

Esoteric Buddhism within the Framework of the Lotus Sutra Buddhism of Nichiren

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Nichiren (1222-82) is recognized as having established an original form of Buddhism which placed the Lotus Sutra at the center of its doctrine. However, there are opinions saying that esoteric Buddhism was a major influence on his thinking. That he copied works related to esoteric Buddhism and made a vow to Ākāśagarbha Bodhisattva, revered in esoteric Buddhist circles, during the time of his studies are cited as evidence. Similarities between the Mandalas of Nichiren and those of esoteric Buddhism, his connection to and criticism of Tōmitsu (Shingon's esoteric Buddhism) and Taimitsu (the esoteric interpretations elaborated within Japanese Tendai), and quotations related to esoteric Buddhism in his Chū-hoke-kyō (references and notes from various Buddhist texts written in the margin spaces and on the reverse sides of the pages of his text of the Lotus Sutra) are pointed out as additional indications of esoteric Buddhism's presence. (Sakai Keijun, *The influences of Taimitsu on Saint Nichiren*; Tendai Gakuhō no.25, 1982; Lucia Dora Dolce, *Esoteric Patterns in Nichiren's interpretation of the Lotus Sutra*; Leiden University, 2002, etc.)

However I take these to be a part of the developmental process of Nichiren's Buddhism. Surviving several experiences of persecution raised Nichiren's consciousness and recognition of himself as a propagator of the Lotus Sutra. To that end he took note of doctrines of the various forms of Buddhism he encountered throughout his period of study and transcended them as he established the original Lotus Sutra Buddhism. Esoteric Buddhism was one of those forms, however I believe it is not suitable to over-emphasize the relation between the character of his Buddhism and esoteric Buddhism. This is a focal point of my research toward concretization of this relationship.

1) Esoteric Buddhist texts transcribed by Nichiren

In 1233, at the age of twelve, Nichiren entered the Seichō-ji temple (the T'ien-t'ai temple of Hieizan [Mt. Hiei] of the Yokawa tradition) in Awa province (currently Chiba Prefecture), not far from his home village of Kominato, and there he received his elementary education. Young Nichiren studied many subjects such as "Impermanence," "Confused Standpoints of the Various Schools," and "Doubts and Questions Regarding the Pure Land Teaching." It seems that he was studying the doctrine of the Pure Land School since his youth in order to gain mastery of a sense of impermanence. Later, in a letter to a follower, Myōhō Bikuni Gohenji, (reply to a female believer) he wrote:

“I wanted to plant Buddha’s seed in my heart and to get over the distress of life and death. Then I believed in Amitābha Buddha because many people believed in that teaching, and I have chanted Amitābha’s name since I was a child. But, I made my one vow because I came to have doubt about Pure Land teachings.” (Shōwa Teihon Nichiren Shōnin Ibun, Minobusan Kuonji, 1952, pp.1553)

In 1238, at the age of seventeen, Nichiren copied a manuscript that was kept at Kanazawa Bunko (Shōmyō-ji temple, Kanagawa Prefecture) at Kiyosumi, in the monks’ residence where Dōzen-bō (Nichiren’s master teacher for becoming a Buddhist priest) lived. The source document, the Juketsu-entaragishū-tōketsu, is attributed to Enchin (the fifth head priest of Hieizan Enryaku-ji temple), and is a commentary about the early period of Hongaku-shisō (the doctrine of original state of enlightenment). This writing comes after Enchin’s “Juketsushū,” but it is just an esoteric reading of that work. In the postscript to his transcription, Nichiren wrote:

“In 1238, at the age of seventeen, Zeshō-bō (then Nichiren’s name) copied this document in Dōzen-bō’s residence on the east side of the Seichō-ji temple of Awa province. In the future when people see this, they shouldn’t criticize my copying errors.” (“Nichiren Shōnin Shinseki Shūsei” vol.5, Hōzō-kan, 1977, pp.299)

Nichiren went to Kamakura, a former capital of Japan, and also to Kyoto and Nara—centers of Japanese Buddhism and culture—and continued to study the doctrines of Buddhism. It is said that he studied at Hieizan, Onjō-ji, Kōya-san, Shiten-nō-ji, etc., but there are no historical materials that give precise confirmations. But, it is historically confirmed that, in 1251, he copied a work of Kakuban (1095-1143), a late Heian Shingon thinker, called the Gorin-kuji-myō-himitsu-gishaku (Interpretation of the Five-Element Stupa and Nine-Letter Mantra). It was a secret text of the Shingi Shingon school, which Kakuban founded. This document is famous for having united the Amitābha Buddha faith with esoteric Buddhism. It insisted that the embodiments of Mahāvairocana and Amitābha were one and the same, and skillfully tried to adopt the doctrine of the Pure Land school to esoteric Buddhism. The Five-Elements were the “Godai,” (the five great elements: earth, water, fire, wind, space) and the Nine-Letter Mantra referred to the nine syllables of the Amitābha Mantra. By means of a supposition that the Nine-Character Mantra was the same entity as the Five-Element Stupa, this document argued the idea that Mahāvairocana and Amitābha were the same body.

The copying of this document is pointed out as an indication of esoteric Buddhism's relationship with the doctrine of Nichiren. From the postscript to the transcription noting that it was completed at about 8 p.m. on November 24, in 1251, at Kyoto, it can be inferred that Nichiren worked well into the night. There is an opinion that Hōun-ji temple at the west gate Hosshō-ji temple of Kyoto is the place where calligraphic copies were made. (Shōwa-teihon, pp.2875, Kushida Ryōkō; Shingon Mikkyō Seiritsukatei no Kenkyū, Sankibō busshorin, 1964). And, Nichiren's name is contained in records (Rishōin Ketsumyaku, preserved in Kanazawa-bunko) of the Shingon school's Ono branches, which is given as proof of his lineage in the Shingon esoteric Buddhism.

Since Nichiren's writings such as the Shugo-kokka-ron, the Risshō-ankoku-ron, etc., contain quotes from various other works like the Senchaku-shū (a justification of Pure Land Buddhism as the most effective method of salvation written by Hōnen [1133-1212]), the Zaija-rin by Myōe (1173-1232), the Jōdo-ketsugi-shō, by Kōin (1145-1216), the Dan-senchaku (writings criticizing Pure Land Buddhism from the position of existing Buddhism, by Jōshō [?-?]), and the Ken-senchaku, (an argument from the position of Pure Land Buddhism, by Ryūkan [1148-1227]), it is understood that he read these works. Many writings from various schools are inscribed in Nichiren's Chū-hoke-kyō as well. It can be guessed that Nichiren studied various schools of Kegon (Flower Garland) Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, and esoteric Buddhism of the Shingon school, even while T'ien-t'ai doctrine was central in his thinking.

But Nichiren couldn't encounter the best master for himself while he was studying. His master teacher when he became a priest, Dōzen-bō, was fearful of the criticisms of Tōjō Kagenobu (in 1253, the local steward of Nichiren's birthplace) and of the priests from Pure Land Buddhism in the Seichō-ji temple, and he couldn't protect Nichiren from them. Disappointed, Nichiren left the Seichō-ji temple of his hometown.

Historical materials from 1363 (Nichidai-jikken-taitō-mondō-ki) show that he was the pupil of Shunpan (1182-1262?; chief of doctrine at the Hiei-zan Enryaku-ji temple). But he was just one of many students, and Shunpan wasn't the master teacher for his Buddhist life. Nichiren encountered the Nirvana Sutra doctrine to "rely on the Dharma, not on persons" at that time. The Dharma to be relied on is the Lotus Sutra, and no persons are masters except for Śākyamuni Buddha. He studied various schools of Buddhism peripherally to the T'ien-t'ai school, and his copies of documents related to esoteric Buddhism are but a few historical materials within his period of study. One might think that he was particularly taken with esoteric Buddhism if one focuses only that copying of documents, but one should rather consider the entire period of study encompassing the whole life of the one who established the religion which placed the

Lotus Sutra at the top of many sutras. Esoteric Buddhism was a rich concept that interested him within that time, however it would be difficult to conclude that it became the nucleus of Nichiren's Lotus Sutra Buddhism.

2) “Fudō-aizen-kankenki”

As a conclusion to his studies Kamakura, Kyoto etc., Nichiren declared the establishment of Lotus Sutra Buddhism. On the morning of April 28, 1253, he faced the rising sun at the top of Mt. Kiyosumi and chanted *Namu-myōhō-enge-kyō* (The sacred title of the Lotus Sutra). This is the moment the Nichiren School began. Nichiren gave his first sermon to his former master and fellow monks, but he shocked his audience by criticizing the doctrine of the Pure Land school. The local steward, Tōjō Kagenobu, a Pure Land school follower, heard that sermon and got angry. Then Nichiren fled to Kamakura from the Seichō-ji temple.

A little while after that, Nichiren experienced a dream of the figure of Aizen (Rāgarāja) on New Year's Day of 1254, and he experienced the figure of Fudō (Acala) in dreams from the 15th to 17th. He wrote a description of those experiences on June 25, 1254; that description, the Fudō-aizen-kankenki, is preserved at the Myōhon-ji temple in Chiba Prefecture. Fudō (Immovable) is a messenger of Dainichi (Mahāvairocana) who presents a frightful form, holding a sword in his right hand and a rope in his left. Aizen is the god of love in Shingon esoteric Buddhism, and although he has an angry and fearsome appearance—his whole body is red, he has three eyes and six hands, and the crown of a lion on his head—he is full of affection. On Nichiren's Mandala (object of worship), the names of Fudō and Aizen are written in siddham—an ancient Sanskrit script—which may be an indication of the great influence the experience of these dreams had on him. And although not historically confirmed, it is said that Nichiren commissioned a painting of the figures of Fudō and Aizen on the back of which he wrote a dated inscription.

Nichiren became a priest at Seichō-ji temple (the T'ien-t'ai temple of the Yokawa tradition at Mt. Hiei) where Kokuzō-bosatsu (Ākāśagarbha) is the principal object of worship. It can be assumed that he experienced esoteric Buddhism's secret transmissions because he learned T'ien-t'ai esoteric Buddhism simultaneously with the T'ien-t'ai exoteric doctrine. (See the section: Nichiren's Mandalas and the Mandalas of esoteric Buddhism)

3) The Role of Kokuzō-bosatsu (Ākāśagarbha Bodhisattva)

Nichiren was a youth of great talent. Desiring to increase his wisdom, he prayed to Ākāśagarbha. In the Dainichi-kyō-sho (Ta-jih ching-shu, a commentary on the Mahāvairocana Sutra), it is written:

“The beneficial works and wisdom of Ākāśagarbha are immeasurable; he is unobstructed in all things and freely abides in the universe.”

This bodhisattva was possessed of immeasurable good virtue and wisdom. Many people believed in him as a bodhisattva who could bring their wishes to realization. He is the central figure in the Kokuzō-in division of the “Taizō-kai Mandala” (the Matrix-store Realm Mandala). It seems to be a historical fact that Nichiren prayed to Ākāśagarbha. Seichō-ji temple is a T’ien-t’ai temple, and, with its geographical features, it is not unreasonable to assume that it was a location for typical forest training, and faith in Ākāśagarbha. Additionally, with the practice of “gumonji-hō”(a ritual training for acquiring good memory) as a backdrop to that, it can be thought that he prayed to Ākāśagarbha in his youth. Central to this ritual is the invocation of the mantra of Ākāśagarbha 10,000 times in a day, and to continue this for 100 days. This ritual aims at increasing one’s memory—it is said that if practitioners complete this ritual, they will never forget any of their experiences. Kūkai (774-835), before going to China, wrote in his Sangō-shiiki (a treatise on Buddhism’s philosophical excellence) that he completed this ritual. But Nichiren’s wish is thought to be the genuine desire of a boy wanting to improve his performance in school.

4) Nichiren’s Mandalas and the Mandalas of esoteric Buddhism

The meaning of the Mandala of Shingon esoteric Buddhism is the existence of true nature and essence. In the drawing it harmoniously expresses the stage of enlightenment and the world of Buddha, who was complete in all virtues. There is the “Taizō-kai Mandala” that expresses the principle of the dharma-body of Mahāvairocana Buddha based on the Mahāvairocana Sutra, and “Kongō-kai Mandala” expressing the wisdom of the dharma-body of Mahāvairocana Buddha based on the Diamond-Peak Sutra. Shingon esoteric Buddhism and T’ien-t’ai esoteric Buddhism use both Mandalas as the foundation of doctrine.

Nichiren’s Mandalas are graphic configurations in the middle of which are inscribed the title of the Lotus Sutra and names of deities. The invocation of Śākyamuni Buddha is inscribed to the left of the title of the Lotus Sutra, and Tahō Nyorai (Prabhūtaratna, Many Treasures Buddha) is inscribed to the right. The Four Great

Bodhisattvas (the leading disciples of the eternal Buddha—the Bodhisattvas Jōgyō, Muhengyō, Jōgyō, and Anryūgyō)—are inscribed at both sides of two Buddhas in the upper portion. Manjuśri and the names of other bodhisattvas are written in the middle area, along with names of guardian deities and disciples such as Śāriputra. And other guardian deities such as Kishibo-jin (Hārītī) and the masters of Chinese and Japanese T’ien-t’ai tradition such as Chih-i (538-597) and Saichō (767-822) are inscribed in the lower area. The four guardian kings are arranged in the four corners, and the siddham inscriptions of Fudō and Aizen are written along both sides. Nichiren’s signature (kaō; “seal”) appears in the very bottom part.

It has been said that the world of the “Taizō-kai Mandala” and the “Kongō-kai Mandala” from Shingon esoteric Buddhism are the archetypes of Nichiren’s Mandala. It is also said that he varied the arrangement of various honored ones pictured on the Mandala of Shingon esoteric Buddhism by expressing them with written characters. Another item offered as proof is that Fudō (Messenger of Dainichi Buddha) and Aizen (the Love God of Shingon Esoteric Buddhism) also appear in Nichiren’s Mandalas. Another focus is that Nichiren employed two siddham inscriptions for his seal, using 𑖀 until May 1278, and 𑖁 from June 1278.

Additionally, it is said that some Mandalas serving as principal objects of worship from the Hossō School—Shinran’s (1173-1262) “Myōgō-honzon” (An invocation of Amitābha Buddha written in Sino-Japanese logographs in the middle of a scroll), and Myōe’s (1173-1232) “Kōmyō-honzon” (Mandala of Amitābha’s universally shining light)—became the basic forms of Nichiren’s Mandalas in the same time period. But I don’t think that these were cases of other principal objects of worship being taken as a hint for him. And I think that, in the world of religion, it is not uncommon to independently make the same figures into venerable ones and into objects and focuses of faith: Nichiren and the audience on Vulture Peak look up at the scene of the discourse; Śākyamuni Buddha sits down with Prabhūtaratna in the Stupa of Many Treasures that is floating in the air; then bodhisattvas and various venerable ones surround them. Such a three-dimensional composition of the eternal Buddha of the Lotus Sutra (especially in chapter 16) is expressed in Nichiren’s Mandalas. I think that the expression of this picture of the world of eternal Buddha of the Lotus Sutra through written characters is Nichiren’s originality.

5) Nichiren’s reception and criticism of Shingon and T’ien-t’ai Esoteric Buddhism

Before moving on to Kyoto, Nichiren initially came back to Kiyosumi when he finished studying in Kamakura in the spring of 1242. At that time he wrote his first thesis, the Kaitai-sokusin-jōbutsugi. He focused on the acceptance of the Buddhist

precepts—which was a foundation subject of Saichō—and he discussed the Buddhist precepts of Hīnayāna Buddhism, Provisional Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Lotus Sutra, and Shingon esoteric Buddhism. He emphasized the excellence of the Buddhist precepts of Shingon esoteric Buddhism that were introduced to the disciple by the master. When Nichiren criticized Honen’s (1133-1212) Senchaku-shū (a treatise justifying the chanting of Amitābha Buddha’s name as the most effective method of salvation) with his treatise, the Shugo-kokka-ron, in 1259, one can often find assertions of the justice of the Lotus Sutra and Shingon esoteric Buddhism in the text.

On the other hand, he criticized Shingon esoteric Buddhism in his writings before his banishment to Sado in 1271. In the Shō-hokke-daimoku-shō (1260), he points out that the Mahāvairocana Sutra does not reveal the meanings of the Buddha’s teachings, and in the Risshō-ankoku-ron (1260), he says that the prayers of Shingon esoteric Buddhism are not effective. Kūkai is criticized in the Kyō-ki-ji-ko-ron (1262). The classifications of Jūjū-shin (the ten stages of mind) by Kūkai, and classifications by Zenmū (637-735, “Śubhakarashīṃha”), Kongōchi (671-741, “Vajrabodhi”), and Fukū (705-774, “Amoghavajra”) are criticized in his Ken-hōbō-shō (1262). And in his Zenmū-shō (1266), he criticizes the “Commentary on the Mahāvairocana Sutra” by Zenmū. And in his Hōmon-kashin-shō (1269), he writes that Shingon esoteric Buddhism plagiarized the “Ichi-nen-san-zen” concept (the three thousand realms are contained in one mind) from T’ien-t’ai doctrine.

It seems that he didn’t criticize the T’ien-t’ai esoteric Buddhism before his banishment to Sado. Such criticism came forth during and after that, showing up in detail during his Minobu-san days (in his hermitage at Mt. Minobu). In the Risshō-ankoku-ron (1260), and the Hōmon-kashin-shō (1269), Nichiren considered Ennin (794-864, the third head priest of Hieizan Enryaku-ji temple) as a traditional master of Japanese T’ien-t’ai Buddhism. But Ennin is criticized in the Kaimoku-shō, (1271), and the Kitō-shō (1271) from Nichiren’s Sado days. Ennin and Enchin (814-891, the fifth head priest of Hieizan Enryaku-ji temple) are criticized in Minobu-san treatises such as the Senji-shō (1275), the Hōon-shō (1276), and others.

There are some that find an indication in this that Shingon esoteric Buddhism and T’ien-t’ai esoteric Buddhism exist as an undercurrent of Nichiren’s doctrine. Dr. Asai argues that Nichiren’s Lotus Sutra Buddhism was formed when he transcended the doctrines of T’ien-t’ai that he had learned. In line with the opinion of Dr. Asai, I think that Nichiren transcended the doctrines of various schools learned during his period of study, including Shingon esoteric Buddhism and T’ien-t’ai esoteric Buddhism. He then established his original Lotus Sutra Buddhism. (Asai Endō, Jōko nihon tendai honmon shisōshi, Heirakuji shoten, 1973)

6) On the Quotations of Esoteric Buddhism in Nichiren's Chū-hoke-kyō

The Chū-hoke-kyō is a copy of the Lotus Sutra in which Nichiren wrote references and notes from various Buddhist texts into the margin spaces and on the reverse side of the document. There are a few comments that are Nichiren's opinions. Of the 2015 entries, 900 are quotations from three works of T'ien-t'ai Chi-i: the Hokke-gengi (Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra), the Hokke-mongu (Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra), and the Maka-shikan (Great Concentration and Insight). But, there are many entries connected with the Kegon (Hua-yen) school, the Sanron (San-lun-tsung) school, the Hossō (Fa-hsiang) school, and the Shingon (Shingon-dharani) school. There are only a few entries (seven examples) related to the Jōdo (Pure Land) school. There are about 50 quotations regarding esoteric Buddhism from the Mahāvairocana Sutra, the Diamond Peak sutra, the Susiddhikāra Sutra, etc., in the Chū-hoke-kyō. These chosen selections are characteristic esoteric Buddhist assertions, the main points of the sutras, and their own explanatory materials.

During his period of study and development, Nichiren copied the Gorin-kuji-myō-himitsu-gishaku, an esoteric writing of Kakuban, a Heian Shingon thinker, and the Juketsu-entaragishū-tōketsu, an esoteric document attributed to Enchin from early period of Hongaku shisō. He was a critic of the Pure Land school early-on in his life, and, before his banishment to Sado, he also became critical of Shingon esoteric Buddhism and Kūkai. He became critical the T'ien-t'ai esoteric Buddhism after his banishment. Given that background, there are opinions that Nichiren was heavily influenced by doctrines of esoteric Buddhism, and that it is proven by his quotations of esoteric Buddhism in his own Chū-hoke-kyō. But, upon researching commentaries in Nichiren's collected writings regarding the body of esoteric Buddhism-related materials in the Chū-hoke-kyō, it can be seen that Nichiren's purpose in quoting esoteric Buddhism in the Chū-hoke-kyō is never as a supportive reference, but rather is a criticism of esoteric Buddhism's doctrines and of Kūkai's classification. (Sekido Gyōkai "On the Quotations of Esoteric Buddhism in Nichiren's Chū-hoke-kyō," abstract, *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies*, 2011, pp.221)