

Buddha Sakyamuni's Nirvana / Nichiren Daishonin's Birth

Twenty five hundred years ago, in northern India, there was a great master preaching on the existence of suffering, the causes of suffering, the realm free of suffering and the way to attain that realm. This person was Buddha Sakyamuni. Over his 40 years of teaching, many expedients and sutras were extolled to the followers around him. Towards later in life, knowing that death would be approaching, he began to reveal the ultimate truth, which was contained in the Lotus Sutra. As he sensed death was near he summoned his most faithful disciples to journey together. At a stop, Sakyamuni ate something that made him violently ill. Knowing time was short, he ventured, however painful to the town of Kushinagara. This was the place where Sakyamuni had decided to pass away. Though disciples were filled with sorrow, Sakyamuni calmly assured them to continue to follow the path of the dharma and spread this teaching to others. On February 15th, Buddha Sakyamuni quietly passed into parinirvana, the final extinction of birth and death.

Seventeen hundred years later, in a quiet town in eastern Japan named Kominato, a boy was born, Zennichi-marō on February 16, 1222. His parents were poor as his father was a simple fisherman. This young boy though was smart and a quick learner. Most poor families were not able to send their children to school for education. Fortunately, Zennichi-marō showed promise and was sent to the local temple for education at the age of 11. After four years of devout study, Zennichi-marō became an ordained priest, changing his name to Rencho.

Curious, Rencho began studying all sects of Buddhism in Japan. The question lingered in his mind, “why were there 10 different Buddhist sects, when Buddha

Sakyamuni only preached one?” His travels took him to Kamakura, a town 31 miles southwest of current Tokyo. This was the capital for the military government. During this period, the government and the Buddhist sects worked together. The people all looked to the government to solve their problems included answers to natural disasters or to stop disasters by Buddhist priests performing special rituals. After several years of study, Rencho needed more in depth study. Kamakura was not enough. In Kyoto, the Imperial capital, there was a center for Buddhist studies at Mt. Hiei. All the schools discussed and debated over scripture and ideology. This is where Rencho was able to strengthen his resolve that all of these schools were wrong and that the Lotus Sutra was the one and only sutra that should be taught.

Upon returning home, Rencho, meditated for a week before he walked up Mt. Kiyosumi on the morning of April 28, 1253 to face the rising sun over the Pacific Ocean and chanted “Namu Myo Ho Ren Ge Kyo” for the first time. Now Rencho was determined to awaken the people to the truth, which is the Lotus Sutra; changed his name to Nichiren Daishonin, or Sun Lotus. The sun represents the illumination over darkness or illusions where the lotus flower represents the purity or the teaching since this flower can grow from muddy waters. On a quick side note, it is customary for us Nichiren Shu believers to face the rising sun and chant the Odaimoku. Many mountain retreats, notable Shichimen-san, we all wake up early, head to a spot where we can see Mt. Fuji and chant the odaimoku as the sun rises. This is very powerful and strengthens the faith. We do not have to be on mountain retreat to do this. There are spots around town high enough to see over the valley and watch the sun rise.

Nichiren Daishonin was not well liked. His teachings were considered blasphemous. The current prevailing Buddhist sect was the Pure Land. Being told that paying homage to Amida Buddha was not only wrong but was the reason the country was in strife, had disasters, famine and drought. The government does not take kindly to criticism especially when it affects their power. This was the time when Nichiren Daishonin wrote *Rissho Anoku Ron*, Treatise on Spreading Peace throughout the Country by Establishing the True Dharma, one of his most famous work and considered a national treasure in Japan today.

What to do with trouble makers? The government was now paying attention to this perceived heretic as well as many other Pure Land priests. The first persecution happened on August 27, 1260 in Matsubagayatsu. A mob descended in the middle of the night and torched Nichiren Daishonin's home. Legend has it that a white monkey appeared and awoke Nichiren Daishonin before the mob arrived. He retreated to the outlying provinces to rest, regroup and teach, away from the prying eyes of the government. When the dust settled, he returned to Kamakura to again spread his teaching.

The government decided to exile him to a small island, Ito near the Izu Peninsula. The only way to reach this area was by boat. The guards being lazy or with animosity, left Nichiren Daishonin on a small patch of land that was quickly being overtaken by the rising tide. A fisherman, seeing this, rescued Nichiren Daishonin and provided shelter. At this time, the lord of the area was extremely sick. None of the other sects with their special rituals were able to cure this lord. Out of desperation, the followers reached out to Nichiren Daishonin for help. Being compassionate, Nichiren Daishonin recited passages from the Lotus Sutra and instructed the followers in how to cure the sickness. Several

days later, the lord recovered and out of gratitude, gave Nichiren Daishonin a statue of Buddha Sakyamuni which he carried with him everywhere. After a couple of years, Nichiren Daishonin was pardoned, possible with the help from the lord, returned to Kamakura to continue preaching.

The next persecution was serious. Nichiren Daishonin could not return home after he started to proselytize. The local lord, Tojo, was a firm believer in Pure Land sect and would do bodily harm to Nichiren Daishonin if he stepped on his land. Because of this, he did not return after hearing of his father's death, but now hearing that his mother was gravely ill, returned home at the risk of execution. When all was thought lost, Nichiren Daishonin read passages from the Lotus Sutra and his gravely ill mother recovered and was able to live another four years. As Nichiren Daishonin was on his way to meet a devout neighbor Lord Kudo, he was attacked. Couple of his disciples was killed as well as Lord Kudo who came to the rescue of Nichiren Daishonin. Nichiren Daishonin too was not immune to injury. Lord Tojo was about to behead Nichiren Daishonin, but at the last moment, he scared the horse with his ozuju, which threw off the sword's trajectory but still cutting his head and Lord Tojo was thrown off his horse. This incident known as Komatsubara greatly affected Nichiren Daishonin. One, the Pure Land followers were willing to kill to suppress his message and two, that the teachings of the Lotus Sutra was becoming true. He lived it with his body through persecution. (read ch. 13)

In 1268, Japan was in turmoil. Nichiren Daishonin returned to Kamakura upon hearing that the Mongols sent an emissary demanding tribute or be invaded. Rissho Ankoku Ron, written many years before was coming true. Through the failure of practicing the one true dharma, all the protective deities of Japan left, leaving only

invasion from a foreign land. The government still would not listen. So they decided to banish Nichiren Daishonin to Sado Island, but the night before a high government official, Yoritsuna took it upon himself to execute Nichiren Daishonin. He was paraded down the street towards the beach, Tatsunokuchi.

On his way, he asked to stop in front of the shrine to Hachiman, the Buddhist patron deity for Japan. The crowd thought he was going to repent and ask for forgiveness, but instead Nichiren Daishonin admonished Hachiman, saying how the deities could not protect he who is spreading the Lotus Sutra. They are the ones who promised to Buddha Sakyamuni that any follower of Lotus Sutra would be protected. Back on his horse, Nichiren Daishonin continued down to the execution grounds. Just as the sword was about to strike his neck, Nichiren Daishonin chanted Odaimoku when a flash of bright light shot across the sky, frightening everyone, leading the executioner to drop and shatter his sword. Soon after the military leaders instilled that Nichiren Daishonin not be harmed and sent to Sado Island.

At Sado Island, Nichiren Daishonin was able to put down his doctrine which focused on devotion. Kaimoku-sho and Kanjin Honzon-sho was written at this time. Once his doctrinal work was laid out, he created the Gohonzon as you can see behind me. This represents the universe with the odaimoku at its center. The names written include everyone, from all realms of the universe. This symbolizes that we all have the seed of Buddha nature. After three years he was pardoned as the situation with the Mongols heated up.

Upon returning to Kamakura, the government asked Nichiren Daishonin again, how to stop this invasion and again reiterated the writings from Rissho Ankoku Ron, the

government must banish all other Buddhist beliefs and only recite the Lotus Sutra. The government could not do this. By doing so would admit that they were wrong and lose faith from the people. So as an old Chinese proverb stated, a sage warning his lord three times in the error of his ways and three times the advice not heeded should retreat to the mountains. So that is what Nichiren Daishonin did and went to Mt. Minobu.

As for the invasion the Mongols were not successful since their fleet was destroyed by a typhoon, commonly referred to now as the kamikaze, or divine wind. Twice the Mongol invasion was thwarted by the typhoon. Of course the priests in government took credit for this “divine wind” brought on by official rituals. The thing is, typhoons have always hit Japan around this time. Kublai Khan just did not know that and foolishly attacked twice at the same period of the year.

From this resolve, the government bolstered in the belief their teaching saved Japan, began persecuting, exiling and executing Nichiren Daishonin’s followers. This saddened Nichiren Daishonin but also realized that his followers were now true parishioners who would not renounce their faith.

In his time at Mt. Minobu he began to work on fine tuning his doctrine. Many people reached out to him as there are many letters of correspondence during this time.

This is where I will stop my story about Nichiren Daishonin. We are here to celebrate his birth. Though a controversial figure in his time, he tried to bring about change to his country. The people of Japan are suffering, why? What can I do to help? The answer, the government has wrong belief which is blinding them to the truth. Arrogance and self preservation blocks the mind from wanting to see the truth. What Nichiren Daishonin did was to bring back the one true dharma, the one true teaching

taught by the Buddha many thousands of years ago. We are now in the time of the Later Age of the Declining Law, where we have forgotten the true teaching. Nichiren Daishonin was able to re-instill the importance of reciting the Lotus Sutra. Thus when we read the invocation, we commonly refer to Nichiren Daishonin as Jogyo Bodhisattva or Superior-Practice Bodhisattva. Jogyo is one of the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas from the Underground who are from this earth ready to expound the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. He told the Buddha that he would return in the Later Age of the Declining Law to bring back the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. Therefore, today in celebration of Buddha's passing to parinirvana, we also celebrate Nichiren Daishonin's birth. From death comes re-birth, not just in the physical sense, but with the teachings. Lotus Sutra disappeared for awhile and now has returned to stay.