

## Nichiren's Thinking on Buddha-Nature

### Introduction

Nichiren<sup>a</sup> (1222–82), like the contemporary religious leaders in the Kamakura<sup>b</sup> Period (1185–1333), e.g. Shinran<sup>c</sup> (1173–1262) and Dōgen<sup>d</sup> (1200–53), agreed with the famous sentence of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*<sup>1</sup> (Jap. *Daihatsu-nehān-kyō*<sup>e</sup>), “issai shujō shitsu u busshō<sup>f</sup> [All beings completely possess Buddha-nature]”.<sup>2</sup> Does this mean that all sentient beings will certainly realize Buddhahood? How does Nichiren interpret the term *busshō*, and what significance does it have in his religious system? These were some of the questions I examined this year in my unpublished M.A. thesis, “Issai shujō shitsu u busshō—Buddhanatur bei Nichiren, Shinran und Dōgen”.

Because of the limited space here I will only examine Nichiren's interpretation of Buddha-nature, which is less discussed than Shinran's or Dōgen's. Nichiren's thought is influencing a growing number of people: thirty-two million members in thirty-five different Nichiren schools<sup>3</sup> and in the internationally active Sōka Gakkai<sup>g</sup>, from which the political party Kōmeitō<sup>h</sup>, the second largest opposition party in Japan, arose. There are converts worldwide. But let us first take a glimpse at the history of the term Buddha-nature and at Nichiren's tradition before we go on to his own views.

### Buddha-nature in India and in the Tiantai Sect in China

Since the arising of the concept of Buddha-nature (*buddhatā* or *buddhatva*) in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism it was widely and controversially discussed in India and China, because it was identical to the question as to whether all beings, at least all human beings, could realize Buddhahood or not. Although the central goal of the Mahāyāna is to lead all beings to enlightenment, different Buddhist sūtras and schools give different answers to the question

---

<sup>1</sup> Northern version, tr. Dharmakṣema [Jap. Donmuseu], *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (hereafter abbr. T.) XII/374.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Tetsugaku jiten*, ed. Shomonaka Kunihiro, Tokyo: Heibon Shuppansha, 1971, 1977, p. 1197. There is a Japanese translation of the *Daihatsu-nehān-kyō*, Vol. II, ed. Iwano Masao, in: *Kokuyaku issai-kyō*, Tokyo: Daitō Shuppansha, 1935, pp. 120–1.

<sup>3</sup> *Japanese Religion: A Survey by the Agency for Cultural Affairs*, Tokyo, New York, San Francisco: Kodansha International Ltd., 1972, pp. 254–6.

as to whether all sentient beings possess or participate in Buddha-nature, which they regard as a kind of true state of being *buddha*, as absolute.<sup>4</sup>

In this discussion the Chinese Tiantai<sup>i</sup> School identified Buddha-nature with Suchness (*tathatā*, Jap. *shinnyō*'), which permeates all phenomena of the universe (*dharmā*), and regarded it as the cause of realizing Buddhahood. The great Tiantai philosopher Zhiyi (538–97) regarded Buddha-nature as a triple cause (*san'in-busshō*<sup>k</sup>): *shō-in*<sup>l</sup>, the real inherent cause, *ryō-in*<sup>m</sup>, wisdom as a cause, and *en-in*<sup>n</sup>, virtuous actions as a cause. According to his views, *busshō*<sup>o</sup> as a cause is inherent in all sentient beings, but wisdom and virtue are gained by religious practice.<sup>5</sup> So all non-human beings—in the realms of hell, hungry ghosts, animals, demons, and gods—and many humans too must be excluded from two parts of the triple-cause Buddha-nature, because they cannot follow (the right) religious practice.

### Nichiren's views on Buddha-nature

Nichiren was initially a Tendai monk<sup>6</sup> who wanted to restore the original Tiantai teaching—that is, stressing the importance of the *Lotus Sūtra*<sup>7</sup> as the Buddha's ultimate sermon and truth. Nichiren fully accepted Zhiyi's interpretation of Buddha-nature. He wrote in the *Hasshū-imoku-shō*<sup>r</sup> that only in the *Lotus Sūtra* could the threefold Buddha-nature (*san'in-busshō*) be found. The disclosure of *busshō* was inherent in all sentient beings but their capacity for virtue had gone in these evil days of the *mappō*<sup>s</sup> era, when the true practice and fruit (enlightenment) of the Buddha's *Dharma* were lost, and only the scriptures were left, without people being able to understand and follow them. Therefore religious practice was very important.<sup>8</sup>

The practice he preached all along in his works was to chant the phrase in homage to the *Lotus Sūtra*, “*Namu myōhō-enge-kyō*”, because the five characters of this *daimoku*<sup>u</sup> contain all of the Buddha's teachings, especially

---

<sup>4</sup> Here the word “absolute” is used to denote something which simultaneously makes the plurality and the unity of reality possible. It is not identical with any single reality itself but is realized by the connection of the single realities' being dependent on each other. According to Buddhists it is impossible to make any appropriate statement about the Absolute because it is beyond the limits of speech, beyond duality. My exposition here on Buddha-nature in general is very short because of the limited space. It will be more detailed in a forthcoming article in the *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft*, Münster.

<sup>5</sup> Mochizuki Shinkō, *Bukkyō daijiten*, Tokyo: Bukkyō Jiten Kankōsho, 1958, p. 4455c; *Hōbōgirin*, fasc. II, ed. P. Demiéville *et al.*, Tokyo: Maison Franco-Japonaise, 1930, p. 186, s.v. *busshō*; Nakamura Hajime: *Shin bukkyō jiten*, Tokyo: Seishin Shobō, 1962, 1987, p. 452.

<sup>6</sup> The Tendai School is the Japanese form of the Tiantai School and was founded by Saichō<sup>p</sup>, posth. Dengyō Daishi<sup>q</sup> (767–822).

<sup>7</sup> T. IX/262, tr. Kumārajīva.

<sup>8</sup> *Nichiren jiten*, ed. Miyazaki Eishū, Tokyo: Tōkyōdō, 1982, p. 226. On the term *mappō*, see Peter Fischer, “Studien zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des Mappō-Gedankens und zum Mappō-Tōmyō-Ki, *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens* (OAG), Bd. LXV, Hamburg, 1976, pp. 103, 109–10.

those of all human beings realizing Buddhahood, of the Buddha Śākyamuni's (Jap. Shaka'y) enlightenment since beginningless time, of *ichinen-sanzen*<sup>w</sup>,<sup>9</sup> and of *karma*. This chanting as an expression of belief in the *Lotus Sūtra* replaces the understanding of the Buddha's difficult teachings for the miserable people of the *mappō* era.<sup>10</sup> Nichiren did not explicitly state it in his main works, but the *daimoku*, the title of the *Lotus Sūtra* regarded as the essence of the whole sūtra, must also contain Buddha-nature, since in the *Hasshū-imokushō* Nichiren had written that the threefold Buddha-nature could be found in the *Lotus Sūtra*.

So Nichiren's new teaching was that to realize Buddhahood one has to chant the *daimoku* exclusively. He condemned all other sects in harsh terms for not propagating the chanting of “*namu myōhō-renge-kyō*”, and for not acknowledging universal Buddha-nature. In the *Kaimokushō*<sup>x</sup> he wrote, “They do not say at all, ‘All sentient beings have Buddha-nature.’ They do not affirm Buddha-nature in each human being.”<sup>11</sup> So it seems that he took the idea of inherent Buddha-nature in all beings for granted, although he scarcely mentioned it in his works. He silently assumed it as a fundamental truth and followed the views of the Tiantai School, to such an extent that he even affirmed Miaofo's<sup>y</sup> (Jap. Myōraku)<sup>12</sup> idea that grass, trees, pebbles, and dust particles have Buddha-nature.<sup>13</sup>

But how did the concept of universal Buddha-nature fit into Nichiren's teaching that human beings in the *mappō* era could only gain salvation and realize Buddhahood by chanting the *daimoku*? If this chanting is Nichiren's definition of virtuous actions (*en'in-busshō*), does that mean that he expected all beings to chant the *daimoku* sometime in the future? Indeed in 1261 in a letter of gratitude to Yasaburō<sup>z</sup>, who supported him in his first exile on the Izu<sup>aa</sup> Peninsula, he wrote,

---

<sup>9</sup> The term *ichinen-sanzen* denotes the mutual interpenetration of the ten suchnesses (*nyoze*), the ten worlds (*jikkai*), and the three divisions of the mundane (*seken*). This means that every single one of these contains the others, too. In every being in the human world, for example, the other worlds are also inherent, even the Buddha-world. So in every person Buddhahood is concealed (cf. Bruno Petzold, *Die Quintessenz der Tien-t'ai-Lehre*, Wiesbaden, 1982, pp. 47–51; Alicia and Daigan Matsunaga, *Foundation of Japanese Buddhism*, Vol. I, Los Angeles, Tokyo: Buddhist Books International, 1974, pp. 155–6). Nichiren explains this theory briefly in the *K(w)anjin-honzon-shō* (ed. Takagi Yutaka and Tokoro Shigemoto, in *Nichiren*, Nihon shisō taikēi 14, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1970, 1985, pp. 131–2).

<sup>10</sup> Concerning Nichiren's teaching on *daimoku*, see his treatise, *Hokke-daimoku-shō*, in: Takagi and Tokoro, *op. cit.*, pp. 112–22. The overall importance (*daimoku* is stressed in *op. cit.*, p. 157).

<sup>11</sup> *Kaimokushō*, in: Tamura Yoshiro, *Nichirensū*, Nihon no shisō 4, Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1969, p. 150. By the way, Nichiren only addressed the traditional schools here. He did not take into account Shinran and Dōgen; he probably did not know them.

<sup>12</sup> Tannen (711–82), Tiantai philosopher (Nakamura, *op. cit.*, p. 361).

<sup>13</sup> *K(w)anjin-honzon-shō*, *op. cit.*, p. 135. In 1272 he even wrote a letter on this topic, “*Sōmoku-jō-butsu-kuketsu*”, tr. in: Gaston Renondeau, *La Doctrine de Nichiren suivie de la Traduction de six de ses Ouvrages*, Publication du Musée Guimet, Bibliothèque des Études, Tome 58, Paris, 1953, pp. 281–3.

We, all sentient beings, find ourselves in the middle of the ocean of birth and death since beginningless time, but we become people practising the *Lotus Sūtra* and [so] we come to be Buddha-body (*busshin*<sup>bb</sup>), which is beginningless mind and matter (*shiki-shin*<sup>cc</sup>), fundamentally the essential nature of all phenomena (*rishō*<sup>dd</sup>), wonderful realms (*myōkyō*<sup>ee</sup>), and the indestructible diamond (*kon-gō*<sup>ff</sup>) of the Buddha's wisdom (*myōchihō*<sup>gg</sup>).<sup>14</sup>

Here Nichiren stated clearly that all sentient beings will practise the *Lotus Sūtra*, that is they will chant the *daimoku* and realize Buddhahood by this.

But in this letter, as well as in his main works, Nichiren did not give Buddha-nature as a reason for human beings' capacity to realize Buddhahood. He proved it by reminding his readers of the Buddha's promise in the second chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* to save all beings, and by the idea of *ichinen-sanzen*. He wrote, "What you call 'Buddha of *ichinen-sanzen*' is the 'becoming Buddha of the *Dharmadhātu* (*hokkai*<sup>hh</sup>)'",<sup>15</sup> and, "An ordinary human being is the Buddha, the Buddha is an ordinary human being. This is *ichinen-sanzen* and one's true becoming a Buddha (*jō-butsu*<sup>ii</sup>)."<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

We have seen that Nichiren explained all human beings' realizing Buddhahood in the future with the concepts of *ichinen-sanzen* and *daimoku*, but the theory of Buddha-nature was not at the centre of his concern. He took for granted the threefold Buddha-nature (*san'in-busshō*) of the Tiantai tradition as a fundamental truth, without reflecting upon it in his writings. He did not give any new meaning to the concept of universal Buddha-nature, as Shinran and Dōgen had done. He just stressed the importance of the *Lotus Sūtra* as the only sūtra containing *san'in-busshō*, and he defined the practice, *en'in-busshō*, definitely: in order to realize Buddhahood people must chant the title of the *Lotus Sūtra*, "*Namu myōhō-renge-kyō*"; and Nichiren was convinced that all human beings would do that in the future.

Brigitte Granier  
University of Freiburg  
Federal Republic of Germany

(List of Characters overleaf)

---

<sup>14</sup> Quotation from Nichiren's letter to Yasaburō in *Nichiren bunshū*, ed. and comm. Kabutoki Shōkō, Iwanami Bunko, Nos. 6987–90, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1968, 1972, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> *op. cit.*, *loc. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 14.

## List of Characters

a.	日蓮	aa.	妙樂
b.	鎌倉	bb.	弥三郎
c.	親鸞	cc.	伊豆
d.	道元	dd.	仏身
e.	大般涅槃經	ee.	色心
f.	一切衆生悉有仏性	ff.	理性
g.	創価学会	gg.	妙境
h.	公明党	hh.	金剛
i.	天台	ii.	妙智
j.	眞如	jj.	法界
k.	智凱	kk.	成仏
i.	三因仏性		
m.	正因仏性		
n.	了因仏性		
o.	縁因仏性		
p.	仏性		
q.	最澄		
r.	伝教大師		
s.	妙法蓮華經		
t.	八宗異目抄		
u.	末法		
v.	南無妙法蓮華經		
w.	題目		
x.	釈迦		
y.	一念三千		
z.	開目鈔		