of a doctrine meant to protect the country, based on the *Lotus Sutra*. 200 years after that, Saichō had founded the Tendai Sect on Mount Hiei, based on the same Lotus Sutra, but 400 more years later, the country was in turmoil due to the rise of the warrior class, the Pure Land Sect founded by Hōnen on the concept of reciting the name of Amida was stagnating, even the Tendai Sect was affected by the *mappō* trend of thought, and the newly-arisen Shingon and Zen sects were gaining more and more followers amidst the warrior class. Nichiren considered that precisely because it was the age of *mappō*, the *Lotus Sutra* had to be revived, and he thought it his mission to convince the statesmen to reform the religious system focusing on the *Lotus Sutra*, in order to insure the safety and stability of the country.

On his return to his homeland, Nichiren spent 100 days in meditation at the Tendai temple Shōmyōji in Ise; at the end of the 100 days he went to the great Ise Jingu Shrine, dedicated to the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, to whom he prayed for help in spreading the *Lotus Sutra*. At that moment, Myōken Bosatsu (a bodhisattva representing the deification of the North Star) appeared to him and promised protection. 20 years before, when Nichiren received the blessing of Ākāśagarbha, Myōken Bosatsu had been worshipped in the inner hall of the Seichōji temple, as an embodiment of the Big Dipper. After revealing itself to Nichiren, Myōken – the North Star – will play a significant role in his life.

Nichiren's birth place, Tōjōgō in Awa County was an estate belonging to the Great Ise Shrine, where it had been donated by Minamoto no Yoritomo in 1185, after his victory against Taira no Kiyomori, and



Nichiren viewed it as a sacred ground where the ancestors of the Imperial House were worshipped. The lord who ruled that territory was the one who had opened the gates for Nichiren to study at Seichōji. At the time when Nichiren returned to his homeland, the land steward appointed by the shogunate, Tōjō Kagenobu, tried to extend his power and was in conflict with the local lord over his invasion of the territory belonging to Seichōji, whose rights and interests he forcefully acquired, also ignoring the ban on the killing of any living things on the premises by hunting deer in the area. Moreover, Kagenobu pretended to be a follower of the Pure Land Sect and tried to turn the Seichōji temple, which rightfully belonged to the Tendai Sect, over to the Pure Land. Nichiren found out that the lord had started a lawsuit and decided to stand by him, so he attended the suit at the High Court in Kamakura, where he used his knowledge to create a logical and coherent case argument, which helped him win the lawsuit. However, that meant that Kagenobu's resentment was now directed at Nichiren.

Back at Seichōji, Nichiren started gradually to spread his criticism of the Pure Land doctrine among the population, but Kagenobu heard of it and pressured Dōzenbō into dismissing Nichiren from the temple. Nichiren started towards Kamakura and established a hermit hut at Matsuba-gayatsu as a basis for his preaching against the doctrine of the Pure Land, and he began his movement on the streets of Kamakura. People started listening to his words and he invited them to his hut in order to commence the religious reform. He gained followers and disciples, yet the followers of the Pure Land and Zen sects would torment him by throwing stones and tile fragments, so the difficulties he had to face increased day by day.

From 1257 until 1260, Kamakura was often afflicted by violent storms and earth-

quakes, which led to famine and the spread of epidemics, and soon the streets were flooded with corpses. As a response to that state of affairs, the monks and priests of the Pure Land Sect unanimously withdrew from the lay world, praying for rebirth in the Pure Land, while the representatives of Zen simply prayed for personal enlightenment. Their followers in the ruling class ordered all sects to pray for the well-being of the country, but their orders had no effect and no measures for population relief were taken. Seeing this, Nichiren sought to find an answer to the problem in religious thinking, and to this purpose he re-read the Buddhist scripture confined at Iwamoto Jissōji Temple. The result of his meditation was a work entitled *On Securing the Peace of the Land by Establishing True Teachings of Buddhism*, which he presented to the Shogun Hōjō Tokiyori on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1260. There he stated:

The cause of all calamities is the fact that people have turned their backs to the true law and embraced the path of evil, so the good deities have forsaken our country and the evil deities have brought about only disasters. That evil is the Pure Land doctrine, and if we do not stop following it, the country will fall into chaos and prey to foreign conquering powers, while the rule of its leaders will be short lived. The only way to avoid disaster is to reform religion and embrace the true law recorded in the *Lotus Sutra*.

Thus, Nichiren, who described himself as the son of a poor fisherman, the equal of any member of India's lowest caste, and who empathized with the suffering of the common people, delivered a poignant criticism of the religious sects who concerned themselves only with fighting for privileges and profits.

The Shogunate ignored Nichiren's appeal, but he challenged the high priests of the



Pure Land Sect in Kamakura and he increased the violence of his criticism during the sermons addressed to the common people. As a result, 40 days after he had submitted *On Securing the Peace of the Land by Establishing True Teachings of Buddhism*, in the evening of August 27<sup>th</sup>, an enraged mob of Pure Land followers took revenge by setting Nichiren's hut on fire. Nichiren narrowly escaped the danger and withdrew for a while in the province of Shimousa. The following year he went back to Kamakura, where he renewed his attacks on the Pure Land Sect. This time, however, members of the Pure Land falsely accused him of attacking the Shogunate, which led to Nichiren's arrest and his sentence to three years of exile in the Izu Peninsula, in the trust of the local governor, Itō Hachirōzaemon. The man charged with escorting Nichiren to the place of exile thought to put him to death by leaving him in the middle of the sea, on a rock which would be submerged in water during high tide. Fortunately, a hunting ship passed by and rescued Nichiren, offering him shelter and protection for 30 days. After that, Hachirōzaemon fell ill and found himself on the verge of death, so he asked Nichiren to pray for his recovery. Nichiren's prayer proved efficient and Hachirōzaemon became one of his followers.

Three years later, in 1263, Nichiren received a pardon and he returned to Kamakura, but on the following year he had to go back to his homeland to visit his mother, who was sick. Near his village there was the mansion of the village head, Kudō Yoshitaka, who had already embraced Nichiren's philosophy. He invited Nichiren at his place and on November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1264, just as dusk was settling down, Nichiren together with 10 disciples were heading towards Yoshitaka's mansion. As they were approaching Matsubara, all of a sudden arrows rained down upon them and a numerous group of heavily armed men fell on them. It seems that Tōjō

Kagenobu, hearing of Nichiren's return, decided to ambush and kill him, and in the fierce fighting that ensued two of Nichiren's disciples lost their lives. Even Kudō Yoshitaka, who had tried to run, was finally murdered after a desperate fight. Nichiren himself had his left arm broken and suffered a sword injury on his forehead, but managed to make a miraculous escape under the cover of darkness. Nevertheless, Nichiren saw this misadventure as corresponding exactly to what the *Lotus Sutra* predicted: "Those who believe and try to put into practice these sacred words shall suffer various misfortunes", and that strengthened his belief that he was a true disciple of Buddha and that his mission was to spread the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra*.

On January 18<sup>th</sup>, 1268, Korean envoys carrying diplomatic messages from the Mongolian Empire arrived in the Province of Dazaifu. The Mongols, after having defeated the Sung Dynasty, had invaded Korea and intended to do the same to Japan. The Shogunate did not respond to the threats; instead, they reinforced the defenses and ordered all temples and shrines to pray for the safety of the country. What Nichiren had prophesied 8 years before in *On Securing the Peace of the Land by Establishing True Teachings of Buddhism*, namely the foreign invasion, turned out to be a real threat, so Nichiren sent letters to 11 prominent members of the Shogunate and high clerics, challenging them to a public confrontation. He was ignored by both parties, but, as from 1269 to 1271, Mongolian envoys kept coming and the menace of invasion became more and more real, the number of his followers and disciples increased dramatically. Due to the fact that many of them were village heads or had other high social positions, they were able to exert a certain influence in society as Nichiren believers.



In June 1271, after a long drought, the Shogunate demanded the Shingon priest Ryōkan, who was venerated as a living Buddha, to perform a prayer for rain. Hearing that, Nichiren addressed Ryōkan: “Should rain fall within 7 days, I shall become your humble disciple. But should rain fail to come, you should embrace the *Lotus Sutra*.” Ryōkan prayed for rain, but after 7 days nothing happened. All of his disciples got together and they prayed for rain, yet again nothing happened. Having lost face, Ryōkan challenged Nichiren to a theological debate, but Nichiren, who would accept nothing but a public confrontation, refused to comply. Then Ryōkan conspired with other high priests of the Pure Land Sect and falsely accused Nichiren of gathering and arming men, suggesting that he was a political agitator. The Shogunate, busy dealing with the Mongolian threat, saw Nichiren and his disciples as a turbulent group, and on September 10<sup>th</sup> Nichiren was summoned for investigation by Hei no Yoritsuna, who commanded the Board of Retainers. During the cross-examination, Nichiren stated: “Should you get rid of me now, Japan will lose its supporting pillar, and soon internal disputes will ensue and foreign powers will invade us.”

On September 12<sup>th</sup>, at around 4 in the afternoon, Hei no Yoritsuna and his subordinates attacked Nichiren’s hut, destroyed the Buddhist images, stepped on the sutra scrolls and grabbed even the scroll Nichiren kept close to his bosom, then hit and eventually arrested Nichiren. While dragging Nichiren through the streets to the place of judgment, the party happened to pass by the temple of the god Hachiman, and Nichiren reproached the god for not having honoured the promise to protect him, promise made in front of Buddha himself. That caused no small surprise among his escort, as the temple dedicated to Hachiman in Tsurugaoka was built as a center of worship for the tutelary god of warriors

and many of those in the convoy guarding Nichiren used to pay their respects there.

At 6 o’clock in the afternoon of the same day Nichiren was sentenced to exile in Sado, and around 2 am on the following day he departed, together with some of his disciples, towards the place of exile, accompanied by an armed escort. According to the Jōei Code (the code of warriors), the highest punishment that could be inflicted on priests was exile, so Nichiren thought it strange that they would start on their journey in the middle of the night. “I was condemned to exile, but it seems that death will be my fate,” wrote Nichiren later about his thoughts that night. As Nichiren expected, on the way to the residence of Honma Shigetsura, the officer in charge of escorting him to Sado, it transpired that Nichiren would be beheaded on the execution place known as Tatsu-nokuchi. The night was pitch dark, the moon hidden in the clouds, so Nichiren lit a bonfire and sat on a mat, surrounded by a few warriors who observed him and by his disciples, and started quietly chanting the *daimoku* (the sacred mantra of his sect), in preparation for his last moments. When the executioner swung his sword, from the direction of Enoshima a globe as bright as the moon floated over Nichiren’s head and from it a dazzling light shone, blinding the executioner, who dropped the sword and collapsed. The other people present also drew back, frightened and groveled away. The execution was canceled and the next day around noon Nichiren reached Honma Shigetsura’s house in safety. That evening, at the Honma residence, the warriors were finally able to relax and they went out in the garden, when Nichiren appeared and, facing the moon of the thirteenth night, read from the *Lotus Sutra* and said: “Candra, you who swore to protect the *Lotus Sutra*, why don’t you protect me?” Then, to the utter surprise of the onlookers, a star as bright as Venus descended from the sky and hung on the branch of a plum tree.



After that, Nichiren spent 3 years in exile in Sado, but 5 months after the Tatsu-no-kuchi incident, internal struggles related to the measures against the Mongolian invasion occurred within the Hōjō clan, who held the political power. Added to that was the continuous invasion menace, and thus Nichiren's prophecy that the country would fall into turmoil came true. In April 1274, he was pardoned and Hei no Yoritsuna demanded to know his opinion as to when the Mongolians would arrive in Japan. Nichiren's answer was "within the year", but Yoritsuna was preoccupied with military and diplomatic issues, while Nichiren was concerned with the fate of Japan if it lost the *Lotus Sutra*, and thus the two failed to reach an agreement. As a result, in May Nichiren retired on Mount Minobu, where he occupied himself with educating his disciples. The Mongolians did reach Japan in October that year, as he had foreseen, and again 5 years later, but each time a typhoon destroyed their ships, thus saving Japan from the danger of invasion.

The wonders surrounding Nichiren's life did not fail to influence those around him. Date Tomoyoshi, a vassal of the Hōjō Clan who was present during both extraordinary phenomena that had occurred during the attempt to Nichiren's life, gave up his belief in the Pure Land and converted to the faith preached by Nichiren. Consequently, he was dispatched to a territory far away from Kamakura, where he built numerous Nichiren temples. The life of Honma Shigetura took a similar course when he also adopted Nichiren's faith, which spread over the entire Sado Island. Later, based on Nichiren's letters recounting the Tatsu-no-kuchi incident, many argued that what had happened was in fact a natural phenomenon. Specialists in astronomy from Tokyo University even suggested that it was actually the Comet Encke that accidentally saved Nichiren's life, the night when the globe of

light supposedly hung from the branches of the plum tree being the night when the comet was at its most brilliant point. Other scientists have pointed out the fact that Tatsu-no-kuchi is an area where thunder and lightning occur frequently, thus explaining the phenomenon as a particularly powerful lightning stroke. Regardless of whether the miracles concerning Nichiren have or not a scientific explanation, what matters is the fact that the legends surrounding him have been transmitted up to the present day.

Nichiren's case is, obviously, not singular, yet, as the era when he lived is closer to our times than the periods when other great religion founders lived, the historical records are more detailed and accurate. Thus, we have the opportunity to compare what we know to be the truth with various accounts and legends, the process through which a certain incident turns into a myth becoming clearer and easier to understand. Did Jesus really feed masses with just five fish and three loaves of bread? Maybe, or maybe he was a David Copperfield of his time. Did the gods really send stars down to the earth to save Nichiren's life? The phenomenon may have a scientific explanation, but one could argue that the natural phenomenon itself was an embodiment of the will of gods. So maybe the gods did send a star to hang down from the branches of a plum tree. Or it may be that Nichiren was simply extremely lucky and the executioner had a seizure right at that moment. Or the charismatic Nichiren convinced the executioner and the warriors to spare his life, concocting afterwards a story that would be not only plausible, but would also benefit his mission. As in the case of all myths, we shall never be in possession of the absolute truth, the myth being the elusive ground where illusion and reality merge until it is impossible to distinguish one from the other.