

PROCLAMATION OF THE DAISHONIN'S BUDDHISM — APRIL 28 Not What They Expected

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On April 28, 1253, a challenge was made to religion in Japan. This challenge has since led to a change in religious thought throughout the world.

At 12, Nichiren Daishonin, whose birth name was Zennichi-maro, was sent by his parents to Seicho-ji temple to improve his reading and writing skills. There he pondered why so many people were suffering when so many somehow had faith in Buddhism. His doubt about what the correct Buddhist philosophy was grew deeper. To find the answer, he prayed for wisdom. "From the time I was a small child," he writes, "I prayed to Bodhisattva Kokuzo, asking that I might become the wisest person in all Japan" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 4, pp. 77–78).

At 16, Nichiren was given the choice of returning to secular life or continuing his studies. He decided to join Seicho-ji, taking the name of Zesho-bo Rencho. For the next 15 years, he would study and travel, looking for answers. Texts of the sutras resided in various temples around the country, making it common practice to visit different temples for research. His travels took to him to Kamakura, the seat of the government, Enryaku-ji temple at Mount Hiei, Onjo-ji temple and various provinces in western Japan. When he returned to Seicho-ji temple in 1252, many, including his teacher, Dozen-bo, were curious as to what Nichiren had learned in his travels.

The next year, 1253, he was slated to give a lecture. The date was April 28. One can only guess what the audience expected — possibly a lecture that would confirm and illuminate what many of them had studied, or possibly a lecture giving a new perspective on the practices and customs of different temples throughout the country. And one can assume that what they got was not what they expected.

In the week leading up to his lecture, Nichiren Daishonin prepared alone in his quarters. On the morning of the 28th, he arose and headed toward a hill at Kasagamori. Alone, facing the Pacific Ocean, he chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo for the first time. Those who attended the lecture held later the same day included his mentor, Dozen-bo, most of the priests studying at the temple, and various lay believers and guests from outlying areas. Nichiren Daishonin began by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. The audience was silent. No one was sure what was happening, what was coming next.

He began to discuss the concept of *mappo*, the Latter Day of the Law, expounding on issues he had, no doubt, covered in his studies. He talked about the different forms of Buddhism that were practiced at the time and the need for one way of practice. He spoke of the need to alleviate the confusion of those seeking a correct way to practice Buddhism, defiantly pronouncing that the religions of the day were leading the country to ruin, the people to unhappiness.

Specifically, he condemned Nembutsu, Zen, Shingon and Ritsu as the causes of suffering and unrest in the country. He castigated these four very popular, well-supported sects not only for their misinterpretation of and disrespect for the sutras, but for their lack of compassion for the people. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the crystallization of the Lotus Sutra, was the answer that everyone had been seeking, he said. He further announced that he was changing his name — to Nichiren, meaning "Sun Lotus."

Living in the United States at the end of the 20th century, it may be a little difficult to

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understand the situation in which the Daishonin spoke. After all, we live in a country and time where free speech is a right. If we disagree, we may say so — to another person, to a group, at a press conference or on e-mail. While there have been and still are instances of free speech being denied, legally it is our right. Speaking our minds certainly does not equate with risking our lives, but in 13th-century Japan this was not necessarily the case. When you spoke your mind or went against the status quo, you could be labeled as a threat, as someone who needed to be silenced.

At the time of this lecture, those in government and in power worked closely with prominent priests, who were practitioners of the sects the Daishonin admonished. Nichiren Daishonin's declaration was seen not only as a threat to other sects but to those in power as well. When word spread of his lecture, anger flared. Tojo Kagenobu of Tojo Village ordered the immediate arrest of Nichiren Daishonin. Fortunately, Dozen-bo, although as shocked by the lecture as anyone, managed to provide the Daishonin with an escape.

On April 28, Nichiren Daishonin did more than chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo for the first time. At 32, he stood in front of peers and teachers and told them that the four major sects in Japan had brought nothing but harm. He stood before them and effectively said: "What you're doing is wrong. Stop it and stop it now." Though one might think that he was initially driven by emotion, his proclamation and all his future victories were grounded in reason and documentation. His declaration was not only a call of defiance, it was a call of freedom for all those who have followed.

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