THE SIN OF “SLANDERING THE TRUE DHARMA”
IN NICHIREN’S THOUGHT

Jacqueline I. Stone

In considering the category of “sin” in comparative perspective, certain acts, such as murder and theft, appear with some local variation to be proscribed across traditions. Other offenses, while perhaps not deemed such by the researcher’s own culture, nonetheless fall into recognizable categories of moral and ritual transgression, such as failures of filial piety or violations of purity taboos. Some acts characterized as wrongdoing, however, are so specific to a particular historical or cognitive context as to require an active exercise of imagination on the scholar’s part to reconstruct the hermeneutical framework within which they have been abhorred and condemned. Such is the case with the medieval Japanese Buddhist figure Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1282) and his fierce opposition to the sin of “slandering the True Dharma” (ひひょうしょうぼう, or simply ひょう 法). Originally trained in the Tendai school 天台宗 of Buddhism and the initiator of the Nichiren sect that came to bear his name, Nichiren taught a doctrine of exclusive devotion to the Lotus Sūtra and promoted the practice of chanting the sūtra’s daimoku 頌 or title in the formula Namu-myōhō-renge-kyō 南無妙法蓮華経, which, he said, contained the entirety of all Buddhist truth within itself and enabled the direct realization of Buddhahood. The Lotus Sūtra was widely revered in Nichiren’s day as the Buddha’s ultimate teaching, and in his eyes, it was the only teaching that could lead all persons to liberation now in the degenerate Final Dharma age (まぼ末法). Based on this conviction, Nichiren harshly criticized other forms of Buddhist practice as no longer soteriologically efficacious. And because, he argued, only faith in the Lotus Sūtra leads to Buddhahood, to reject the Lotus in favor of other, “inferior” teachings was in effect to slander the True Dharma and led inexorably to rebirth in the Avici Hell. To the evil of “slandering the Dharma” he attributed all the calamities facing Japan in his day: famine, epidemics, earthquakes, outbreaks of civil unrest, and the threat of invasion by the Mongols. Nichiren is by no means the only Buddhist teacher to have leveled charges of “Dharma slander” against his rivals. But he is unusual in the extent to which he built this idea into the structure of his message,
making it the basis of his lifelong preaching career. A perceived need to
counter slander of the Dharma runs throughout his corpus, from his earli-
est known essay, written at age twenty, to his very last writings some forty
years later. It prompted his denunciations of prominent religious leaders
and of government officials for supporting them, which in turn brought
down on him the wrath of the authorities; he was repeatedly attacked,
twice arrested and sent into exile, and once very nearly executed. Oppos-
ing slander of the Dharma was for Nichiren a form of Buddhist practice
in its own right and a debt owed to the Buddha, to be discharged even at
the cost of his life. Yet, despite its formative role in his doctrine, this con-
cept has rarely been explored in studies of Nichiren, even among Nichiren
sectarian scholars.\(^1\) Neglect of “Dharma slander” as a category integral to
his thought may owe to its lack of resonance, or more properly, outright
conflict with modernist religious sensibilities as well as a desire to defuse
widespread perceptions of Nichiren as “intolerant.” This essay attempts
to clarify Nichiren’s idea of Dharma slander as the worst imaginable of
all sins. Rather than tracing his development of this concept in a strictly
chronological way, I will address recurring themes in his treatment of it.

“Nenbutsu Leads to the Avīci Hell”

The term “slander of the Dharma” did not originate with Nichiren but
appears in Buddhist canonical sources. In the broadest sense, it means
disparaging any of the three jewels—the Buddha, his teaching, or his
order. But the term occurs most frequently in the Mahāyāna sūtras, where
it often carries the specific meaning of speaking ill of the Great Vehicle
scriptures and was evidently intended to deflect criticism from the Bud-
dhist mainstream that the Mahāyāna was not the Buddha’s teaching.\(^2\) A
warning against the horrific karmic retribution awaiting those guilty of
this offense occurs, for example, in the verse section of the “Parable” chap-
ter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which represents the Buddha as saying:

\(^1\) The most detailed study of this topic to date is Watanabe Hōyō, “Nichiren Shōnin no shūkyō ni okeru ‘hōbō’ no igi.”
\(^2\) BD 5:4327c–28c. Sanskrit terms for ‘slander of the True Dharma’ include saddharma-
pratikṣepa, saddharma-pratikṣipta, saddharmāpavādaka, saddharma-pratikṣepāvaraṇa-kṛta,
dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?8a.xml+id(‘b8ab9-8b17-6b63-6cd5’)).