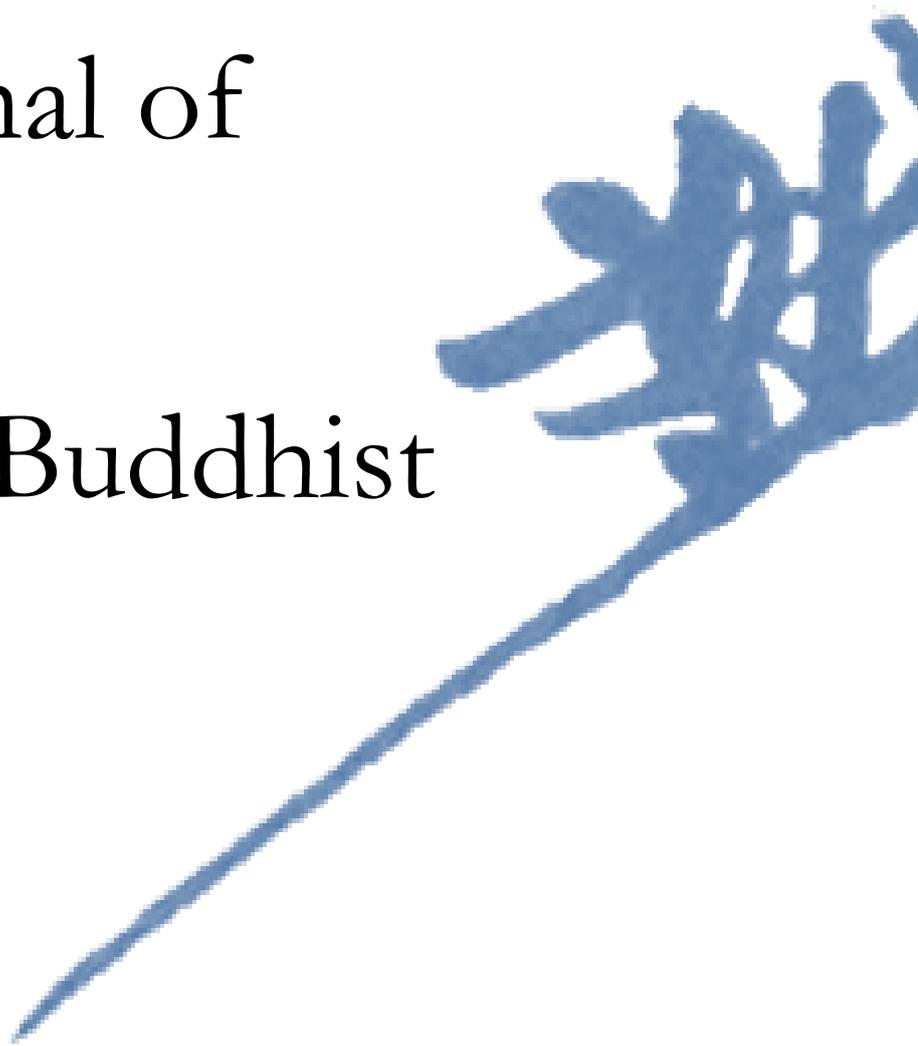


The Journal of
Nichiren Buddhist
Studies



Issue 04-17

How Nichiren's disciples were influenced by the Gohonzon they received and the *moji*-mandala versus the tridimensional *honzon*.

Essay by Ken Mandara, The Nichiren Mandala Study Workshop

Summary

Although Nichiren bestowed a calligraphic mandala to each of his senior and mid-tier disciples in different phases of his predication, it is a fact that he kept a statue of Śākyamuni for his whole life. The effigy was enshrined at his base in Minobu as also a large Gohonzon, now preserved at Jōsaizan Sōgen-ji in Mobarā as it is customary for temples in Japan to have a main hall and an “image hall” dedicated to its main Buddha. The elemental Kuon-ji however could not afford the luxury of having several buildings, it is hence not completely clear which was the main *honzon* adopted at the time. For sure, many lay believers made a perilous pilgrimage to the site in order to receive their calligraphic mandala.

This paper analyzes how different disciples perceived the transmission from Nichiren basing their own schools on the Gohonzon they received and the particular period it was inscribed for them. Some cases are fairly obvious, as Izumi Ajari Nippō produced mandalas with the same side inscriptions that Nichiren placed on the Gohonzon he received. Nippō was also in contact with the lay believers that received the largest mandala ever produced by Nichiren made of 28 sheets, which also bears the same soaring quotations of the Lotus Sūtra. The cases of Nichirō and Nikkō are more nuanced for a number of reasons.

It seems evident however, that the top senior disciples received their Gohonzon already in the Bun'ei era, while the others either in the Kenji or mostly in the Kōan period. After Nichiren passed, his successors would adopt either the calligraphic mandala or enshrine various formats of statue grouping, at times fiercely debating about which type of *honzon* shall be adopted in the Nichiren School.

The various *honzon* formats are described and analyzed within a broader non-sectarian context while trying to harmonize all the different views. It can be asserted that Nichiren considered the Lotus teaching as “word” of the Eternal Buddha that defines the moment in which humanity became self-conscious and detached from the realm of beasts. He evidently knew that the scripture is the result of several translators, compilers, thinkers and philosophers who made their additions to the ultimate Sūtra script. However he considered the canonical text as final and perfect, almost like a chorus that intones about enlightenment in magnificent harmony.

References to the series “The Mandala in Nichiren Buddhism” (vol. 1~3) are abbreviated as MNB, the canon of Nichiren's writings *Shōwa Teibon Nichiren Shōnin Ibum* as STN and “Writings of Nichiren Daishōnin” as WND.

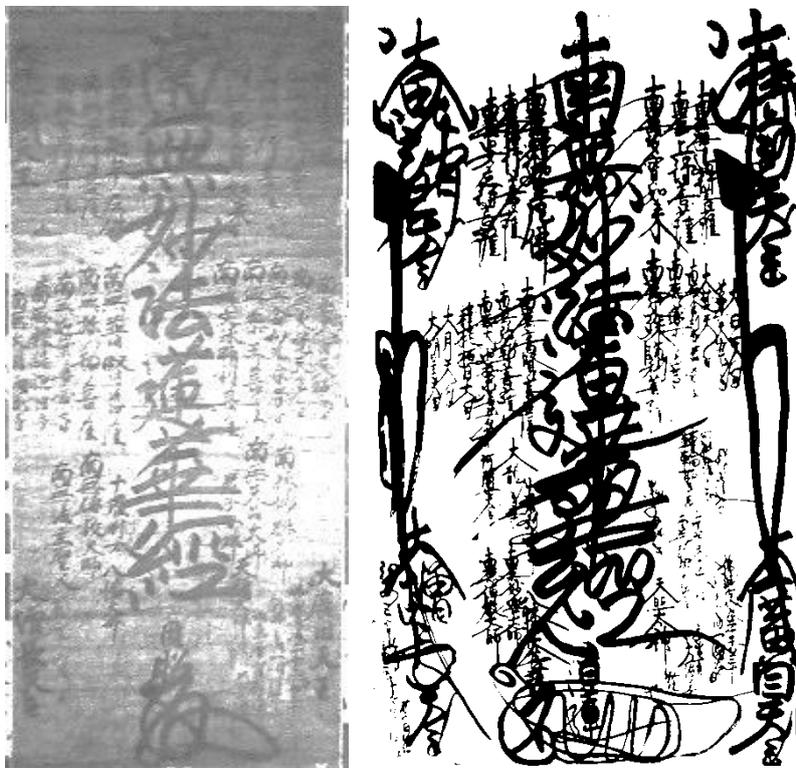
Keywords: Nichiren, mandala, Gohonzon, *isson-shibi*, *ittō-ryōson*

Mandalas bestowed upon the six senior disciples

Unfortunately a whole set of six scrolls with an explicit dedication to each one of the six elder disciples is not extant today. However three out of six were specifically bestowed upon Nisshō, Nitchō and Nikō, while the recipients of other scrolls were evidently Nichirō, Nikkō and Nichiji, the latter unfortunately only in the form of an uncertified replica. Nichirō placed his signature on two scrolls and is said to have received a large Gohonzon (Nr. 18), the second-largest ever produced, and that shows unique presence of esoteric *Mahāvairochana* of the *Taijōkai* and *Kongōkai* realms. Although not directly specified, it is believed that Nikkō was given another distinctive mandala (Nr. 16), on which Nichiren hints at his identity as Bodhisattva *Viśistacāritra*.

- **Ben Ajari Nisshō**

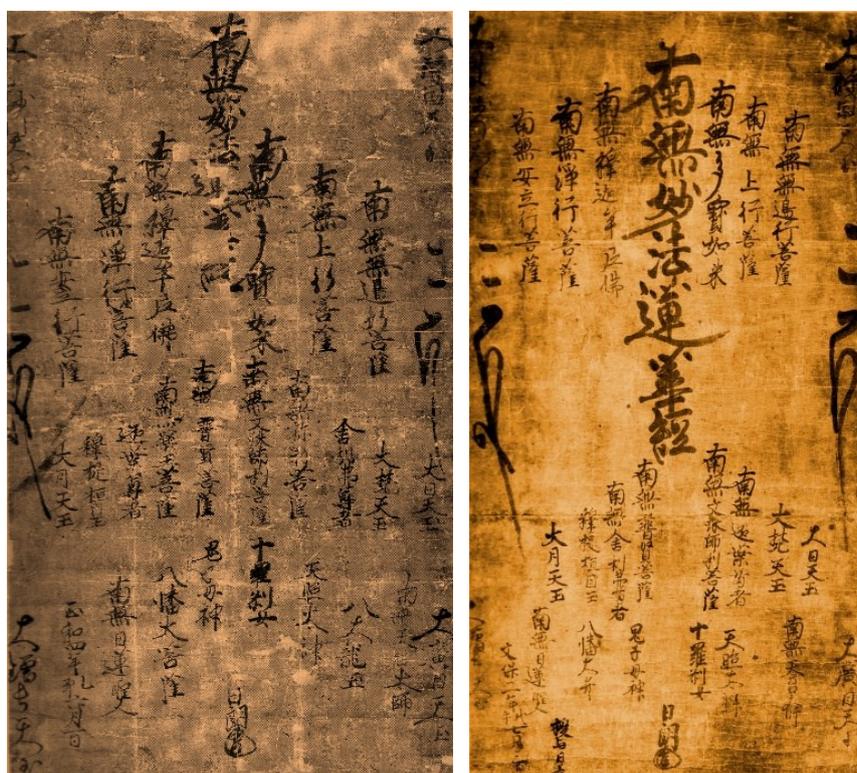
His first and eldest disciple was Ben Ajari Nisshō, who has been alongside with Nichiren for the longest time. As a deputy of Nichiren in Kamakura he looked after the local *sangha* with Daishin Ajari Nisshin and Sanmi-bō Nichigyō, to whom however Nichiren did not bestow a Gohonzon. Nisshō received both a personal prayer mandala (Nr. 37) as well as a large scroll (Nr. 101), known as “Transmission of the Law” (*denpō*) Gohonzon. Nisshō authored at least two mandalas in similar format (MND:3). The first scroll, is sized mm 924×512 and made of three sheets, authored in the fourth month of 1295, stored at Tamazawa Myōhokke-ji. The second Gohonzon, measuring mm 1142×442 and made of four sheets, is dated sixth month of 1333, housed at Kumogane Myōhon-ji. Fudō and Aizen were probably trimmed out. Nisshō adopted Nichiren’s *Kōan* period format, but omitted the lower realms represented by the Wheel Turning King, Ajase King, Ashura King, Dragon King and Devadatta.



Left: the Nisshō mandala stored at Kumogane Myōhon-ji; right: the *Denpō* Gohonzon inscribed by Nichiren

- **Daikoku Ajari Nichirō**

Nichiren's first acolyte, who joined through Nisshō was Daikoku Ajari Nichirō. He tonsured in private form at Matsubagayatsu and two or three mandalas can be linked to him. One is the second-largest ever inscribed by Nichiren (Nr. 18), the other a scroll on which he placed his *kaō* signature (Nr. 17) as well as a Gohonzon from the early Kōan era (Nr. 56), known as the *oshitori* mandala due to the pattern of the frame brocade. His mandalic corpus, consisting of about 22 scrolls, is fairly homogeneous and a reflection of his deduction on Nichiren's doctrine. Nichirō remained very fond of his youthful days spent in Kamakura, where the focus was mainly redirecting people towards the Lotus teachings at no Gohonzon scrolls were produced prior to 1271. Nichirō remained at the base in Matsubagayatsu and could hardly witness how many scrolls Nichiren produced at Minobu, while he remained in the political capital looking after the *sangha* that was nevertheless consistent. Upon becoming older, he supported Myōhon-ji in Kamakura, in fact his signature is on the backside of the *Rinmetsu Dōji* mandala, but he transferred to the Ikegami compound in the final stage of his life as the family was related to him.



Two mandalas authored by Nichirō, left in 1315 and right in 1318

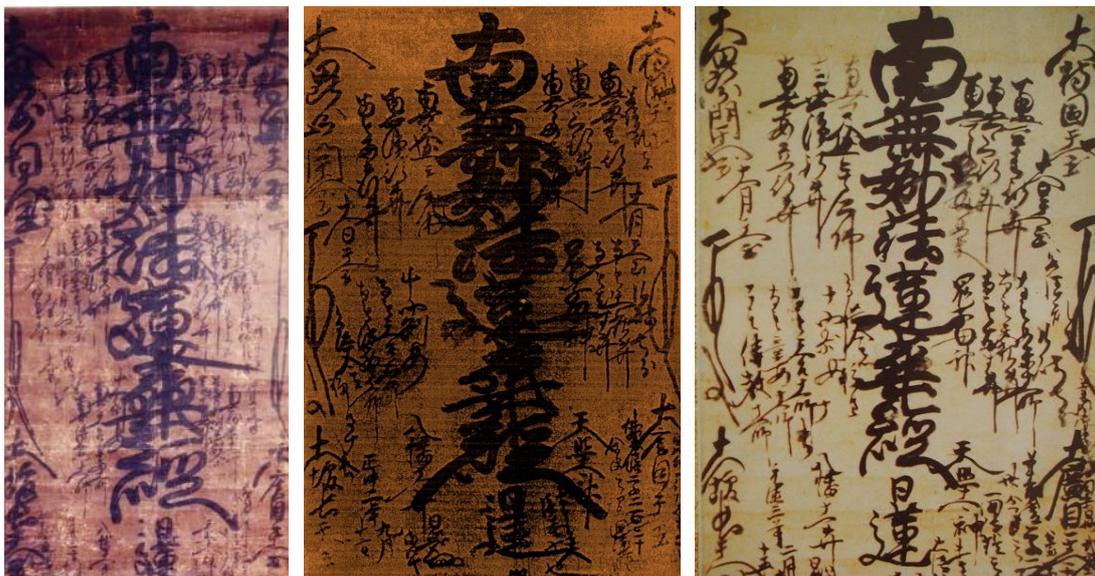
The twenty or more extant mandalas of Nichirō are generally all very similar, reminding an orderly lineup of effigies as the scenery described in the Jūryō chapter of the Lotus with Nichiren's additions of such as the Japanese *kami* and the Wisdom Kings. Not much hints at the dynamic representation of reality that transcends Tendai Buddhism and is distinctly perceivable in the works of Nichiren and other disciples. The preference for tridimensional forms of *honzon* such as group of statues is generally attributed to the school of Nichirō, while the earliest examples are actually found in the Nakayama tradition. The calligraphic traits of Nichijō Toki and Nichirō however are very similar, notably the absence of Nichiren's distinctive *kōmyō* elongated spikes and both with an evident lack of Sanskrit studies as neither had received a formal clerical training. There might be a correlation between the adoption of tridimensional forms of *honzon* and the motionless mandala compositions in the founders of both lineages.

- Nikkō

The acting secretary, who witnessed most of the Kōan era mandala inscriptions and kept a rigorous registry, was Byakuren Ajari Nikkō. While not specifically mentioned, there is strong evidence that he received the mandala in the twelfth month of 1274 (Nr. 16), known as the *Mannen kyūgō Daimandara*. As a matter of fact, the scroll was originally stored at Taiseki-ji temple, hence taken from Minobu Kuon-ji by Nikkō and later transferred to Kōdaisan Myōhon-ji by his disciple Saishō Ajari Nichigō. Nikkō is by far the disciple who greatly revered the Gohonzon and who produced a large amount of scrolls. While his works display a common pattern, such as the signature *Nichieren+zraigohan*, the scrolls are very diverse in matter of composition and depicted figures. They show clear evidence that he fully understood the boundaries and framework in which he could operate in terms of adding or omitting figures, quotations, sūtra passages or specific notes. In fact the notes or re-conferrals of Nikkō can be observed on original mandalas from Nichiren in at least twenty cases in the extant Nichiren mandalic corpus (MNB 3:84~93).



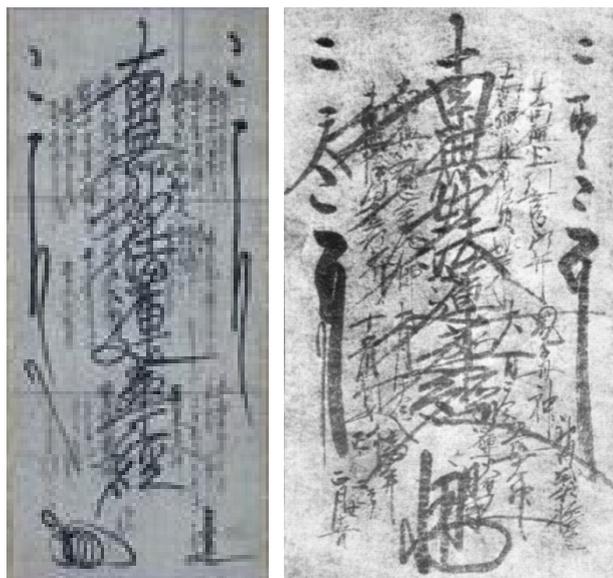
Mandalas authored by Nikkō, left 1287, center 1292, right 1300



Mandalas authored by Nikkō, left 1315, center 1325, right 1331

- **Nichiji**

One scroll attributed to Nichiren, but not authenticated by Yamanaka Kihachi, bears a bestowal to Renge Ajari Nichiji and identical inscriptions to the Nikkō Gohonzon (see *Nichiren's sangha series, Priest Disciples: Renge Ajari Nichiji*, NMSW 2016). The *Daimandala for the World Protection* is dated eight month of the eleventh year of Bun'ei (1274). Even Yamanaka was unsure if the scroll is an original or not, which hints at the fact that it must have been produced by looking at the original. Kawasaki Hiroshi however is of the opinion that it might as well be authentic. The scroll was taken to Myōkō-ji in Okayama by Ryūge'in Nichijitsu (1318~1378) of Ryūge'in Myōkaku-ji in Kyoto. This would hint at Higo Ajari Nichizō or more probably at Shūjin'in Nichiryū, who had contacts with the Fuji school and also specifically with the Kōchō-ji temple in Okamiya. This temple preserves an exact copy of the Gohonzon Nr. 16, which otherwise may hint that a copy was made also from this *Sangoku kyūgo Daimandara*. The temple was originally in Kagawa prefecture and following the Sanuki Great Earthquake the premises were relocated in 1532. It is ascertained that Nichiryū of the Hokke School had contacts with the Honmon-ji temple in Sanuki. There are hence two possible scenarios: Nichiji took the original Nichiren mandala with him to his journey to Manchuria, leaving a copy which was later taken from the Fuji area to Kyoto by Nichiryū and successively to Okayama. The only three mandalas attributed to him, two at Ren'ei-ji and another one in Hokkaidō, are both located at temples established by him. It is hence reasonable that his successors would produce, either replicate or piously forge, a Gohonzon in his name. The Ren'ei-ji scrolls however are signed in his name and the *kaō* does not match other extant documents. Moreover, being originally a disciple of Nikkō, he would have signed the scroll as *Nichiren+zaigoban*. Actually, most of the research on Nichiji is focused on whether he reached the Chinese continent or not, which seems to be the most important point for Japanese scholars, while the mandala is secondary by comparison. There are hence not sufficient elements to formulate a hypothesis, as Ren'eiji temple became neglected for a long time after Nichiji ventured northbound. The other temples ascribed to him, Jitsugyō-ji and Myō'ō-ji in Hakodate (Hokkaidō) do not store evidence, either holograph or replica to sustain a sound theory.



Left: *Sangoku kyūgo Daimandara*, right Gohonzon mandala attributed to Nichiji at Ren'ei-ji

- Nikō

In the case of Minbu Ajari Nikō, his mandala, known as the *Hōshi* Nikō Gohonzon (Nr. 61), was bestowed upon him in the second year of Kōan (1279). The scroll, which he took to Jōsaizan Sōgen-ji in Mobara at the end of his life, is extant and preserved there since. An earlier scroll is supposed (35 but disputed) to be his. There are at least two certified mandalas authored by Nikō, one in 1296 and the second in 1314, plus a few apocryphal scrolls attributed to him. The first shows a calligraphy, including his signature, that is very similar to the works of Nikkō. On this mandala the “curse and blessing” inscription are also present, as in the Fuji school and on the Gohonzon he received from Nichiren. It is signed *Nichiren Shōnin*, as Nikkō and Nichimoku did in the early years, which may reflect the general stance in the *sangha* at the time before the first schism. The second scroll does not resemble at all the earlier work and reflects Nikō’s new position towards the *honzon* that he considered to be made from a group of statues, rather than in the calligraphic form. As a matter of fact, Nikō left his first scroll at Minobu, an indication that he distanced himself from the period he produced it. Fortunately this Gohonzon was later taken to Myōden-ji in Kyoto and could be spared by the flames of 1875. Although inspired by the scroll he received from Nichiren, the influence of Byakuren Ajari Nikkō is very evident, also because the latter used to sign his early mandalas with *Nichiren shōnin+zaigoban*.

Another scroll composed later by Nikō that is extant at Mobara Jōzaisan Sōgen-ji temple shows a completely different mindset. The composition reminds more of the schematic floor plan of a cathedral than a typical Gohonzon, but nevertheless seems to depict something that Nikō might have heard from Nichiren. The theological differences with Nikkō are definitively very evident.



Left: Gohonzon authored by Nikō in 1296, right the mandala of Nichiren bestowed upon Nikō in 1279

- Nitchō

The original Gohonzon of Iyo Ajari Nitchō (Nr. 53) is extant at Ryūsuisan Kaichō-ji in his native area, not far from his grave at Ōjuzan Shōrin-ji near Kitayama Honmon-ji. The scroll was taken to Kaichō-ji due to family connections between the Nanjō and Matsuno clans, but brought to the area when he reconnected with his mother Myōjō. There are however no extant mandalas produced by Nitchō, except one later copy attributed to him at Mamasan Guhō-ji, not far from Nakayama Hokekyō-ji (MNB3:103). It cannot be completely ruled out that it is a copy of an original scroll that was once extant. In any case it bears a dedication to someone in the Nanjō clan and is inscribed according to the tenets of Byakuren Ajari Nikkō, whom he followed in later years. Another detail is the presence of the so-called “curse and blessing” passages as on the scroll given to Nitchō, the dating in the fifth year of Kōan (1282) however can hardly be authentic and hints as a pious forgery from the Edo period. After entering in a dispute with his adoptive father Toki Nichijō in 1293, Nitchō left the group and joined his mother Myōjō and sister Oto at Omosu Kitayama.

During his period at Omosu, he copied several original writings of Nichiren and given his position he probably did not author any mandala, since Nikkō was in charge of this task. Nichimoku authored a few Gohonzon during the lifetime of Nikkō, but he was already appointed Abbot at Taiseki-ji. It can be hence supposed that Nitchō inscribed a mandala for a member in the Nanjō family as it is thought that his sister Oto married Nanjō Gorō, a younger brother of Tokimitsu. In any case, according to the precise records of Nikkō, which are extant in his own handwriting, both Nanjō Shichirō and his wife received a mandala from Nichiren. During the Atsuhara incident, Shimonobō Nisshū and Echigo-bō Nichiben could find refuge at Guhō-ji. Nichiben is said to have been the brother of Myōjō, hence a blood relative of Nitchō. As there were several males in the Nanjō clan, the brothers of Jirō Tokimitsu, siblings from his father’s first marriage, Tokimitsu’s own sons Tarō, Jirō Tokitada, Saburō, Shirō, Gorō Tokitsuna, Shichirō, Nichigen and Nisshō, in addition to their own children. The most probable candidate however could have been a male in the Nanjō family married to his sister Oto.



The mandala of Nichiren bestowed upon Nitchō in 1278

- Nichijō

Toki Jōnin, ordained himself once Nichiren passed away, after a period in which he was considered a *shami* novice priest. He produced only few mandalas, seven in total are extant today, with the calligraphy somehow reflecting his analytic and stern personality, without much emphasis on the *kōmyō*-lines as his later successors. The mandala he received from Nichiren was stolen in 1900, but supposed to be still extant nearby the Hokekyō-ji compound, hinting at disputes in the clergy. A copy of the three scrolls given to Ōta *nyūdo* Jōmyō, his wife Ōta *ama* Kyōjō and Toki Jōnin inscribed on the same day has been made by Shinnyō'in Nittō in 1711 and fairly takes after the original. It has the distinctive traits of Nichiren's style of 1278 resembling also the scroll given to his son Nitchō in the same year. Toki Jōnin however did not try to simulate the calligraphy or composition style of Nichiren, he rather based himself on the pragmatic reading of the Lotus Sūtra, in the way he believed best suited his interpretation.



Copy of the mandala bestowed to Toki on 16.7.1278



Two Gohonzon authored by Nichijō Toki in 1295 and

- Higo Ajari Nichizō

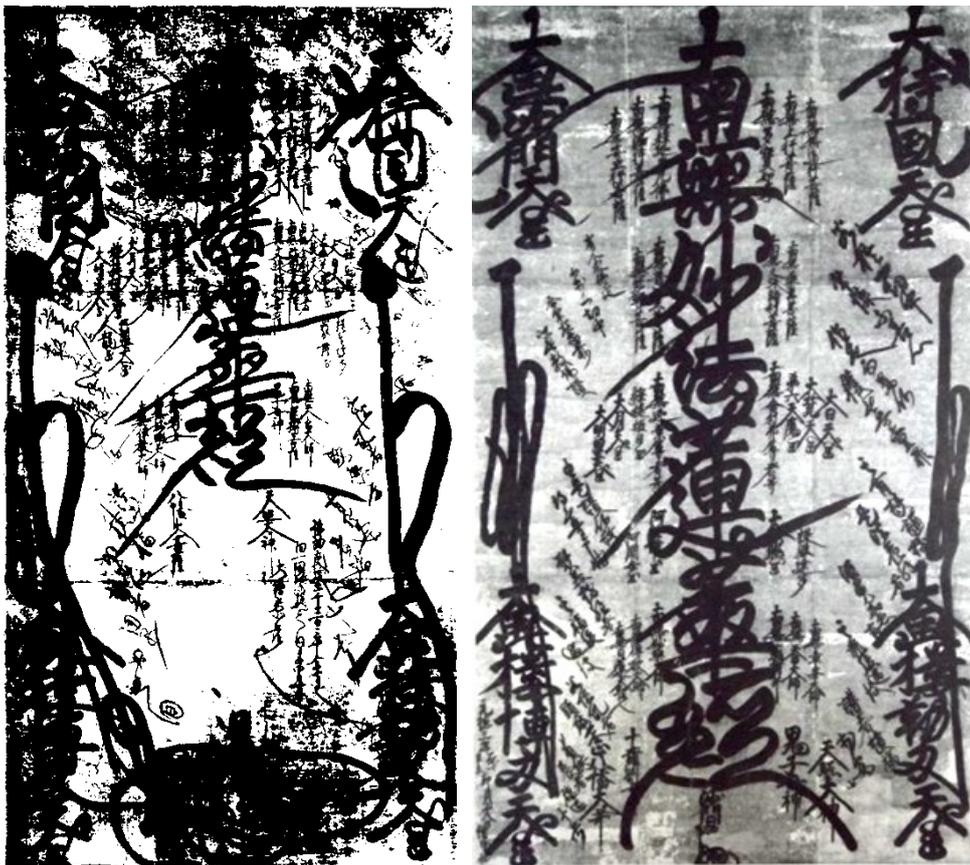
The boy Kyōichimaru, later Higo Ajari Nichizō, who received mandala Nr. 28, can be seen as the eighth senior disciple, the seventh being generally considered Toki Nichijō. After Nikkō, he was the most prolific and creative author of Gohonzon scrolls. Nichizō was the first to add some painted figures instead of logographs, generally the four *deva*. He reinterpreted the mandala structure with great originality, within the framework of the Lotus, inscribing the characters as if they were pattern elements of a painting and the only direct disciple to create his own particular *Namiyuri Daimoku* logographs. There was clearly no influence on Nichizō from the small protective talisman that he received from Nichiren as a child. Nevertheless, serving him devotedly as an altar boy in Minobu, there were many chances to witness the production of several mandalas. Nichizō's undeniable artistic inclination definitively shows in his works and those of his brother Nichirin. His successor in the *shijō* lineage Daikaku Myōjitsu was also clearly inspired by Nichizō. Particularly Daikaku was even more artistically prone, as he actually reversed the proportion between painted figures and logographs by composing pictorial mandalas where the only logographs were the seven *Daimoku* characters. While not unanimously, the *shijō* lineage produced some of the most creative mandala works.



Left: the Gohonzon inscribed for Nichizō in the Kenji era; right: a semi-pictorial mandala authored by Nichizō

Mandalas bestowed upon mid-tier disciples

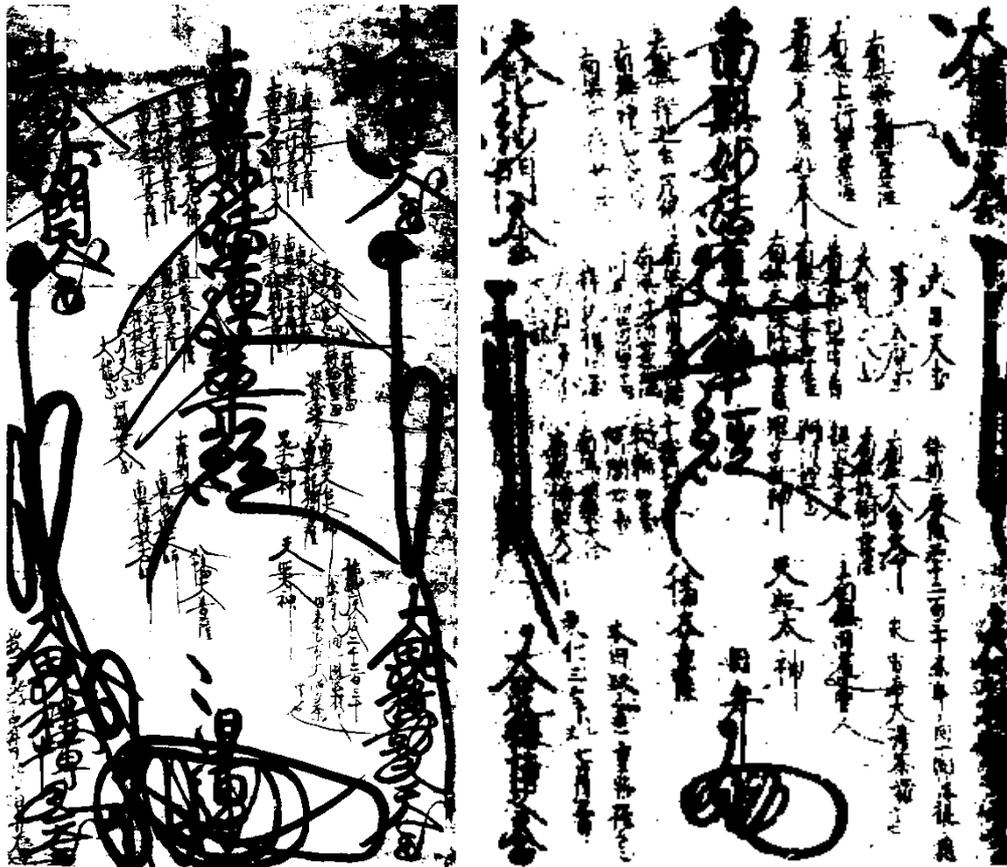
Although Nichiren bestowed a mandala to few of his mid-tier disciples, not all of them later inscribed a Gohonzon, but perhaps a holograph or at least some copies are neither extant nor documented. Among these younger disciples, those whose mandala is still extant are, Izumi Ajari Nippō (65), Echigo Ajari Nichiben (63), *shamon* Nichimon (50), *biku* Nichiken (52), Renzō-bō Nichimoku (60), *shamon* Nichiei (69), Jakunichi-bō Nikke (92), *biku* Shōsuke-bō Nichizen (93/2), Renmei Ajari Nisshun (105) and Mino Ajari Tenmoku Nissei (120). Sotsu Ajari Nichikō, was one of the child acolytes with Nichimoku, Nichizō and others, but did not receive a Gohonzon directly from Nichiren. He nevertheless authored several mandalas signed in his own name, placing Nichiren on the scenery as *bōshū shōnin*, Saint Master of the Law, as in the Nakayama tradition initiated by Toki Nichijō. Nichiben, Nisshū and Nichiken inscribed each one Gohonzon. Some mandalas stored at Shimojō Myōren-ji are attributed to Nikke, but only one exemplar was included in the catalogue of Yamanaka Kihachi and its authorship is still under scrutiny. Nichimoku authored very few Gohonzon, not resembling the scroll he received from Nichiren where Fudō and Aizen are switched.



Left: the Gohonzon inscribed by Nichiren in 1279; right: the almost identical mandala authored by Nippō

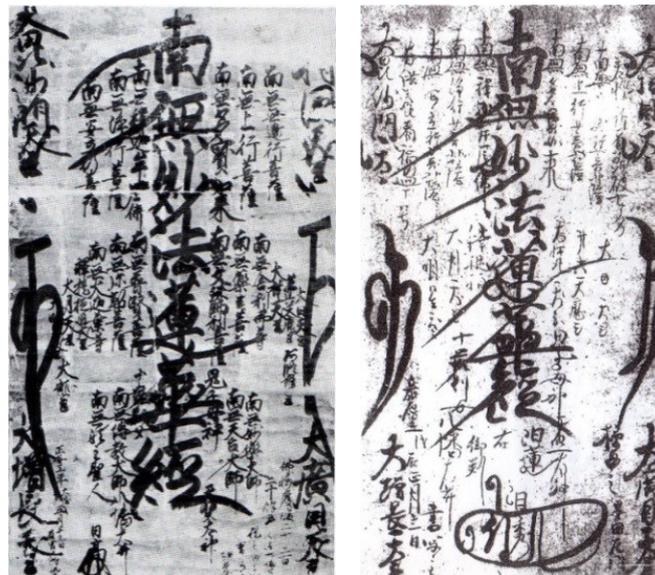
The example of Nichiben shows that he made no effort to mimic the calligraphy of Nichiren, while the spatial structure reminds of the scroll he received. The proportion between the length of the central inscription and the overall surface covering two thirds of the paper, placing the two Japanese *kami* Hachiman and Tenshō in the same position are indicative that Nichiben was definitely looking at his own Gohonzon. He signed the mandala with his own name inserting *namu-Nichiren-shōnin* on the lower right side. While there are no indications of his previous affiliation with the Shingon School, according to the *Nichiben Shōnin no shiteki kōsatsu*, he was the brother of Shimono-bō Nichinin, Toki Jōnin's wife Myōjō and uncle of Mino Ajari Tenmoku.

Nichiben was theologically influenced by both the ideas of Nikkō (Fuji School), Nikō (Minobu School) and Toki (Nakayama School), but finally severed ties with Nikkō and spent his final years preaching in the northern regions and was slain after a sermon in 1311. It seems evident that most disciples waited at least twelve or thirteen years or more after Nichiren's passing before going definitively separate ways and forming their own group, although there are earlier examples. In the Kamakura period, a *sichikaiki* (seventh anniversary of one's passing), *jūsankaiki* (twelfth) and *sanjūsankaiki* (32nd) ceremonies were held to commemorate the death.



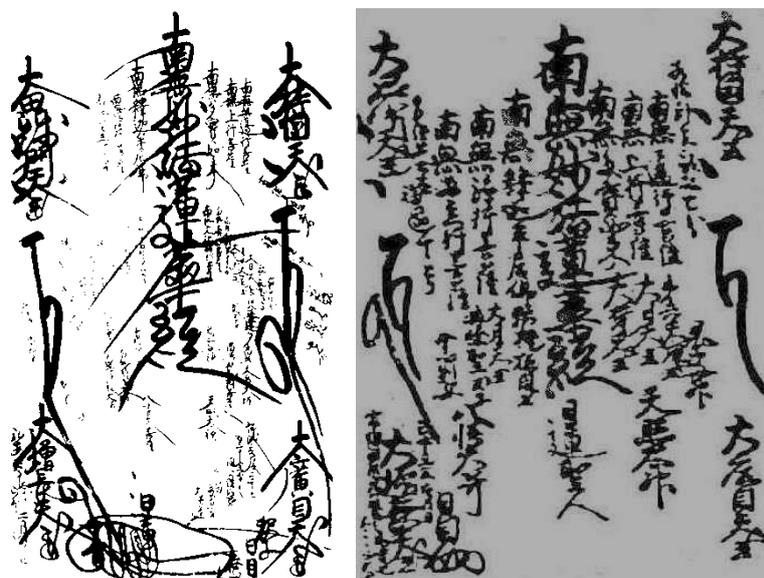
Left: the Gohonzon inscribed by Nichiren in 1279; right: the similar mandala authored by Nichiben in 1295

There are no extant scrolls bestowed either to Sotsu-*kō* Nichikō or to Shimonobō Nisshū, nevertheless both were disciples of Nichiren. Nichikō was already an acolyte in the Bun'ei era, as documented in a letter to Nisshō where he is quoted in the text. He produced a few mandalas and he definitively witnessed Nichiren inscribing the scrolls at Minobu, but it is not documented that he received a Gohonzon from Nichiren. There is also no holographic reference to a mandala bestowed upon Nisshū, but the extant scroll authored by him may indicate that he might have received one. While placing his own signature large and bold at the bottom, Nisshū added *Nichiren+zagohan* after the central inscription as to follow the method of Nikkō



Left: Gohonzon authored by Sotsu-*kō* Nichikō; right: Shimonobō Nisshū

Nichimoku received a mandala from Nichiren in 1279 with other mid-tier disciples, but the few Gohonzon he produced after receiving the transmission from Nikkō do not remind at all the scroll authored by Nichiren, which is one of the few examples where the Wisdom Kings are switched. He generally placed *Nichiren+shōnin* as in the early mandalas of Nikkō-



Left: Gohonzon authored Nichiren in 1279; right: Renzobō Nichimoku

Calligraphic mandala vs. tridimensional *honzon*

The debate concerning the object of devotion in Nichiren Buddhism has not yet abated. Especially the Fuji School initiated by Byakuren Ajari Nikkō fiercely insists on the exclusive use of the calligraphic mandala and considers the *Ittō-Ryōson* (one *Daimoku*-tablet flanked by the two Buddha) or the *Ittō-Ryōson-shishi* (*Ittō-Ryōson* with the addition of four Bodhisattvas) as tantamount to heresy. Surely, the first grouping of statues started to appear soon after Nichiren's passing under the leadership of second generation disciples, who met him in their childhood. As highlighted by other scholars, there is more than one possible interpretation of his real intent. There are in fact two readings of a passage (STN1:712, WND1:366) in the “The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind Established in the Fifth Five-Hundred-Year Period after the Thus Come One's Passing” otherwise known as the *Kanjin Honzon-shō*.

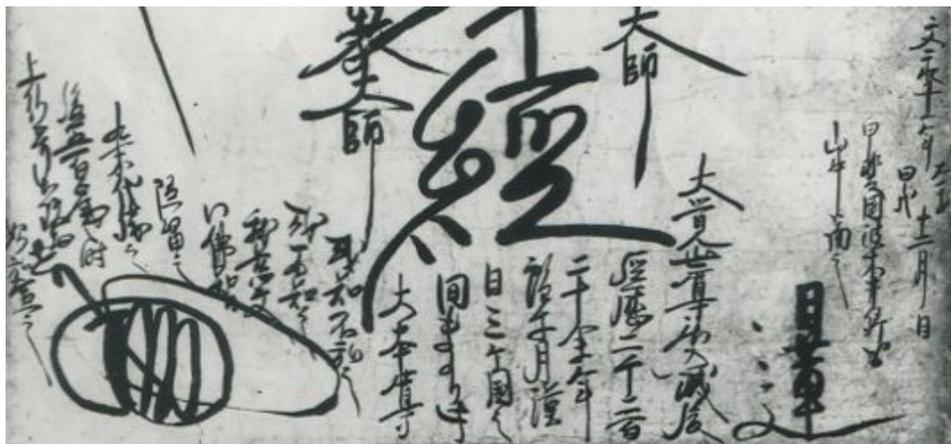


Early *Ittō-Ryōson* 1338, Nakayama Hokekyō-ji

In the *shōbō* period, the first millennium after Śākyamuni, a sculpted or painted Buddha image of the Lesser Vehicle flanked by Mahākāśyapa and Ananda (indicating the pre-Lotus Śākyamuni) was made as an object of devotion. In the second millennium, the *zōbō* period, images of Śākyamuni attended by Bodhisattvas Fugen and Mañjuśrī (*shakke-bosatsu*) based on the Nirvana and Lotus Sūtras became valid. However even this metaphor still refers to the Śākyamuni who is preaching the *shakumon* or trace teaching; hence in the *mappō* period the object of devotion should be the Buddha of the Essential Teaching, a depiction of the *Jūryō* chapter in the Lotus. In this part of the text, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth (*jūyū-bosatsu*) make their appearance while Śākyamuni entrust them with propagating the Essential Teaching (*honmon*). The group is led by Bodhisattva Viśistacāritra and in fact Nichiren's mandala clearly depicts Śākyamuni of the *Jūryō* chapter. However, the relevant passage in the *Kanjin Honzon-shō* (STN1:720) can be either interpreted as an object of devotion with “Śākyamuni of *honmon* with his attendants” or with “the attendants of Śākyamuni (*Namu-Myōbō-Renge-Kyō*) of the essential teaching”. The second reading implying that the Eternal Śākyamuni of *honmon*, is identified with the Dharma = *Namu-Myōbō-Renge-Kyō*, but this point is just implied and not unambiguously stated.

If the concept of *sōmoku jōbutsu* (enlightenment of plants and insentient beings) is valid, then a calligraphic *honzon* would be a correct object of devotion. The second reading corresponds to the interpretation of Daini Ajari Nichikan, the 26th Abbot at Taiseki-ji, a reformer of this school. Nichiren stated that *after more than two thousand and two hundred years after the Buddha's passing*, he would appear in Sado as (or in representation of) Bodhisattva Jōgyō to draw the great mandala. If this is the sense of what Nichiren meant the passage, Nichikan's interpretation is correct; however the weak point of this reading is that there is no clear statement that “Śākyamuni of the Essential Teaching” (the Eternal Śākyamuni) is equal with the five or seven characters of *Namu-Myōhō-Renge-Kyō*. The copy of a writing attributed to Byakuren Ajari Nikkō, currently stored at Yōhō-ji in Kyoto, seems to lean towards the other interpretation favoring an *Isson-shishi* as a *honzon*. The essay is dated as being copied in the fourth year of Kōan (1281) during Nichiren's lifetime, but it is questionable that Nikkō really interpreted the passage in such manner. In any case, even considering the second reading does not equal to adopt a tridimensional *Isson-shishi*. Moreover, the year after he composed the *Kanjin Honzon-shō* Nichiren inscribed the *Mannen Kyūgō Daimandara* (Nr. 16 of the catalogue MNB1:95), which has a unique laudatory inscription, pertaining to Nichiren identifying himself with Bodhisattva Viśistacāritra (Jōgyō). Considering the said period *after more than two thousand and two hundred years*, the esoteric Taimitsu and Tōmitsu mandalas had already made their appearance, thus Nichiren felt the time had come to propagate the object of devotion that is appropriate for the *mappō* era. This idea is echoed in the unique laudatory inscription of a mandala (Nr. 16) supposedly bestowed upon Nikkō:

“Following the Greatly Awakened World Honored One's entry into extinction, more than two thousand two hundred and twenty years have passed. Even so, within the three countries of Yuezhi, (India) China and Japan, this Daihonzon had yet to exist. Either it is known but not propagated, or it is not known at all. I, the compassionate father, exercising the Buddha wisdom, hide and leave this for the future age of degeneration. At that time during the latter five hundred years, Bodhisattva Jōgyō makes his appearance in the world, and for the first time, widely propagates this”.



The unique laudatory inscription of mandala Nr. 16, supposedly given to Nikkō

This is the only example where Nichiren mentions a *Daihonzon* and not a *Daimandala*. Furthermore he identifies himself with Bodhisattva Viśistacāritra and specifically mentions “wide propagation”. On an additional note, this Gohonzon is inscribed depicting only representatives of the four noble paths of Learning, Realization, Bodhisattva and Buddhahood without the six lower worlds.

If Nichiren meant *Kanjin-no-honzon* = *honzon* of *Honmon* = image of Śākyamuni of *honmon*, aka that a *honzon* should be made with Śākyamuni, Lord of the Essential Teaching, it must be underlined that there is no clear-cut indication that an *Isson-shishi* should be made as *honzon*. Genkū (Hōnen) invoked the name of Amida Buddha facing an image of Amitābha, while Nichiren chanted *Namu-Myōhō-Renge-Kyō* in front of the *Kanjin-no-honzon* of *Ichinen-sanzen* aka the *Daimandala* of *Namu-Myōhō-Renge-Kyō*. In fact the laudatory inscription of the *Mannen Kyūgō Daimandara* is the only one on which a “Dai-honzon” instead of *Daimandara* is clearly mentioned, which leaves no room for any doubt. Three years later Nichiren composes the *Essay on Gratitude (Hō'on shō)*, where he mentions that a *honzon* made with Śākyamuni of *honmon*, the Lord of Teachings should be made.

The *Isson-shishi*, or one Venerable and Four Attendants, is “Śākyamuni of the Essential Teaching”, while *Ittō-Ryōson-shishi* is the “Original Buddha (Eternal Śākyamuni= symbolized by *Namu-Myōhō-Renge-Kyō*), flanked by the two Venerables (Śākyamuni and Tahō) with the Four Attendants. This is the object of devotion centered on the Original Buddha. Kurana Hōkō interprets the *Shūdai-honzon* (only *Namu-Myōhō-Renge-Kyō* inscribed on a scroll) as an abbreviated version of the *Daimandala* and the *Isson-shishi* as a condensed form of the *Ittō-Ryōson-shishi* and specifies five different conceptions or imageries for the object of devotion.

The first is a simple graphic rendering of the Lotus Sūtra title, *Namu-Myōhō-Renge-Kyō*, known as *Shūdai-honzon*. In his essay titled *Shō Hokeke Daimoku-shō* (On Reciting the Daimoku of the Lotus Sutra), composed on the 28th day, fifth month in 1260, Nichiren states < *First, with regard to the object of devotion, one should inscribe the eight volumes of the Lotus Sutra, or one volume, or one chapter, or simply the Daimoku, or title, of the sutra, and make that the object of devotion, as is indicated in the “Teacher of the Law” and “Supernatural Powers” chapters of the sutra* >. In the period he was still active in Kamakura, before being exiled Nichiren understood that a *honzon* should be made with the title of the Lotus Sūtra. He reiterates this concept in 1275 when he writes to *Nii-ama gozen*, where again he mentions < *this great mandala of the five characters* > and the year after in *Honzon Mondō-shō* (Questions and Answers on the Object of Devotion) in a question and answer format < *They should make the Daimoku of the Lotus Sūtra their object of devotion* >. As a matter of fact, the first *honzons* that he inscribed were of very simple format based on *Namu-Myōhō-Renge-Kyō* placed at the center. Few typologies of this “abbreviated” *honzon* can be observed before he started to inscribe the larger mandalas in formal style, which are way more detailed. Immediately after adding the Four Bodhisattvas, Nichiren also clearly experiments with various depicted figures before he reaches a clear compositive structure in his *Gohonzon*. There are even exemplars where he inscribed the esoteric Buddha Mahāvairocana in both the *Taijōkai* (Womb Realm) and *Kongōkai* (Diamond Realm) manifestation. However, a *Shūdai-honzon* as such, without any other element as inscribed by later successors in various lineages is not found in the works of Nichiren.



Left: *Ippen-shūdai* by Butsujō'in Nissei; center: by Myōgen'in Nitō; right: by Seju'in Nippō

The second form of *honzon* is basically the image of Śākyamuni, actually the one he used personally and mentions in his *Kaimoku-shō* (Opening of the Eyes) and *Zenmui Sanzō-shō* (The Tripitaka Master Shan-wu-wei). In the latter, he does not contradict his position regarding the *hon-jaku* (both the Lotus *Honmon* and *Shakumon*) Teaching, he simply stresses that Śākyamuni is primary against the *honzons* of other Buddhist schools. These *honzon* may be represented in form of painted or sculpted images and in the *Kaimoku-shō* Nichiren elaborates that he means the Eternal Śākyamuni. In order to distinguish between the historical Buddha and the *honzon* he meant, his four attendants shall be flanking the central figure. It is however known that he enshrined a statue or painting of Śākyamuni at his dwelling in Matsubagayatsu; and from the letter to Toki Jōnin titled *Bōjikyō-ji* (On Forgetting the Copy of the Sutra) it becomes evident that the same effigy was also enshrined at Minobu < ...you entered the chamber and then, when you had safely placed the remains of your mother before the sacred image of Śākyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings... >. Nichiren seems to have considered the image, which was given to him during the Izu exile, as the quintessence of a living Śākyamuni, but it is difficult to pinpoint a specific period in which he started considering the statuette as his personal *honzon* and nevertheless challenging to draw a line between the single effigy of the original Eternal Buddha and Śākyamuni flanked by his four attendants, the *Ison-Shishi*. Nichiren lauds Nichigen-nyo, the wife of Shijō *kingō* Yorimoto, for fashioning a sculpture of Śākyamuni and specifically because it defines a moment when she finally discarded her attachment to Amidism. This information is found in the letter *Nighinennyō Shaka-Butsu Kuyō-ji* (Concerning the Statue of Śākyamuni Buddha Fashioned by Nichigen-nyo), authored in 1279. Not only Nichiren specifically mentions that he also had inscribed a Gohonzon for her, which is probably the extant mandala Nr. 72, but the couple already received a protective *omamori* Gohonzon five years earlier. Finally, a Go-*honzon* (meaning his effigy of Śākyamuni) is specifically listed in the *Shūso Gosenge Kiroku* records authored by Byakuren Ajari Nikkō. The image was among Nichiren's possessions and was inherited by Daikoku Ajari Nichirō. The latter was a young acolyte who originally tonsured at Matsubagayatsu and this particular *honzon* had definitively a special meaning for him. Nikkō later lamented that the statuette was taken to Kamakura by Nichirō, while it was supposedly intended to remain enshrined at Nichiren's grave. The honzon was given to Nichiren by Kudō Hachirō *saemon* Sukemitsu as a token of gratitude. He was the steward of Izu when Nichiren was exiled in the area and prayed for his recovery. In any case, the original Śākyamuni image was later transferred to Honkoku-ji temple in Kyoto, probably lost by fire and substituted by what is hopefully a replica as otherwise there are few indications on what the statuette may have looked like. The main point is that at the time of Nichiren, his disciples and followers had faith that it would represent the Eternal Śākyamuni of the essential teaching.



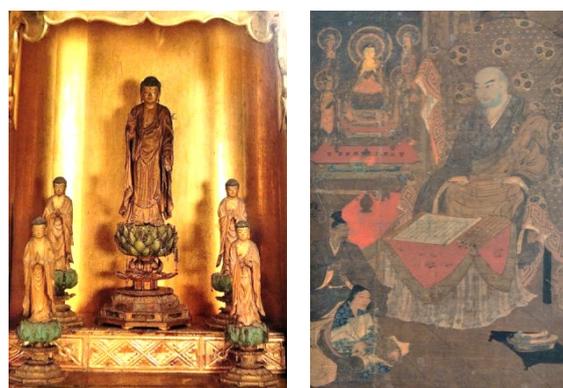
Left: the alleged effigy of Śākyamuni worshipped by Nichiren; right: a graphic rendering of the image

The third *honzon* format is obviously the mandala conceived by Nichiren which developed from the two Fūdo and Aizen *kankenki* drawings (MNB1:13-18) with abundant esoteric symbols, to the first *omamori* talismans produced after the Tatsunokuchi incident and evolving into the sophisticated “formal” arrangement style that represented the peak of his predication. The Nichiren mandala has been abundantly clarified in the three volumes of *The Mandala in Nichiren Buddhism*, please refer to these texts for details. Later successors either inscribed their own mandala, placing Nichiren in various forms as a saint or great Bodhisattva in addition to reproducing original Gohonzons of Nichiren and printing the scrolls on woodblocks as *okatagi*.



Left: woodblock *okatagi* printing matrix; center: plank mandala, Nichiren matrix; right: *okatagi* print, Nichirō matrix

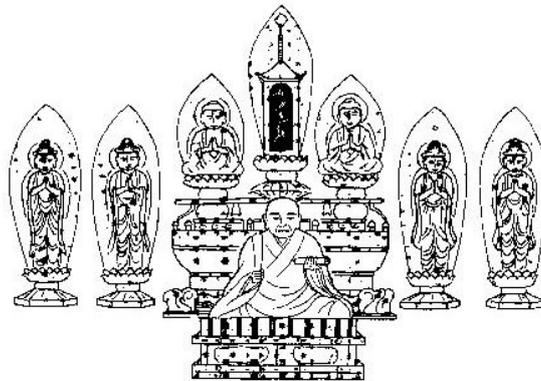
The fourth type of *honzon* is the *Isson-Shishi* that is Śākyamuni flanked by the four Bodhisattvas, *Viśistacāritra* (Superior Practices), *Viśuddhacāritra* (Pure Practices), *Anantacāritra* (Boundless Practices) and *Supratisthitacāritra* (Firmly-established Practices). The first reference is found in Nichiren’s major exegesis *Kanjin Honzon-shō*, but apart from the letter known as *Hokeke Gyōja Gonanji* (A Votary of the Lotus Sutra Will Meet Persecution) there is no direct documentary evidence that Nichiren, his disciples or lay followers had enshrined an *Isson-Shishi* set of statues as their *honzon*. Nevertheless in the Nakayama lineage, a standing statue of Śākyamuni with the Four Bodhisattvas, aka an *Isson-Shishi* is catalogued by Toki Nichijō in 1299 (*Jōshū’in Honzon Seikyōji*). This might be the setting quoted in *Mama Shakabutsu gokuyō chikujō* (Concerning the Statue of Shakyamuni Buddha Made by Toki) for which Nichiren lauds Toki, but it must be also considered that at the time of this writing in 1270, even a rudimental Gohonzon had yet to be inscribed. Nevertheless, Jōgyō’in Nichiyū recorded (*Honzon Seikyōroku*) that the five statues were blessed by the great saint (meaning Nichiren). Moreover, one of the earliest portraits of Nichiren depicts him next to an *Isson-Shishi*. Maka’ichi Ajari Nichi’in, a senior disciple of Nichirō, mentioned (*Hō-zōryū Kuyō Honzon-nikkō*) about the group of five statues with the Eternal Śākyamuni and the Four Bodhisattvas. These records produced soon after Nichiren’s passing are documenting that the *Isson-Shishi* was already in use by immediate disciples and it is supposed to represent a sort Gohonzon mandala proxy in condensed form.



Left: *Isson-Shishi*, Nakayama Hokekyō-ji; right: portrait of Nichiren, Tamazawa Myōhokke-ji (both 1300s)

Lastly the fifth *bonzon* category is the *Ittō-Ryōson-shishi*, the most elaborated set of statues composed by a *Daimoku* tablet, flanked by Śākyamuni and Tahō with the four *bonge* Bodhisattvas of the Essential Teaching, which represents the Ceremony of the Air, describing the state of supreme enlightenment. Such configuration is found in Nichiren’s “Essay on Gratitude” and Jōgyō’in Nichiyū documented its employment. It is hence evident that the uses of statues as *bonzon* mainly originated within the Nakayama lineage, but the *Ittō-Ryōson-shishi* basically represent an enactment of the *bon-jaku* (both the Lotus *Honmon* and *Shakumon*) Teaching. This setting has been represented in various forms, such as a graphic rendering, a *zushi* compact altar or larger statues at temples. All imply the principle of

As with the calligraphic mandala, the the *Ittō-Ryōson-shishi* is simply a *Hensō-zu* which means the “transformation of (Sūtra) text into image”. Such artworks are common also in other schools, including Pure Land and Shingon. From the reading of the Lotus being the ultimate teaching, the way it is represented has no real importance, comparing to the main point of rejecting the pre-Lotus doctrines and embracing the true message of the Eternal Śākyamuni.



Ittō-Ryōson-shishi set usually with Nichiren up front



Left: pictorial *Ittō-Ryōson-shishi*; right: *zushi* configuration

Conclusion

Two main points are to be considered. The first is how Nichiren's successors were visually influenced by the mandalas they received, which is a matter pertaining to both graphic perception and the relative skills of image rendering (symbolic and calligraphic). The second and perhaps main point is their doctrinal understanding of the *honzon* to be propagated for the *mappō* era.

The visual aspect is the most obvious and relatively easy to assess. The example of Izumi Ajari Nippō is evident, as he basically reproduced the mandala in the format he received from Nichiren with the floating passages of the Lotus Sūtra. This scenery clearly renders the situation described in the Jūryō chapter with the words spoken by Śākyamuni still echoing in the air. The fact that Nippō was a less skilled calligrapher and did not possess Nichiren's charisma is mirrored in his works, but he nevertheless grasped the *honzon* as it was inscribed by his teacher in 1278.

Byakuren Ajari Nikkō had a different, much less affable personality than Nichiren. While being an excellent calligrapher himself, he did not need to replicate Nichiren's visual traits except the widely adopted *kōmyō-ten* (see MNB:3), but it is palpable that having personally witnessed the inscription of many diverse mandalas, Nikkō obviously became a Gohonzon virtuoso. He could best judge which situation was fitting to a particular inscription and his mandalic corpus is very diverse. It can be affirmed that among all disciples, Nikkō understood the *honzon* at fullest.

It is also a fact that, in the early period of his predication, Nichiren primarily focused on Śākyamuni and that it was not uncommon to simply rename a statue of another Buddha such as Amida or Yakushi as being Śākyamuni. There in fact are early examples of a Yakushi-*nyorai* image said to have been reconverted by Nichiren and another standing effigy of Śākyamuni that might have been previously Amida. Except certain distinctive symbols or mudra gestures, it was not always clear which Buddha was represented. In his letter titled *Mokue Niṣō Kaigen-no-koto* (Opening the Eyes of Wooden and Painted Images STN1:791, WND1:85), probably authored in 1273, Nichiren clarifies that by enshrining the Lotus Sūtra along with the Buddha statues, it will be endowed with the 32 features of a living Buddha, including the “pure and far reaching voice”. Nichiren was clearly convinced that the Lotus was rendering the words that Śākyamuni had spoken and the scripture echoed his actual intent. The “Original Buddha” is rendered as an envoy of the whole humankind, declaring independence from the beastly realm, focusing on compassion instead of greed, anger and stupidity. From such viewpoint, how this key concept is rendered would be absolutely irrelevant and evidently attuned to the audience. To debate about which *honzon* is correct or wrong actually betrays Nichiren's intent.



Statue of Śākyamuni from the XIII century at Ōnozan Hon'on-ji

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