

The Life of Nichiren
DEDICATED TO THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF HUMANITY
By CRAIG DeROUSSE, Associate Editor

ON Feb. 16, 1222, a baby boy named Zennichimaro was born in the tiny Japanese fishing town of Kominato, or "Littleport," which overlooked the Pacific Ocean. Zennichimaro was the only child of a poor fisherman, Mikuni, and his wife, Umegiku. Although details of his earliest years are sketchy, we know that there were no public schools to attend. The only formal education available to him was found on the green hilltops of Mount Kiyosumi, which cushioned the town against the Pacific Ocean. It was here, at age 11, that Zennichimaro entered the temple Seicho-ji, where he studied Buddhist doctrine in both Japanese and Chinese. A brilliant student, he soon exhibited a profound mastery of both languages as well as a powerfully beautiful writing style.

After several years of intense study, at 15, Zennichimaro had to choose between returning to life with his parents or continuing his studies toward becoming a priest. He chose the latter.

On entering the priesthood, Zennichimaro was renamed Rencho, meaning "growth of the lotus," and moved to Kamakura to further his studies. For the next several years, Rencho studied many forms of Buddhism and eventually moved on to other centers of learning in Japan, such as Kyoto and Nara. As his studies progressed, however, Rencho grew increasingly dissatisfied with the confused state of Buddhism in Japan, and he embarked on a personal quest to find the ultimate truth of Buddhism.

By age 30, Rencho was convinced that the Lotus Sutra was superior to all other sutras. He perceived the direct path to enlightenment within its title, Myho-rence-kyo. At age 31, he returned to Kominato to announce his revelations in an audience with his childhood mentors at Seicho-ji.

First Invocation of the Mystic Law

EARLY on April 28, 1253, Rencho climbed a hill overlooking the Pacific Ocean and awaited morning. As the sun rose above the horizon, the young man from Kominato greeted it with humanity's first invocation of the Mystic Law, Nam-myoho-rence-kyo. Much more than the title of the Lotus Sutra to young Rencho, it was the essence of the Lotus Sutra itself, the ultimate reality of life.

Returning to Seicho-ji from the hilltop, Rencho announced his revelations to the gathered priests and students. At high noon, he made his proclamation and declared all other Buddhist sects to be provisional teachings.

In addition to refuting the existing sects of Buddhism, Rencho changed his name to Nichiren or "Sun Lotus" which, he said, "Signifies that I attained enlightenment by myself" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 236). This was of great philosophical importance.

Shakyamuni had declared that he originally attained enlightenment in an unimaginably distant time in the infinite past. Shakyamuni also referred to past Buddhas from whom he had learned the truth of life, such as one of his fathers from a past life who had been enlightened in another remote period of time.

Although Shakyamuni never indicated that he attained enlightenment on his own, Nichiren specifically stated that he became a Buddha by himself. This is why he is

sometimes called “the original Buddha.” This is not to say, however, that Nichiren was in any way better than anyone else.

The Original Buddha and a Common Person Are the Same

SINCE many of us have been conditioned to believe that religious practitioners can never attain the enlightened state of our religion’s founder, we may be compelled to think of Nichiren as a superhuman or god-like being. However, Nichiren himself taught that the original Buddha and a common person are the same. As he wrote just two years after he first invoked the Mystic Law:

While deluded, one is called a common mortal, but once enlightened, he is called a Buddha. Even a tarnished mirror will shine like a jewel if it is polished. A mind which presently is clouded by illusions originating from the innate darkness of life is like a tarnished mirror, but once it is polished it will become clear, reflecting the enlightenment of immutable truth. Arouse deep faith and polish your mirror night and day. How should you polish it? Only by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. (MW-1, pp. 4-5)

Although millions of practitioners in ages to follow would praise his advent, Nichiren was greeted with much less enthusiasm by the Japanese people of 1253. Since he felt that the truth of Buddhism had been completely misunderstood, Nichiren tirelessly worked to establish the essential practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo as the direct path to enlightenment in one’s lifetime.

Due to his dynamic personality and remarkable success in converting practitioners of other sects, his life was in constant danger from jealous political and religious leaders. He was exiled, nearly assassinated, publicly denounced and ridiculed along with his followers, several of whom were executed because of their refusal to renounce their faith.

After years of such persecution and remonstrations with the Japanese government, which continued to support the Shingon faith despite ongoing domestic disasters and foreign invasion, Nichiren retired to Mount Minobu. It was there that he would fulfill the ultimate mission of his life.

Staunch Faith Now Appeared To Be the Rule

ON Oct. 3, 1279, Nichiren received word from Nikko that some farmer-disciples in Atsuhara had been arrested and tortured, facing possible execution for their faith. Even so, they refused to recant. Previously, many disciples had wavered during persecutions; therefore, only a handful of the staunchest followers had been bestowed Gohonzon. But since staunch faith now appeared to be the rule rather than the exception, Nichiren decided to inscribe a Gohonzon for the entire world. This, he believed, was the ultimate mission of his life: to ensure that the Law he propagated would be physically embodied in ink, which he then directed one of his disciples to carve into a wooden plank to last “for ten thousand millennia.”

On Oct. 12, 1279, twenty-seven years after his declaration of the True Law and three days before three farmer-disciples were put to death for their refusal to deny the greatness of Myoho-renge-kyo, Nichiren inscribed the Dai-Gohonzon for all humanity. In the lower left corner on the Dai-Gohonzon is a dedication to a fictional lay believer who

represents the common people of the world who would now inherit the direct path to enlightenment, and on the right side are the words *bestowed upon the entire world*.

Over the next few years, Nichiren's health began to fail, and he knew the time had come to transfer his responsibilities to his most trusted disciple, Nikko.

On his way to a hot spring, Nichiren realized his time of death was near and stopped at the home of his disciple, Ikegami Munenaka.

It was there, on the morning of October 13, 1282, that while he and his disciples calmly chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo together, Nichiren—Rencho, Zennichimaro, the boy from "Littleport"—breathed his last in this lifetime and moved peacefully on.

For a more detailed account of the life and times of "the boy from Littleport," please read the revised edition of The Life of Nichiren Daishonin, published in 1993 by NSIC, Tokyo, available at SGI-USA community centers or through mail order.

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