

The Life of Nichiren Daishonin

Nichiren Daishonin (1222–82) dedicated his life to propagating the Mystic Law—*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*—motivated by an unwavering commitment and compassion to eradicate suffering and enable all people to reveal their innate Buddhahood. Hardship and persecution dogged him throughout his life as he sought to address and put an end to the evils obstructing people’s happiness.

Early Years

Nichiren Daishonin¹ was born on February 16, 1222, in the coastal hamlet of Kataumi in Tojo Village of Nagasa District in Awa Province (part of present-day Kamogawa City in Chiba Prefecture). He was the son of commoners, his family earning its livelihood from fishing.

At the age of twelve, he began his schooling at a nearby temple called Seicho-ji. During this period, he made a vow to become the wisest person in Japan (see “The Tripitaka Master Shan-wu-wei,” *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 175). He sought to gain the wisdom of the Buddhist teachings for overcoming the fundamental sufferings of life and death, and thereby lead his parents and all people to genuine happiness.

At the age of sixteen, in pursuit of a deeper understanding of the Buddhist teachings, he formally entered the priesthood at Seicho-ji, receiving instruction from Dozen-bo, a senior priest there. It was

shortly thereafter, the Daishonin writes, that he attained “a jewel of wisdom as bright as the morning star” (“The Tripitaka Master Shan-wu-wei,” WND-1, 176), which can be interpreted to mean wisdom regarding the Mystic Law that is the essence of Buddhism.

Nichiren then traveled to Kamakura, Kyoto, Nara and other centers of Buddhist learning, carefully studying the sutras and commentaries housed at leading temples such as Enryaku-ji on Mount Hiei, the headquarters of the Tendai school, and familiarizing himself with the core doctrines of each school. He confirmed that the Lotus Sutra is the foremost among all the Buddhist sutras and that the Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to which he had awakened is the essence of the sutra and provides the means for freeing all people from suffering on the most fundamental level. He also awoke to his mission to spread Nam-myoho-renge-kyo as the teaching for people in the Latter Day of the Law to attain enlightenment.

[Note: The Latter Day of the Law refers to the age when the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha lose their power to lead people to enlightenment. It was generally regarded to mean the period two thousand years after the Buddha's passing. In Japan, it was believed that this age began in the year 1052.]

The Declaration of the Establishment of His Teaching

Through his studies at leading Buddhist centers, Nichiren Daishonin confirmed his mission to spread the Mystic Law—Nam-myoho-renge-kyo—and the means by which to do so. He embarked on his struggle knowing that he would inevitably encounter great opposition and persecution.

On April 28, 1253, around noon at Seicho-ji, he refuted the Nembutsu and other Buddhist teachings of his day as erroneous and

proclaimed Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to be the sole correct Buddhist teaching for leading all people in the Latter Day of the Law to enlightenment. This is known as the declaration of the establishment of his teaching. He was thirty-two years old. From around this time, he adopted the name Nichiren (literally, Sun Lotus).

Nichiren's denunciation of the Nembutsu doctrines on the occasion of declaring his teaching enraged Tojo Kagenobu, who was the local steward (an official of the Kamakura government who had the powers of law enforcement and tax collection) and an ardent Nembutsu believer. The latter planned an armed attack on the Daishonin, but the Daishonin narrowly managed to escape beforehand.

Nichiren then made his way to Kamakura, the seat of the military government. There, he took up residence in a small dwelling in Nagoe (at a site that later came to be known as Matsubagayatsu) and embarked in earnest on propagating his teaching. While refuting the error of the Nembutsu and Zen teachings, which had gained wide influence among the people of Kamakura, the Daishonin spread the teaching of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

It was during this early period of propagation that such well-known disciples as Toki Jonin, Shijo Kingo (Shijo Yorimoto) and Ikegami Munenaka converted to his teaching.

Submitting the Treatise "On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land" and Encountering Persecution

In the period when Nichiren Daishonin began his propagation efforts in Kamakura, Japan had been experiencing a series of natural disasters and calamities, including extreme weather, severe earthquakes, famine, fires and epidemics. In particular, the devastating earthquake of the Shoka era, which struck the Kamakura region in August 1257, destroyed many homes and important buildings in Kamakura.

This disaster prompted the Daishonin to write the treatise “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land” (see WND-1, 6–26) to clarify the fundamental cause of people’s suffering and set forth the means by which people could eradicate such suffering. On July 16, 1260, he submitted this treatise to Hojo Tokiyori, the retired regent of the Kamakura military government, who was still effectively the country’s most powerful leader. It was the first time that Nichiren remonstrated with the authorities. This is known as his first remonstrance with the government authorities.

In this treatise, he declared that the cause of the successive calamities lay with people’s slander of the correct teaching of Buddhism and their reliance on erroneous doctrines. The most serious root cause, he asserted, was the Nembutsu teaching popularized in Japan by the priest Honen (1133–1212).

The Daishonin urged people to discontinue their reliance on such erroneous teachings and embrace faith in the correct teaching of Buddhism without delay, for this would ensure the realization of a peaceful and prosperous land. Continued reliance on erroneous teachings, he warned, would inevitably result in the country encountering internal strife and foreign invasion—the two calamities of the “three calamities and seven disasters” yet to occur.

[Note: The “three calamities and seven disasters” are described in various sutras, and differ slightly depending on the source. The three calamities include high grain prices or inflation (especially that caused by famine), warfare and pestilence. The seven disasters include natural disasters such as extraordinary changes of the stars and planets and unseasonable storms.]

However, the ruling authorities ignored Nichiren’s sincere remonstrance and, with their tacit approval, Nembutsu followers began plotting to persecute the Daishonin.

One evening shortly after Nichiren submitted his treatise “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land,” a group of Nembutsu believers stormed his dwelling in an attempt to take his life. This is called the Matsubagayatsu Persecution. However, the Daishonin escaped unharmed. After this incident, he left Kamakura for a short period.

On May 12, 1261, the following year, having returned to Kamakura sometime earlier, Nichiren was arrested by the authorities and sentenced to exile in Ito of Izu Province. This is called the Izu Exile. After being pardoned from exile in February 1263, the Daishonin made his way back to Kamakura.

In 1264, he returned to his home province of Awa to visit his ailing mother. On November 11 of that year, Nichiren and a group of his followers were on their way to the residence of another follower named Kudo in Amatsu (also in Awa Province). At a place called Matsubara in Tojo Village, they were ambushed by a band of armed men under the command of the local steward, Tojo Kagenobu. In the attack, the Daishonin sustained an injury to his forehead and a broken left hand. One of his followers was killed at the site. This is called the Komatsubara Persecution.

The Tatsunokuchi Persecution and “Casting Off the Transient and Revealing the True”

In 1268, an official letter arrived in Kamakura from the Mongol empire demanding that Japan become one of its tributaries and threatening military attack should the demand be rejected. With this development, the danger of the calamity of foreign invasion befalling the nation became very real.

This spurred Nichiren Daishonin to write eleven letters of remonstrance to top government officials, including the regent Hojo Tokimune, and the heads of major Buddhist temples in Kamakura.

In the letters, he stated that the impending danger of an invasion was just as he had predicted in his treatise “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land,” and he expressed the hope that the priests of the various Buddhist schools would meet with him in an official public debate.

Neither the government leaders nor the religious establishment heeded the Daishonin’s appeal. Rather, viewing Nichiren’s community of believers as a threat to the existing power structure, the government began to take repressive measures against it.

Around this time, True Word priests were enjoying growing influence, the government having charged them with the mission of conducting prayers for the defeat of Mongol forces. Ryokan (Ninsho) of Gokuraku-ji (a temple in Kamakura), a priest of the True Word Precepts school, was also becoming more influential through his connections with powerful government figures.

The Daishonin fearlessly began to refute the errors of the established Buddhist schools that were exerting a negative influence on the people and society as a whole.

In the summer of 1271, in response to a prolonged drought, the government ordered Ryokan to pray for rain. Learning of this, Nichiren made a proposal to Ryokan: If Ryokan should succeed in producing rain within seven days, Nichiren would become his disciple; but if he failed to do so, then Ryokan should place his faith in the Lotus Sutra.

When his prayers failed to produce any rain after seven days had passed, Ryokan asked for a seven-day extension. Again no rain fell, but fierce gales arose instead. Ryokan had clearly lost the challenge.

Rather than honestly acknowledge defeat, however, Ryokan grew even more hostile toward the Daishonin. He contrived to bring accusations against Nichiren by filing a complaint with the government in the name of a Nembutsu priest who had close ties with him. He also used his influence with top government officials as well as their wives to have the Daishonin persecuted by the authorities.

Although Ryokan was widely respected among the populace as a devout and virtuous priest, he enjoyed the trappings of power and privilege, and colluded with government officials toward self-serving ends.

On September 10 of the same year (1271), Nichiren was summoned by the government and interrogated by Hei no Saemon-no-jo Yoritsuna (also known as Taira no Yoritsuna), the deputy chief of the Office of Military and Police Affairs (the chief being the regent himself). The Daishonin admonished him and emphasized the proper attitude for the nation's rulers based on the correct teaching of Buddhism.

Two days later, on September 12, Hei no Saemon-no-jo, leading a group of armed soldiers, conducted a raid on Nichiren's dwelling and arrested him, treating him as if he were a traitor. On that occasion, the Daishonin strongly remonstrated with Hei no Saemon-no-jo, warning that if he toppled him, "the pillar of Japan," the calamities of internal strife and foreign invasion would descend on the land. (The events on September 10 and 12 marked his second remonstrations with the government authorities.)

Late that night, Nichiren was suddenly taken by armed soldiers to the beach at Tatsunokuchi, on the outskirts of Kamakura. This was at the directive of Hei no Saemon-no-jo and others who conspired to have the Daishonin secretly beheaded there. Just as the executioner raised his sword to strike, however, a brilliant orb of light burst forth from the direction of the nearby island of Enoshima, shooting northwest across the sky. The soldiers were terrified, and the attempt to kill the Daishonin had to be abandoned. This is called the Tatsunokuchi Persecution.

This persecution had extremely important significance for Nichiren. In triumphing over the Tatsunokuchi Persecution, he cast off his transient status as an ordinary, unenlightened person burdened with karma and suffering and, while remaining an ordinary human

being, revealed his original, true identity as a Buddha possessing infinite wisdom and compassion (the Buddha of beginningless time or eternal Buddha). This is called “casting off the transient and revealing the true.”²

Thereafter, the Daishonin’s behavior was that of the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law, and he went on to inscribe the Gohonzon for all people to revere and embrace as the fundamental object of devotion.

The Sado Exile

While the government was deliberating on his fate following the Tatsunokuchi Persecution, Nichiren Daishonin was detained for about a month at the residence of Homma Shigetsura (the deputy constable of Sado) in Echi, Sagami Province (part of present-day Atsugi City, Kanagawa Prefecture). During this period, the Daishonin’s followers in Kamakura were subjected to many forms of persecution, including being unjustly accused of arson, murder and other crimes.

Eventually, Nichiren was sentenced to exile on Sado Island (part of present-day Niigata Prefecture). He departed from Echi on October 10, arriving at the graveyard of Tsukahara on Sado on November 1. The dwelling he was assigned there was a small, dilapidated shrine called the Sammai-do, which had been used for funerary rites. The conditions the Daishonin faced were truly harsh. It was bitterly cold on Sado, and he lacked sufficient food and warm clothing. In addition, he was surrounded by hostile Nembutsu followers who sought to take his life.

Nichiren’s followers in Kamakura also continued to suffer persecution. Some were even imprisoned, banished or had their lands confiscated. The majority of his remaining followers began to have doubts and discarded their faith out of fear and a desire for self-preservation.

On January 16 and 17 the following year, 1272, several hundred Buddhist priests from Sado and nearby provinces on the mainland

gathered at Tsukahara with the intent to kill the Daishonin. They were stopped by Homma Shigetsura, who proposed that they engage Nichiren in a religious debate instead. In the debate that ensued, the Daishonin thoroughly refuted the erroneous teachings of the various Buddhist schools of his day. This is known as the Tsukahara Debate.

In February, a faction of the ruling Hojo clan rose up in rebellion, and fighting broke out in Kamakura and Kyoto, the seat of the military government and the imperial capital, respectively. This is known as the February Disturbance or the Hojo Tokisuke Rebellion. The Daishonin's prediction of internal strife had come true just 150 days after declaring it in his remonstrations with Hei no Saemon-no-jo at the time of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution.

In early summer of that year, the Daishonin was transferred from Tsukahara to Ichinosawa, also on Sado, but his life continued to be threatened by angry Nembutsu followers.

Nikko Shonin, who later became the Daishonin's successor, remained at his side throughout his Sado exile, faithfully following and serving him and sharing his sufferings. The Daishonin also steadily gained followers while on Sado Island, including Abutsu-bo and his wife, the lay nun Sennichi.

The Daishonin composed many important works during his exile on Sado. Of special significance are "The Opening of the Eyes" and "The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind."

"The Opening of the Eyes," written in February 1272, explains that Nichiren Daishonin is the votary of the Lotus Sutra of the Latter Day of the Law, who is practicing in exact accord with the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. Ultimately, it reveals his identity as the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law endowed with the three virtues of sovereign, teacher and parent to lead all people in the latter age to enlightenment. "The Opening of the Eyes" is referred to as "the writing clarifying the object of devotion in terms of the Person."

“The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind,” written in April 1273, presents the object of devotion of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to be embraced by all people in the Latter Day of the Law in order to attain Buddhahood. It is referred to as “the writing clarifying the object of devotion in terms of the Law.”

In February 1274, Nichiren was pardoned, and in March, he departed from Sado and returned to Kamakura.

Meeting Hei no Saemon-no-jo in April, the Daishonin strongly remonstrated with him, denouncing the government’s actions in ordering priests to pray for the defeat of the Mongols based on the True Word and other erroneous Buddhist teachings. Further, responding to a direct question from Hei no Saemon-no-jo, he predicted that the Mongol invasion would most certainly take place before the year’s end. This marked his third remonstrations with the government authorities.

Just as Nichiren predicted, a large Mongol fleet attacked Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan’s four main islands, in October 1274. This is referred to as the first Mongol invasion, with the second Mongol invasion occurring in May 1281.

With this event, the two predictions he had made in “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land”—those of internal strife and foreign invasion—had come true.

This was the third time that Nichiren had directly remonstrated with the government authorities and predicted that disasters would befall the country. Affirming that his predictions had been fulfilled, the Daishonin wrote, “Three times now I have gained distinction by having such knowledge” (“The Selection of the Time,” WND-1, 579).

Taking Up Residence at Mount Minobu

When the government rejected his final remonstrations, Nichiren Daishonin decided to leave Kamakura and take up residence in Hakii

Village on the slopes of Mount Minobu in Kai Province (present-day Yamanashi Prefecture). The local steward was Hakii Sanenaga, who had become a follower of the Daishonin through the propagation efforts of Nikko Shonin.

Nichiren moved to Mount Minobu in May 1274. His change of residence, however, was by no means a retreat from the world.

He composed many of his major works there, including “The Selection of the Time” and “On Repaying Debts of Gratitude.” In these writings, he elucidated numerous important teachings—in particular, the Three Great Secret Laws (the object of devotion of the essential teaching, the sanctuary of the essential teaching and the daimoku of the essential teaching).

Through lectures on the Lotus Sutra, he devoted himself to fostering disciples who would carry out kosen-rufu in the future.

During this period, he also wrote many letters to his lay followers throughout the country, patiently instructing and encouraging them so they could persevere with strong faith, win in life and attain the state of Buddhahood.

The Atsuhara Persecution and the Purpose of the Daishonin’s Appearance in This World

After Nichiren Daishonin moved to Mount Minobu, Nikko Shonin actively led propagation efforts in the Fuji District of Suruga Province (present-day central Shizuoka Prefecture), successfully convincing many Tendai priests and followers to abandon their old religious affiliations and begin practicing the Daishonin’s teaching.

This prompted harassment and persecution by local Tendai temples, and threats were directed at those who had embraced Nichiren’s teaching.

On September 21, 1279, twenty farmers, who were followers of Nichiren in Atsuhara, a village in Suruga Province, were arrested

on trumped-up charges and taken to Kamakura. At the residence of Hei no Saemon-no-jo, they were subjected to harsh interrogation equivalent to torture. Though they were pressed to abandon their faith in the Lotus Sutra, they all remained true to their beliefs.

Three of the twenty followers arrested—the brothers Jinshiro, Yagoro and Yarokuro—were ultimately executed, while the remaining seventeen were banished from their places of residence. This series of events is known as the Atsuhara Persecution.

The example of these followers persevering in faith without begrudging their lives convinced Nichiren that humble, ordinary people without any position in society had developed sufficiently strong faith to withstand great persecutions. In “On Persecutions Befalling the Sage,” dated October 1, 1279, in the twenty-seventh year after proclaiming his teaching, he refers to the purpose of his appearance in this world (see WND-1, 996).

While still little more than a child, Nichiren had vowed to become a person of wisdom who understood the essence of Buddhism and to free all people from suffering at the most fundamental level. The fulfillment of that vow was his life’s guiding purpose. Expounding the teaching of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the fundamental Law for the enlightenment of all people, and revealing the Three Great Secret Laws—that is, the object of devotion of the essential teaching, the sanctuary of the essential teaching, and the daimoku of the essential teaching—he established the foundation for kosen-rufu that would endure for all time.

During the Atsuhara Persecution, ordinary people who embraced faith in Nam-myoho-renge-kyo that encompasses the Three Great Secret Laws dedicated themselves to kosen-rufu without begrudging their lives. Their appearance demonstrated that the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin was a teaching that would be championed by ordinary people, a teaching for the enlightenment of all humanity.

The Daishonin thus fulfilled the purpose of his appearance in this world.

At the time of the Atsuhara Persecution, Nichiren's followers strove in faith with the united spirit of "many in body, one in mind." His youthful disciple Nanjo Tokimitsu, steward of a village neighboring Atsuhara, worked tirelessly to protect his fellow believers.

The Daishonin's Death and Nikko Shonin's Succession

On September 8, 1282, Nichiren Daishonin, who was in declining health, left Minobu, where he had resided for nine years. He departed with the stated intent of visiting the therapeutic hot springs in Hitachi Province (part of present-day Ibaraki and Fukushima prefectures) at the recommendation of his disciples. When he arrived at the residence of his follower Ikegami Munenaka (the elder of the Ikegami brothers) in Ikegami in Musashi Province (present-day Ota Ward, Tokyo), he began to make arrangements for after his death.

On September 25, in spite of being gravely ill, he is said to have given a lecture to his followers on his treatise "On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land."

Nichiren passed away at Ikegami Munenaka's residence on October 13, 1282, at the age of sixty-one, bringing to a close his noble life as the votary of the Lotus Sutra.

After Nichiren Daishonin's death, only Nikko Shonin carried on his mentor's fearless spirit and actions for kosen-rufu. Based on his awareness as Nichiren's successor, Nikko continued to speak out against slander of the Law and to remonstrate with the government authorities. He treasured every one of the Daishonin's writings, referring to them by the honorific name *Gosho* (honorable writings), and encouraged all disciples to read and study them as the sacred scripture for the Latter Day of the Law. He also fostered many

outstanding disciples who exerted themselves in Buddhist practice and study.

Notes:

1. Nichiren Daishonin adopted the name Nichiren, which uses the Chinese characters for “sun” and “lotus,” at the age of thirty-two, around the time he established his teaching of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. For convenience, the name Nichiren is used throughout this article.
2. Casting off the transient and revealing the true: The revealing of a Buddha’s true status as a Buddha, and the setting aside of that Buddha’s provisional or transient identity. (See *The Soka Gakkai Dictionary of Buddhism*, pp. 71–72).

A Timeline of Nichiren Daishonin's Life

1222

February 16: Born in Kataumi, Tojo Village, Nagasa District, Awa Province (today, part of Chiba Prefecture)

(**Age 1**—at that time in Japan, as soon as a child was born, he or she was considered to be 1 year old)

1253

(**Age 32**)

April 28: Declares the establishment of his teaching at Seicho-ji, a temple in Awa Province

1260

(**Age 39**)

July 16: Submits “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land” to retired regent Hojo Tokiyori—his first official remonstrations with the sovereign. Soon after, attacked by Nembutsu believers who tried to take his life (known as Matsubagayatsu Persecution).

1261

(**Age 40**)

May 12: Exiled to Izu Peninsula

1264

(**Age 43**)

November 11: Komatsubara Persecution

1268

(**Age 47**)

October 11: Sends eleven letters of remonstrations to key figures in Kamakura

1271

(**Age 50**)

September 12: Tatsunokuchi Persecution. Thereafter begins inscribing the Gohonzon for his disciples

October 10: Sado Exile begins

1272

(Age 51)

January 16–17: Tsukahara Debate

February: Revolt breaks out in Kyoto and Kamakura; writes “The Opening of the Eyes”

1273

(Age 52)

April 25: Writes “The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind”

1274

(Age 53)

March 26: Returns to Kamakura from Sado

April 8: Meets Hei no Saemon; predicts Mongols will attack Japan within the year

May 17: Takes up residence at Mount Minobu

October: Mongol forces invade the southern island of Kyushu

1279

(Age 58)

September 21: Twenty farmers arrested for their beliefs

1281

(Age 60)

May: Mongols invade Kyushu a second time

1282

(Age 61)

October 13: Dies at the residence of Ikegami Munenaka at Ikegami in Musashi Province