

## Introduction to The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin

*The following is an edited excerpt from the introduction to The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, volume one. It explains some of the historical and cultural background of the Daishonin's writings and problems faced in translation.*

JOSEI Toda, the second president of the Soka Gakkai, conceived the idea of publishing Nichiren Daishonin's writings to commemorate the 700th anniversary of the founding of the Daishonin's Buddhism in 1253. In 1951, Nichiko Hori (1867–1957), who had devoted his life to compiling and cataloguing the Daishonin's works and who served as fifty-ninth high priest of Taiseki-ji temple, began work on the editing of *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* (Jp. Nichiren Daishonin *Gosho Zenshu*). In April of the following year, the completed text was published in one volume by the Soka Gakkai in Tokyo.

The authenticity of all of the 426 documents in the collection has been established. Of these, 150 exist in Nichiren Daishonin's own handwriting. Taiseki-ji has thirty-two manuscripts and others are the property of other temples or are in private collections visited by Nichiko Hori. Where no manuscript attributable to Nichiren Daishonin exists, the copies of the work made by his immediate disciples Nikko Shonin (1246–1333) and Nichimoku Shonin (1260–1333) were relied upon wherever possible.

The writings of Nichiren Daishonin fall into several categories. Some are formal treatises on Buddhism with large numbers of quotations from Chinese doctrinal works and translations of sutras. Examples of such treatises are the "The Security of the Land through the Propagation of True Buddhism" and the "The True Object of Worship." These treatises are written in classical Chinese, which, like Latin in Europe until recent centuries, was widely employed in Japan for works of history, philosophy and religious doctrine. Nichiren Daishonin's writings in classical Chinese are marked by great power and fluency.

OTHER writings by Nichiren Daishonin take the form of letters to his various disciples and followers. Some of these are lengthy and detailed, giving us much valuable information on the Daishonin's activities and thinking. Others are short communications written to advise or encourage his followers. These works are written in the ordinary Japanese epistolary style of the Kamakura period. Like the works in Chinese, they show Nichiren Daishonin to have been a master of prose style and contain passages of great warmth and beauty.

The treatises, since they are carefully constructed and logical in presentation, pose relatively few problems of interpretation, though occasionally there are quotations whose sources have yet to be identified. But because classical Chinese is very concise in expression, and because much of the language of the treatises is highly specialized, it has at times been deemed advisable to expand the wording of the original in translation in order to make the meaning clear in English.

The letters, written in a more intimate and personal style, present greater difficulties of interpretation. Whereas the treatises were intended as formal documents to be handed down to posterity, the letters are in most cases rather private communications between the Daishonin and his followers. They take for granted a familiarity with

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certain background information that was known to the writer and the recipient but in many cases cannot be fully known to us today. Thus, without a thorough knowledge of the circumstances under which the letter was written and the identity of the recipient, we must often guess at the exact meaning of references in the text.

Nichiren Daishonin in his letters and other writings frequently alludes to various anecdotes taken from Buddhist texts or works of Chinese history. Such allusions may appear pedantic to the English reader because of not having the cultural background to understand them. But it should be kept in mind that the Japanese readers whom Nichiren Daishonin was addressing would have encountered no such difficulty. The anecdotes he refers to would have been as familiar to them as the stories of the Bible or Greek mythology are to Western readers, and they could therefore immediately grasp the significance of the allusion and appreciate its aptness without difficulty.

ALL personal names are given basically according to their respective nationalities, but fictitious names that appear in the sutras are given in Japanese fashion. All Sanskrit names—personal, local and technical—are introduced without the elaborate diacritical marks demanded by strict Indology. Nearly all such names and terms, however, are listed in the appendix sections with full diacritical marks, along with their Japanese equivalents. All Japanese personal names are given in traditional fashion, with the family name first and the given name second. Thus, Minamoto no Yoritomo is Yoritomo of the Minamoto family. Sometimes the second element in a name is an official title rather than a given name. For example, in the name Shijo Kingo, Shijo is the family name and Kingo the title of the government office held by the individual. Each individual selection is accompanied by a background section that gives readers the information they need to understand that particular translation.

A FINAL word should be added concerning the form of dates found in the English translation. For the sake of readability, these are given as though they were dates in the modern Western calendar. Thus, for example, the date of Nichiren Daishonin's birth is given as February 16, 1222. In premodern times, however, Japan, like China, generally recorded dates in terms of the lunar calendar, and the date of the Daishonin's birth in fact is the sixteenth day of the second lunar month of 1222. By the lunar calendar, New Year's Day, which was regarded as the beginning of the first month and of spring, varied from year to year, but always fell somewhere between January 21 and February 19 by the Western calendar. For this reason, the sixteenth day of the second lunar month would actually correspond to a date in March or April of the Western calendar. Because the months of the lunar year are shorter than those of the solar year, it is necessary to add an extra month at certain intervals to prevent the lunar year from falling behind the solar year. Such a month is known as an intercalary month and occurred regularly about one month out of every thirty.

And finally, according to the traditional Japanese way of reckoning ages, a baby is one year old at the time of birth, and a year is added to its age with the passage of each New Year's Day. □