

The Early Years of Nichiren

February 13, 2011

This morning we held a combined service for the Great Death of Sakyamuni Buddha who passed away on February 15, some 2,500 years ago in India and also the Birthday Celebration for Nichiren Shonin who was born on February 16, 1222. Our founder was born one day after Buddha's death although there are many hundreds of years differences. Nichiren is the one who practiced Buddha Sakyamuni's most important teachings named the Lotus Sutra.

Many Buddhists do not like to call Nichiren as a saint because it sounds like Catholic; however, I prefer to call him a saint. The reason is that Catholic used the term as a person who saved many people by healing sickness and predicted future events. Nichiren Shonin healed Lord Ito when he was exiled to Izu Peninsula, he extended his mother's life for another four years when she was about to die, and he also described special amulets for healing. Saint Nichiren predicted Civil War in Japan and foreign invasion in Rissho Ankoku Ron. The prediction was the result of reading and mastering all Buddhist scriptures at Kamakura, Kyoto, Mt. Hiei and Jisso-ji Temple in Shizuoka, Japan.

Today, I would like to talk about the early years of Saint Nichiren. He was born in the small fishing village of Kominato on the east coast of Japan. Kominato was a remote village whose people suffered the hardships common to the simple and poor. Indeed, Nichiren's parents, Shigetada Jiro Nukina and his wife, Umegiku, were considered to be very lowly since Shigetada made his living by fishing. Those whose jobs required the taking life were called *sendara*, the lowest social class in Japan at that time. The simplicity of his home village and the low class of his parents would later strongly influence Nichiren's views on society and human sufferings.

Traditional stories tell us that Umegiku had a dream that the sun riding atop of lotus blossom descended into her body when Nichiren was conceived. When the child was born, legend also tells us that a clear spring appeared in his parents' home garden and lotus flowers blossomed in the winter water of the village. His parents named their son, Zennichi-marō, which means "The righteous boy."

His father sent his bright son to Seichoji, the local Buddhist temple at Mount Kiyosumi, to receive education when he was eleven. This was rare for a child of the lower class, but his quick and questioning mind attracted the attention of his master, Dozen-bo. In fact, such attention was so rare for the child of a fisherman that some scholars think that perhaps Shigetada had been a samurai, but he hid himself as a fisherman because enemy warriors were looking for him. In either case, Zennichi-marō was fortunate to receive an education beginning at an early age at the temple.

After four years of diligent study, Zennichi-marō was ordained as a Buddhist priest and given his religious name, Rencho. During his training, Rencho had begun to wonder why there were ten different sects of Buddhism that all claimed to possess the true teaching of the Buddha when the Buddha had only taught one school of Buddhism. Determined to solve this mystery and to uncover the Buddha's true teaching, Rencho decided to study with great concentration to find the answer.

After a year of diligent study at the Kiyosumi Temple, Rencho found that he was no closer to his answer. Frustrated and confused, he went to the shrine of Bodhisattva Kokuzo at Seichoji and prayed to become the wisest man in Japan. After 21 days of fasting and profound meditation, Rencho had a vision that the bodhisattva had granted him a "Precious Jewel of Wisdom" that would enable him to discover the true teachings of Sakyamuni Buddha.

Realizing that he had exhausted the resources of Seichoji, Rencho requested permission to further his studies at other temples. Dozen-bo knew that Rencho's potentiality required more than the temple could give him, so the old master gave the young priest permission to take his studies elsewhere.

After fourteen years of studies at Kamakura, Kyoto, Mt. Hiei, Mt. Koya, and Nara, he returned to his home temple, Kiyosumi. There he chanted "NAMU MYOHO RENGE KYO" for the first time and revealed the teaching of the Lotus Sutra to the congregation who waited for the brilliant priest of the fishing village, Kominato.

Today I would like to show you a DVD of Mt. Minobu, where Saint Nichiren spend his last eight years and educated his disciples and followers. Here he wrote important documents and letters which survive today. Many of these letters explain the Lotus Sutra detail.