

### Esoteric Patterns in Nichiren's Thought<sup>\*1</sup>

Although Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–82) is a major figure in Japanese Buddhism, most Western sources acknowledge little more in his thought than the harsh criticism he reserved for other forms of Buddhism and his exclusivistic devotion to the *Lotus Sūtra* [*Hokekyō* 法華經]. In constructing their identities, the modern Nichiren denominations, different as their agendas may be, have also put great emphasis on this exclusivism. This, together with the stress historians place on the innovative aspects of Kamakura Buddhism, has helped create the image of Nichiren as a personality independent of, and in antagonism to, the established religious institutions of his time, including the Tendai sect 天台宗. This paper focuses on certain aspects of Nichiren's doctrine that may illuminate his debt to the traditions of thought current in his time, and the degree to which his doctrine must be regarded as a direct response to them.

Nichiren was engaged in a process of interpretation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the text which had become the definitive sacred source of Tendai Buddhism and the foundation of the various systems created within that school. This enterprise led Nichiren to redefine the meaning of the *sūtra* and to modify the exegetical tradition he inherited, developing a system of thought which conferred absolute value on the *Lotus Sūtra* and established a religious practice entirely informed by it. It was with this "exclusivism" that he entered the religious discourse of the Kamakura period (1192–1333).

Nichiren's hermeneutical endeavor was a search for orthodoxy in both theory and praxis, a search whose directions were defined, however, as much by ontological/soteriological needs external to the tradition as by the weight of traditional exegesis. His orthodoxy, in fact, concealed an unconscious

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assimilation of other forms of Buddhism, which skewed the traditional set of meanings but which eventually became essential to the very originality of Nichiren's thought.

Thus, if we want to comprehend the constitutive elements of his uniqueness, we must first deconstruct the hermeneutical operation through which Nichiren defined his orthodoxy. The paradigm of interpretation as a *modus creandi*, that is, as the production of new meaning through an interaction between the mandate of a tradition and the historicity of the interpreter, will be heuristically valuable in this regard. Interpretation entails not only the literal understanding of a text, the *Lotus Sūtra* in this case, but also the more general process of (re)signification of the reality informed by the text. The interpreter utilizes the existent terminology originating from the textual tradition, but also a set of ideas belonging to his historical dimension and not necessarily coinciding with that tradition. The canonical source (i.e., the *sūtra* plus the exegetical works of Chinese Tiantai) offered Nichiren a constant point of reference. His perception of the possibilities presented by this source was filtered, however, through issues that had been raised in the development of Japanese Buddhism. Since early Chinese Tiantai, "distorted" during its temporal and spatial journey to Japan of the Kamakura period, was ultimately too distant to return to, Nichiren had to "reinvent" a tradition that was meaningful in his historical moment. Our analysis must therefore proceed from an essential first question: what can be defined as "tradition" for Nichiren? The modern exegetes of Nichiren's doctrine have emphasized, in various forms, Nichiren's claim to the restoration of an orthodox Tendai [*junsei hokke* 純粹法華], that is, a Buddhism centered on the *Lotus Sūtra* going back to the Chinese Tiantai of Zhiyi 智顛 (538–97) and Zhanran 湛然 (711–82) and to the early Japanese Tendai of Saichō 最澄 (767–822). Supposedly, Nichiren pursued a Buddhism free of the esoteric elements which, in his view, had "corrupted" the Tendai established on Mt. Hiei from the middle Heian period onwards. This perspective asserts that, in order to maintain the superiority of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Nichiren relentlessly criticized the esoteric schools, both Shingon (Tōmitsu 東密) and Tendai (Taimitsu 台密), along with other forms of Buddhism. In the official exegesis, therefore, Nichiren's relation with *mikkyō* 密教 (esoteric Buddhism) is defined exclusively in terms of opposition and negation. When we look at the shape that Nichiren's Buddhism eventually took, however, it is hardly to be denied that some of its most characteristic and fundamental elements derive from a patently esoteric matrix. Conspicuous examples are the object of worship, which consists of a *maṇḍala*, the recitation of the title of the *sūtra* (*daimoku* 題目), which bears a resemblance to an esoteric *mantra*, and a certain understanding of the nature of the Buddha (*buddharon*) and of the way in which practitioners attain the highest enlightenment (*sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成佛). A doctrine that is supposed to be "orthodox" Lotus thought is thus expressed in unequivocally esoteric terms. Nichiren formulates alternative hermeneutical models which, while hovering within a traditional Tendai structure and explicitly negating

the value of esoteric teachings, do not succeed in escaping the linguistic and conceptual categories prevalent in his milieu.

The question of what it is that Nichiren legitimizes as his own tradition is more complex than first appears in other respects as well. The “orthodox” line of transmission of the Lotus teachings that he drew from Zhiyi to himself, with only Zhanran and Saichō as intermediaries, does not embody a doctrine that remained unchanged through the centuries. We wonder to what extent Nichiren was aware of the shift in emphasis that concepts and practices underwent in the process of transmission. In Zhiyi’s work, for instance, we find very little trace of the theory of the “exclusivistic superiority” of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *chōhakkō* 超八教 on which Zhanran was to elaborate<sup>1</sup> and which Nichiren would later take for granted as an enduring element of Tendai hermeneutics. On the other hand, the role that Nichiren attributes to Saichō in the maintenance of the superiority of the *Lotus Sūtra* cannot be supported historically, as the system he instituted on Mt. Hiei gave the same place to Lotus teachings and esoteric teachings (*shikangō* 止觀業 and *shanagō* 遮那業).<sup>2</sup> Nichiren chose to ignore Saichō’s interest in *mikkyō* and directed his criticism only against Saichō’s disciples, Ennin 圓仁 (794–864) and Enchin 圓珍 (814–91), and against Annen 安遠 (841–903?), that is, against the thinkers who structured the Tendai form of *mikkyō*. Modern scholarship within the Nichiren denomination distinguishes three phases in Nichiren’s attitude towards *mikkyō*: First, criticism of Kukai and the Shingon school; then, criticism of the Chinese patriarchs of esotericism; and, finally, criticism of Taimitsu.<sup>3</sup> In my opinion, however, the focus of Nichiren’s antagonism was all along the esotericism on Mt. Hiei, and his references to other *mikkyō* interpretations were only instrumental to this. Not only did he hardly distinguish between the two different traditions that we call Tomitsu and Taimitsu today, but an accurate reading of his works suggests that his understanding of *mikkyō* remains within the framework of Taimitsu categories. In the final analysis, we are struck by the realization that, in fact, his criticism did not deny any substantial aspect of esotericism per se, but was directed only against the subordinate position assigned to the *Lotus Sūtra*. It was, so to speak, a problem of taxonomy.

One effective approach to recovering the dynamics of Nichiren’s thought focuses on the principles he uses to arrange his *kyōhan* 教判, the classification

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<sup>1</sup> Zhanran’s classification of the *Lotus Sūtra* as being in a category of its own, above all the other teachings (*chōhakkō*), creates an absolute superiority of the *sūtra*. This evaluation seems to me to underlie most of Nichiren’s arguments.

<sup>2</sup> Nichiren’s appreciation of Saichō seems limited to Saichō’s last works, like the *Ebyōshū*, in which he criticized other schools of Buddhism in an attempt to defend the school he had just founded.

<sup>3</sup> Cf., for instance, the relevant entries of the *Nichiren iburt jiten rekishihen* [Dictionary of Nichiren’s Writings: Historical Section], compiled by the Nichiren kyōgaku kenkyūjo, Risshō University, Minobu: 1985.

of doctrines and *sūtras* traditionally used in Buddhism as an interpretative scheme. This approach has never been fully utilized in Nichiren scholarship, probably because of the stress on the innovative aspects of Nichiren Buddhism. It is, in fact, a *communis opinio* that the lack of the traditional *kyōhan* as a model of interpretation is a characteristic of Kamakura Buddhism, where the importance of tradition (in the sense of a corpus of scripture) is considered to have been replaced by the role of the teacher. Yet Nichiren appears to have given a fundamental hermeneutical function to *kyōhan*. To begin with, the first of the five principles he devised to establish the validity of a *sūtra* (*gogihan* 五義判), is *kyō* 教 (teaching) and *kyō* must be understood not simply as the teachings of the *Lotus Sūtra* but as the *kyōhan* of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Nichiren's need to establish the correct doctrine (the implied purpose of any *kyōhan*), takes the form of an insistence on the superiority of a single *sūtra*. In this way, he becomes a perpetuator of the traditional forms of Buddhism, all of which put great emphasis on the hierarchical arrangement of teachings.

Nichiren had to confront two different types of *kyōhan*. In the Tendai model of five periods, based on a supposedly chronological arrangement culminating in the *Lotus Sūtra* (the final doctrine expounded), all teachings are regarded as having been preached by the historical Buddha according to the capacities of his listeners (*gojihakkyō* 五時八教).<sup>4</sup> In the Shingon classification, on the other hand, the esoteric/exoteric polarity is the relevant interpretative principle, the esoteric teachings being the ultimate truth because they were preached by the absolute/universal Buddha, Dainichi nyorai, and the exoteric teachings regarded as inferior because they were preached by his temporal manifestation, Śākyamuni (*kenmitsu shōretsu* 顯密勝劣).<sup>5</sup> The ordering principle of these two *kyōhan* is slightly different: it is the superiority of the Buddha in Shingon and the superiority of the doctrine in Tendai. Between these two fundamental patterns we must place the classification systems of the Taimitsu thinkers Ennin, Enchin and Annen. They constructed, in various ways, a progressive identification of the *Lotus Sūtra* with the esoteric *sūtras*, namely the *Mahāvairocana sūtra*, *Vajraśekhara sūtra* and the *Susiddhikara sūtra*, which resulted in placing the *Lotus Sūtra* in a slightly inferior position.<sup>6</sup> The pattern used by those thinkers is known—with a formula probably coined by Nichiren—as *ridō jishō* 理同事勝, i.e. “The doctrinal assumptions [that the Lotus and the esoteric *sūtras*] are the same but the practice [of esoteric Buddhism] is superior.” Here a famous argument of Shingon hermeneutics is reiterated,<sup>7</sup> and the performance of the three “mysteries”, *mudrā*, *mantra* and *maṇḍala*, through which the practitioner identifies himself with the universal

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the tenth chapter of Zhiyi's *Fahua xuanyi*, and Chegwan's *Ch'ōnt'ae sagyo ūi* 天台四教義.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Kukai's *Benkenmitsu nikyōron* and *Jūjūshinron*.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. for instance, Ennin's *Soshitsujikyōshō*, his *Sasagimon* and Annen's *Kyōjigi*.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the statement of the *Puti xin lun* that only with the practice of Shingon the attainment of the buddhahood with this very body (*sokushinjōbutsu*) is possible.

reality (*sanmitsu yuga* 三密瑜伽), is maintained as the most unfailing way to the perfect enlightenment.

The classification of *sūtras* we usually find in Nichiren places the three esoteric *sūtras* used in Taimitsu at the bottom and the *Lotus Sūtra* at the top. The latter is divided into two parts, *shakumon* 跡門 and *honmon* 本門, with the highest position assigned to the *honmon* section, centered on the chapter in which the “infinite”, not merely historical, existence of Śākyamuni as a Buddha (*kuonjitsujō* 久遠實成) is asserted.<sup>8</sup>

*I. Primacy of the Honmon:* Although the division in two is one of the oldest patterns of *Lotus Sūtra* exegesis, the priority of the *honmon* cannot be ascertained in Zhiyi who, if anything, gave precedence to the *shakumon* section, in which the notion of the true aspect of reality (*jissōron* 實相論) so essential to his system appears. The *honmon* was not primary for Saichō either.<sup>9</sup> It became a central focus of attention only with the Taimitsu attempt to find in the *Lotus Sūtra* elements that would make it function in an esoteric perspective. The defining element of the *honmon* is, in fact, a Buddha very similar to the universal-absolute Buddha (*hosshin* 法身) depicted in the esoteric *sūtras*. Nichiren’s emphasis on the superiority of one section of the *sūtra* reveals that a concern with the foundation of esoteric hermeneutics (i.e., the nature of the Buddha who preached the perfect teaching) is maintained in his system, and this contributes to a factual disappearance of the original Tendai scheme in five periods and the rise of other interpretative patterns. Nichiren no doubt had more than a fleeting acquaintance with the theory of the identity of Śākyamuni and Mahāvairocana, which had been strongly asserted in Taimitsu since Saichō, and had assimilated Ennin’s theory of a single Buddha encompassing all other possible Buddhas as his manifestations (*issaibutsu ichibutsu* 一切佛一佛). It is only in this context that Nichiren’s argument that the three Buddha-bodies are all infinite (*sanshin mushimushū* 三身無始無終) or that all the buddhas are emanations (*funjin* 分身) of Śākyamuni can be explained.

*II. Ji and Ri:* In Nichiren’s understanding, the “eternal” attainment of buddhahood by Śākyamuni Buddha of the *honmon* (*kuonjitsujō*) is *ji* 事, or the actualization of the ultimate truth (*ji ichinen sanzen* 事一念三千). By contrast, he defines the doctrine expounded in the first part of the *sūtra*, the potential for buddhahood of *śrvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas* (*nijōsabutsu* 二乘作佛) as the ultimate truth in principle (*ri ichinensanzen* 理—念三千).<sup>10</sup> It is the “concrete actualization” in the final analysis that establishes the superiority of the *honmon*.

Even if we avoid dwelling on the many implications of this idea, we cannot help noticing how curious this terminology sounds if taken as tradi-

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. for instance, *Shingon shichijū shōretsu* and *Hokke shingon shōretsuji*.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Asai Endō, *Jōko nihon tendai honmon shiso*, Kyoto: 1973, 83–86.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. in particular *Toki nyūdono gohenji Kanjin honzonshō*, *Shijō kingodono gohenji* and *Ōta Saemonjō gohenji*

tional Tendai exegesis. The concept of *ri* and *ji* as complementary exists in Zhiyi, but there we never find *ji* as connoting the highest truth. In Zhiyi the priority is placed on *ri*, which is defined as the fundamental aspect of reality coming before *ji*, its phenomenal aspect, even though it is not regarded as separable from it.<sup>11</sup> In Taimitsu, however, *ji* was granted the role of a critical element in the definition of the highest truth (remember the *ridōjishō* pattern), reflecting the importance in *mikkyō* of “practice”, that is, the experiential knowledge of the ultimate reality in the form of *mudrā*, *mantra* and *maṇḍala*. In Taimitsu we already find, in fact, a classification of the *honmon* section as *ji*. The inversion of the Tiantai categories that Nichiren operates would probably have been impossible without the shift of models consummated in Taimitsu. Proceeding from this, however, Nichiren moved on to elaborate his own doctrine. The “actualization of the ultimate truth (*ji ichinen sanzen*)” became for him the essence of the *Lotus Sūtra*, also encompassing the truth expressed in the *shakumon* section; it is this ‘actualizing’ aspect of the phenomenal world which constitutes the only eternal ground of any reality. Nichiren clearly asserts that, without the ‘eternal enlightenment of Śākyamuni’ described in the *honmon* (*kuonjitsujō*), the possibility of the perfect attainment of buddhahood by man represented in the *shakumon* section (*nijōsabutsu*) is impracticable.<sup>12</sup>

*III. Esoteric forms:* The superiority of *ji* is also the ground on which Nichiren postulates a difference between his own and earlier Tendai teachings. “Orthodox” Tendai is doomed to a partial understanding of the truth of the *Lotus Sūtra* because it only expounds the “principle (*ri*)” without performing the “actual practice (*jigyō* 修行)” through which the essence of the *Lotus Sūtra* is manifested. (Here we recognize a pattern that Taimitsu had already applied to distinguish between the Lotus and the esoteric *sūtras*). Taimitsu had argued that it is possible only with *mantras* and *maṇḍalas* to attain a visible, immediate kind of enlightenment; Nichiren establishes a *mantra* and a *maṇḍala* which have the *Lotus Sūtra* and its world as content. The practice which allows the *hokyekyō no gyōja* 法華經の行子, or practitioner of the *Lotus Sūtra*, achieve identification with the *dharmadhātu* represented by Śākyamuni consists of uttering the title of the *Lotus Sūtra* in front of a *honzon* 本尊 (“true object of worship”) constructed as a *maṇḍala*.<sup>13</sup> The linguistic and ontological implications of this leave little doubt about the force of the esoteric model. Nichiren did not go back to the Tendai kind of meditative practice (*sizhong sanmei* 四種三昧) already available as a form of experiential understanding of ultimate reality, but rather devised a new praxis more suitable to a cultural milieu under the sway of esotericism.

What Nichiren recognized as the orthodoxy he had to restore was a Tendai

<sup>11</sup> Cf. for instance, the explanation of the six *rokuju honjaku* 六重本跡 in *Fahua xuanyi* ch. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. for example, *Kanjin honzonshō*

<sup>13</sup> The nature of this report does not leave us space to discuss the important analogies with the Taimitsu lotus *maṇḍala*.

tradition shorn of the esoteric developments that had occurred within it. Nichiren exalted only this ideal legacy, which I have pointed out as historically nonexistent, as the tradition. Opposing it was the Tendai tradition with which Nichiren actually grew up, a teaching highly impregnated with *mikkyō*. The Lotus orthodoxy representing Nichiren's definitive thought was shaped through a process of synthesis in which the esoteric principles still played a very strong role, although differing from the role they had played in Heian-period Tendai (*jōkotendai* 上古天台). One is tempted to conclude that Nichiren, in fact, transposed or translated into the language of the *Lotus Sūtra* some basic *mikkyō* issues, and that he read a large portion of Zhiyi's interpretation with the esoteric formulations of Japanese Tendai in mind; this assimilation, in turn, eventually drove Nichiren away from Zhiyi's Tiantai and led him to establish his own orthodoxy. Viewed as the result of such a complex hermeneutical operation, Nichiren's Lotus exclusivism appears less idiosyncratic and arbitrary and reveals itself not so much as a dogmatic position but as part of a dialogue within Japanese Buddhism, disclosing one of the possibilities implicit in its dynamics.

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