NICHIRIN’S THREE SECRETS

by

PAUL O. INGRAM

Tacoma, Washington U. S. A.

One of the most interesting, and yet little understood figures in the history of Japanese Buddhism is Nichiren (1222-1282), the founder of a unique Buddhist tradition which bears his name (Nichiren Shū). Perhaps the most charismatic personality in the history of Japanese religions, he has been labeled everything from “prophet” 1) and “true Buddha” 2) to “personal and tribal egotist” 3). However, since his teachings and personality have in our century spawned the largest, most powerfully influential, and dynamic religious mass movement in contemporary Japanese history, the Value Creation Society of the Orthodox School of Nichiren Buddhism (nichiren shōshū sōka gakkai), it would appear that Nichiren’s life and thought should be reassessed. Consequently, the purpose of this study is to join with interested scholars in this enterprise by focusing attention upon Nichiren’s abridgment and simplification of traditional Buddhist doctrine and practice in terms of his “Three Great Secret Laws” (saildai hihō).

The Context of Nichiren’s Teachings

Even though it is true for all religious teachers, and especially

1) Cf. Masaharu Anesaki, Nichiren, the Buddhist Prophet (Gloucester, Massachusetts : Peter Smith, 1916), pp. 3-11.
3) Perhaps Edward Conze’s evaluation of Nichiren is typical of those which are most negative: “Nichiren suffered from self-assertiveness and bad temper, and he manifested a degree of personal and tribal egoism which disqualify him as a Buddhist teacher”. Buddhism, Its Essence and Development (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), p. 206. James B. Pratt was a little less negative in his comment that, “In positive philosophical insight, Nichiren had little to contribute”. The Pilgrimage of Buddhism (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928), p. 646.
Nichiren, that their lives and what they taught cannot be considered separately, we shall not attempt a biography of Nichiren here. This has already been done, and in fact, more is probably known about Nichiren's biography than any other pre-modern Japanese Buddhist teacher 4). We shall, however, make references to his life experiences as these are involved in the development of his Three Great Secret Laws. In this regard, three important facts must be kept in mind from the beginning.

First, the time in which Nichiren lived and taught (that era of the Kamakura Period known as the Hōjō Regency, 1210-1333) was a time of tremendous social, political, economic, moral, military, and religious upheaval. In his Risshō Ankoku Ron (Discourse on the Establishment of the True Teachings for the Security of the Country), written and presented to the Hōjō government on August 24, 1260, Nichiren described the conditions of the times as follows:

We have seen many signs in heaven and earth; famine, plague, and the whole country filled with misery. Horses and cows are dying on the roads, and so are men, and there is no one to bury them. Half of the population has been stricken, and there is no household that has escaped. Therefore, many minds are turning towards religious teachings. Some say, “A sharp sword is the name of Amida”, and turn in prayer to the Lord of the Western Land. Others take up magical formulas and charms as protection against disease which belong to the Lord of the Eastern Quarter... Others, again in accordance with the secret teachings of Shingon, use many sprinklings of water from the five vases. Then again, some enter into ecstatic meditation and with a calm mind meditate upon the truth free from all care. Some write the names of the seven gods of luck on pieces of paper and place them on the door posts of their houses, while others do the same with images of the Five Great Powerful Ones and the various (Shinto) deities of heaven and earth... But let men do as they will, famine and plague rage; there are beggers everywhere, and unburied corpses line the roads 5).

4) The following works are among the most important: Anesaki Masaharu, Hokke-kyō gyōja Nichiren [Nichiren, the Practitioner of the Lotus Sutra] (Tōkyō: 1933); Masutani Fumio, Shinran, Dōgen, Nichiren (Tōkyō: 1956); Yamakawa Chiō, Hokke shisō shijō no Nichiren Shōnin [Saint Nichiren in the History of Lotus Ideologies] (Tōkyō: 1936); Anesaki, Nichiren, the Buddhist Prophet; and George B. Sansom, “Nichiren”, in Sir Charles Eliot, Japanese Buddhism (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1934), pp. 416-431.

5) Nichiren Shōnin Zenshū [The Complete Works of Nichiren Shōnin], 3 vols. (Tōkyō: Nichiren Shū Zensho Shuppansō, 1911), pp. 1-2, hereafter abbreviated NSZ. All translations of Nichiren's works cited in this essay are my own, unless otherwise indicated.