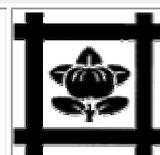


Rissho Ankoku Ron



A commentary
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Nichiren's Critique of the *Senchaku Shu* Part 2: The Effects of Honen's Teachings on Buddhism in Kamakuran Japan

Having shown that Honen's *Senchaku Shu* was a work that recommended neglecting and putting down the Wonderful Dharma of Shakyamuni Buddha, Nichiren proceeds to describe the consequences of Honen's Pure Land movement as he observed it for himself in mid-13th century Kamakura. Nichiren sums up the situation in the following words:

Now we have come to this Latter Age, when people are no longer sages. Each enters his own dark road, and all alike forget the direct way. How pitiful that no one cures them of their blindness! How painful to see them taking up these false beliefs in vain! As a result, everyone from the ruler of the nation on down to the common people believes that there are no true sutras outside the *Triple Pure Land Sutras*, and no other buddhas other than the Amitabha Buddha with his two attendants.

Honen's Pure Land movement, in Nichiren's eyes, had caused people to neglect the whole Buddhist tradition with the exception of the Pure Land teachings because they are convinced that there is no direct way to attain buddhahood in this world, and that the only escape is to be reborn in the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha after death. People are no longer interested in supporting any temples or clergy aside from Pure Land temples and Pure Land teachers. This means that the more comprehensive Buddhist teachings centered on the *Lotus Sutra* had begun to decline and Nichiren describes such temples as abandoned and dilapidated. His fear is that within a generation or two the classical *Lotus Sutra* centered teachings of the Tendai school will be entirely forgotten and only otherworldly Pure Land piety will remain.

Today, what is the state of Buddhism? As mentioned before, there are very few countries that could be considered primarily Buddhist today. Mainland China's reigning ideology is the dialectical materialism of communism. The same is true in North Vietnam and North Korea. While there are many people who are nominally Buddhists in South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, free market capitalism is more or less the reigning ideology.

Buddhism has become little more than a cultural trapping, a way to do funeral or memorial services. Most Buddhists in East Asian traditions consider Buddhism to be nothing more than a way of making sure that those who die are able to pass on to the Pure Land of Amitabha. This is the case for Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese Buddhists. The *Lotus Sutra* is revered, but usually only for the recitation of chapter 25 that deals with Kuan Yin Bodhisattva, the Goddess of Compassion who can be called upon to help overcome worldly troubles and concerns and who is considered the handmaiden of Amitabha Buddha. The central points of the *Lotus Sutra* are not a part of the average teaching or practice of East Asian Buddhism, though occasionally Zen teachers might make reference to it. Shakyamuni Buddha, whether in his historical aspect or as the Eternal Buddha of chapter 16 of the *Lotus Sutra*, takes a distant second place to the veneration of Amitabha Buddha, and the teaching that this world is the actual pure land, the Pure Land of Tranquil Light, is reserved only for the few who delve into Zen practice and the demythologization of the Pure Land teachings and practices. Except for the minority who practice Nichiren Buddhism, it would seem that Nichiren's fear that the veneration of Shakyamuni Buddha and the *Lotus Sutra* would be overcome by Pure Land piety and otherworldliness has come true. Attaining enlightenment in this life and thereby overcoming the sufferings of birth and death, the main point of Buddhism, has indeed taken second place to the goal of attaining rebirth in the Pure Land after death and to attaining worldly benefits in this life. Nichiren's *Lotus Sutra* inspired vision of a society focused on bringing out the buddhahood in all beings in this life has not been realized.

This is why Nichiren castigates Honen and his later followers for turning people away from Buddhism as a whole, and with it the *Lotus Sutra*, in favor of what could be called a form of spiritual escapism. Nichiren laments that there are no longer people of the caliber of Dengyo Daishi (aka Saicho 767-822), the founder of the Tendai school in Japan, and his successors at Mt. Hiei: Gishin (781-833), Jikaku (794-866), and Chisho (814-891). Nichiren praises them because they brought the entirety of the Buddhist tradition to Japan in the form of the *Lotus Sutra* centered teachings of the T'ien-t'ai school. In later works Nichiren would severely censure Jikaku and Chisho for betraying Dengyo's vision and turning the Tendai school into the Shingon school in all but name, but in this work Nichiren praises their contributions to Japanese Buddhism. The 1278 expanded version of the *Rissho Ankoku Ron* even includes the name of Kobo Daishi (774-835), the founder of the Shingon school, among those who went to China to learn more about the Buddha Dharma in order to establish those teachings in Japan. The inclusion of Kobo Daishi in the 1278 expansion is especially interesting because by that time Nichiren had already begun criticizing Kobo Daishi and the Shingon school, claiming that it was Shingon that was actually the root cause of Japan's downfall. In this work, however, Nichiren simply wants to praise those who brought Buddhism as a whole to Japan from China, as opposed to Honen's Pure Land teachings that are

advising people to discard the Buddha Dharma with the exception of the sole invocation of nembutsu.

In the same way, Nichiren praises the honor given to the historical Shakyamuni Buddha and to Medicine Master Buddha, as well as to Earth Repository Bodhisattva (Kshitigarbha) and Sky Repository Bodhisattva (Akashagarbha) in the past at Enryakuji, the head temple of the Tendai school on Mt. Hiei. Later, Nichiren would make the case that only the Eternal Shakyamuni Buddha of the essential section of the *Lotus Sutra* should be revered as the Gohonzon or “Focus of Devotion” in the Latter Age of the Dharma, thus going beyond the explicit teachings of the Tendai school. In *Rissho Ankoku Ron*, however, he is simply pointing to the honor paid to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas by the Tendai school as Dengyo had established it, as opposed to the exclusive devotion to Amitabha Buddha taught by Honen.

Nichiren may have had his critiques of Jikaku, Chisho, and Kobo Daishi as well as his exclusive devotion to the Eternal Shakyamuni Buddha already in mind when he wrote the *Rissho Ankoku Ron*. However, these were not battles that he wanted to fight at this time. The purpose of the *Rissho Ankoku Ron* was to simply point out to the Hojo rulers that Honen’s exclusive nembutsu was subverting the established and governmentally approved hegemony of the more inclusive and theoretically *Lotus Sutra* centered Tendai school and that something must be done to stop it before the Tendai school was totally ruined and the *Lotus Sutra* forgotten. The *Shugo Kokka Ron*, written the year before *Rissho Ankoku Ron*, even refers to Tendai and Shingon together as the schools and teachings that were being subverted by Honen’s Pure Land movement. This shows that Nichiren saw himself, at this point, as a reformer trying to call the rulers and the people back mainstream Buddhism represented by Tendai and Shingon as opposed to the radical and unauthorized exclusive nembutsu of Honen that was taking people away from mainstream Buddha Dharma.

At this early date in his teaching career, Nichiren may have had the hope that if the otherworldly Pure Land movement could be quelled then popular support would return to the Tendai and Shingon schools that both taught the possibility of attaining buddhahood in this world. At that point, the Tendai and even Shingon practitioners could be convinced to reform their own practices by turning back to the *Lotus Sutra*. Things did not at all work out as Nichiren hoped, and years later Nichiren would explain that the root causes of Japan’s suffering lay not with Honen’s exclusive nembutsu, but with the Shingon teachings of Kobo Daishi, and even with Jikaku and Chisho, the successive patriarchs of the Tendai school who put the Shingon sutras on a par with or even above the *Lotus Sutra*.

Nichiren’s praise of the inclusive nature of the Tendai school was not just a tactic to please the authorities by praising the Buddhist establishment. Nichiren believed that in the Former and Middle Days of the Dharma, the Eternal Shakyamuni Buddha had intended that

such skillful methods as devotion to the celestial buddhas and bodhisattvas be used to encourage people and to help them bring the seeds of buddhahood to fruition – either here or in the pure lands. In such circumstances the Pure Land teachings and in fact the many teachings and practices of Buddhism all had their place, as long as they were not clung to excessively and did not cut one off from the Wonderful Dharma of the Lotus Flower Teaching that they were all supposed to be leading up to. In later works, however, Nichiren reveals that in the Latter Age of the Dharma there are no longer people who can benefit from these teachings and that the Latter Age is the time when only a direct relationship (even a negative one) with the *Lotus Sutra* can plant and bring to fruition the seed of buddhahood in people's lives. This argument is dealt with at length in Nichiren's later works and so will not be discussed here. However, if we can assume that Nichiren was already thinking in this way about the difference between the times of Chih-i and Dengyo and his own circumstances, then we can understand why Nichiren would praise the inclusive Tendai practices of the past while advocating an exclusive devotion to the *Lotus Sutra* himself.

Nichiren concludes his critique of Honen by pointing out that people have become very confused about what is an incidental teaching, such as rebirth in a pure land, and what is the primary point of Buddhism, attaining enlightenment through devotion to the Wonderful Dharma. They have turned away from Buddhism as a whole, to embrace a very small and relatively insignificant part of it. For this reason, disaster will occur. In light of this, Nichiren recommends that the teaching of Honen be outlawed.

How pitiful to think that, in the space of a few decades since the publication of the *Senchaku Shu*, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of people have been deluded by these devilish teachings and in so many cases confused as to the true teachings of Buddhism. If people favor only what is incidental and forget what is primary, can the benevolent deities be anything but angry? If people cast aside what is perfect and take up what is biased, can the world escape the plots of demons? Rather than offering up ten thousand prayers for remedy, it would be better to outlaw this one evil.

This recommendation may seem outrageous to those of us who value the separation of church and state, free speech, the right of peaceful assembly and other civil rights. Nichiren, however, lived in a society where the rulers controlled (or tried to control) what teachings could or could not receive the ruler's authorization, patronage, and support. In his view, Honen's movement was not a legitimate Buddhist teaching and therefore should not be recognized or supported by the rulers as if it were. Even still, one might ask what right Nichiren had to ask the rulers to suppress the beliefs of others and whether his recommendations were not more in the spirit of the inquisitor rather than the bodhisattva. As we shall see, this also outrages the guest, and so Nichiren himself will try to clarify what he means in the sections that follow.