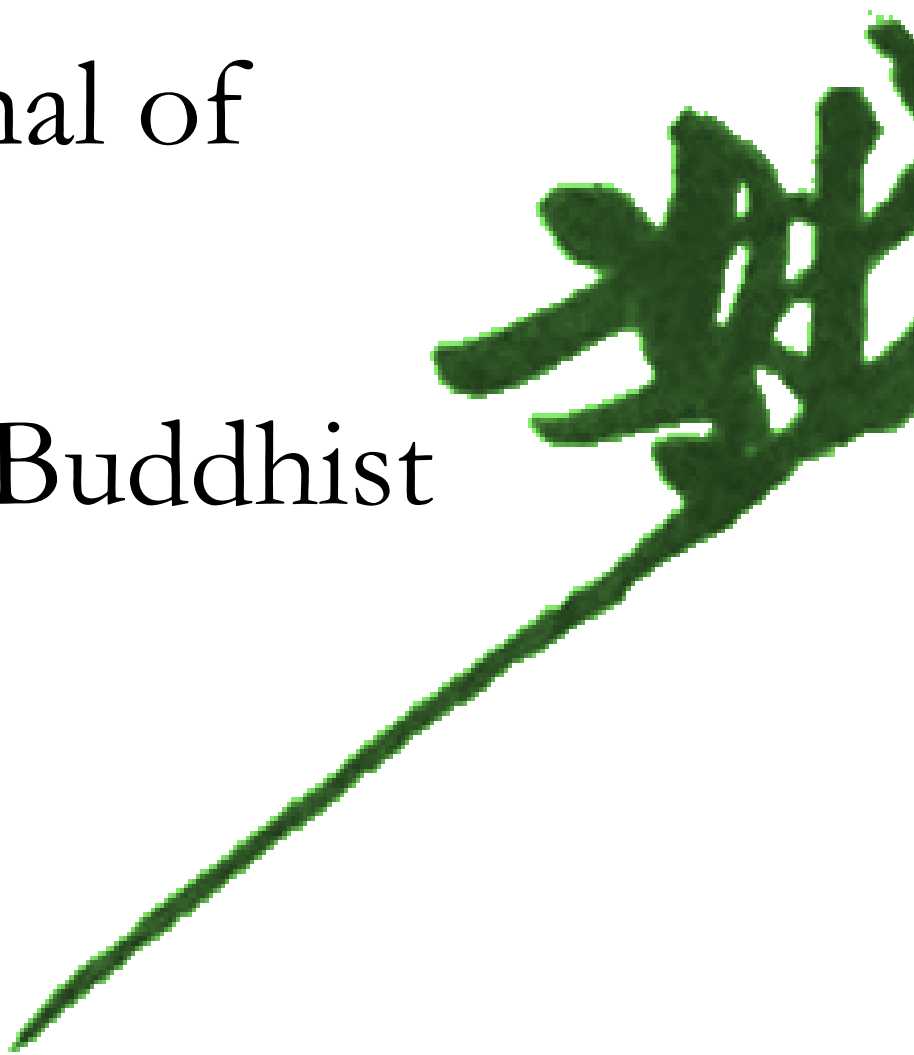


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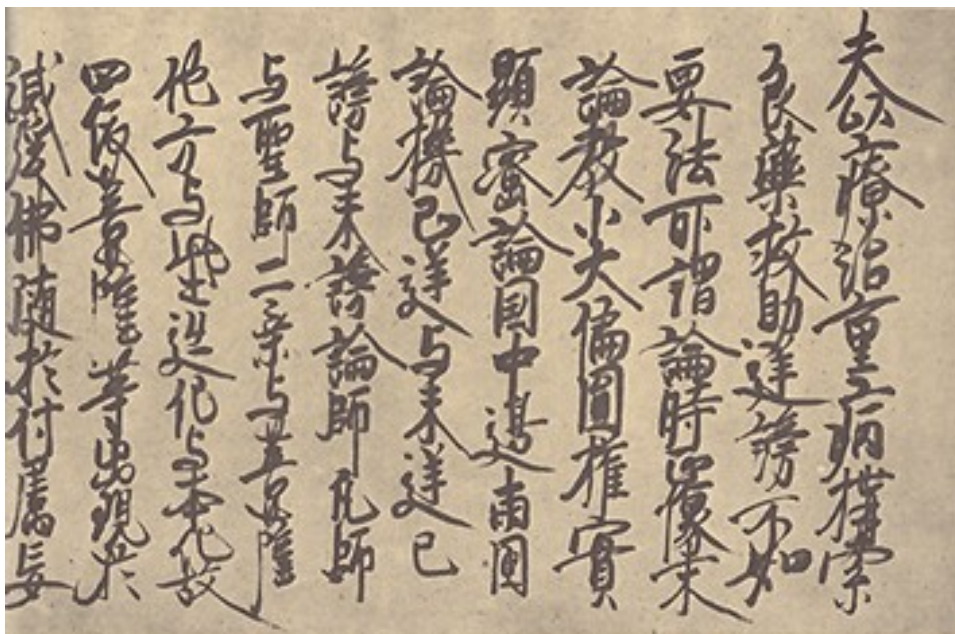
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On the original holograph “Reply to Lord Soya” (*Soya nyūdō dono moto gosho*)

Essay by Ken Mandara, The Nichiren Mandala Study Workshop

Foreword

This writing, titled *Soya nyūdō dono moto gosho* (STN:895), referred as “*gosho*” in this document, is extant at Nakayama Hokenkyō-ji temple in Chiba prefecture. The letter is also known with the alternative titles *Ōta zenmon moto gosho*, *Kōsaku-shō*, *Juyō senji shō* and *Ken Ōta zenmon moto gosho*.



First sheet of the first scroll, beginning of the letter

The recipients are Soya Jirō *hyōe-jō* Norinobu (1224~1291) and Ōta Gorō *saemon-jō kīgō* (1222~1283). The two converted to Nichiren’s teaching along with Akimoto Tarō Shōkō (?~1291), Yagi *shikibu taifu* Tane’ie (n.d.) and Toki Gorō Tsunenobu (1216~1299). The official titles, according to the medieval *Ritsuryō* legal system are given in italic to be distinguished from the person’s name. Since Soya Jirō was reciting the Sūtra daily with great diligence, he was bestowed the Buddhist alias “Kyōshin” and Hōren Nichirai as *niche-gō*, the identification name as disciple of Nichiren. According to one explanation, his wife Renge (nun) *bikuni*, was a maternal relative of Umegiku (?~1267), the mother of Nichiren. The records of Tamazawa temple state that the father of Kyōshin supported the family of Zennichi *maro*, which was Nichiren’s childhood name. In any case, the *Nichiren shōnin setsu hōzu* (also *Juryōbon seppō omiei*) authored by the end of the Kamakura period, states that the second son of the couple was Daishin Sanmi’*kō* Nisshin (1259~1335).

Daishin Nisshin became the third abbot at Minobusan Kuon-ji, after the two senior disciples Minbu-*kō* Nikō (1253~1314) and Hōki-*bō* Nikkō (1246~1333) entered in disagreement and the latter left Minobu to settle at Omosu in Suruga province, present-day Shizuoka. Minbu-*kō* went back to his native province and settled at Jōzaisan Sōgen-ji in Mobara in his final years.

Traditionally Nikō is considered the second abbot and Nisshin the third, however in fact he was the first real abbot at Kuon-ji. From this perspective, it is reasonable to consider the Soya family as relatives of Nichiren. The father of Ōta Gorō is believed to have been a relative of the mother of Toki Gorō, who is also mentioned in Nichiren's writings. Ōta and his wife, whose Buddhist alias was "Kyōjo" (lady of the Sūtra) had a son who became a disciple of Nichiren named Sotsu-*kō* Nichikō (1257~1314). He studied with the other young boys at Minobu and was later appointed the second abbot at Nakayama. Gorō was given the alias "Jōmyō" (vehicle of enlightenment) and the *niche-gō* Hōshi-Myōnichi, *Dharma* master "mystical sun".

Nichiren inscribed a large three-sheet mandala for Ōta, another for his wife on the 16th day of the seventh month in first year of Kōan (1278) and one for Soya in the eighth month of the following year. At present, the location of these scrolls remains uncertain, in any case these are listed in the *Sei-Nakayama Hokekyō-ji Reihō Mokuroku* records of Onden'in Nichikō (MNB3:12).

By comparing the calligraphy of the letters sent to Soya and Ōta and the correspondence with other followers, the ideograms are composed with great thoughtfulness. In addition, Nichiren entrusted the two disciples with teachings of the utmost importance, as their bureaucratic experience allowed them to properly store the holograph and they were knowledgeable about Buddhist principles. This writing is translated as "On the Five Guidelines of Propagation" (WND2:540) and "A Letter to Lay Priest Lord Soya" (WNS3:147).

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

Keywords: Nichiren, *gosho*, Soya Kyōshin, Ōta Jōmyō

Analysis of the contents

The *gosho* is composed in *kanbun*, a form of writing classical Chinese unique to Japan. It was authored on the tenth day of the third month, supposedly in the first year of Kenji (1275), albeit there are other opinions. The writing is composed of two scrolls, the first of 26 sheets (mm 315×12,484) and the second of 19 (mm 315× 9,026), for a total of 45 sheets and is currently stored at Nakayama Hokekyō-ji. Title of the letter is “*Soya nyūdō dono moto gosho*”, the recipients were two lay followers named Kyōshin and Jōmyō, believed to be relatives of Nichiren. The calligraphy expresses great kindness and the letter itself contains significant teachings. At the end Nichiren asks to borrow some important Buddhist transcripts, an evident sign that the two possessed an extensive collection of sacred texts.

The letter also shows the above-average Buddhist knowledge of the two samurai-bureaucrats. In writings addressed to other followers, Nichiren’s rhetoric towards other Buddhist schools is generally straightforward, simple and direct. Explanation in the *Soya nyūdō dono moto gosho* are more thoughtful with particular attention on clarifying Tendai thought. In the defiled *Mappō* era, Japan need the good medicine of the 16th chapter of the Lotus (symbolizing the Eternal Buddha) to cure the grave illness of its people.

In the ninth year of Bun’ei (1272), while in exile at Sado, Nichiren sent a letter to Toki titled *Hasshū Imoku shō*¹ (STN:525), where he criticizes the eight Mahāyāna schools² of his time comparing them with Tendai teachings. However, such critique is not made from the standpoint of medieval Tendai school in Japan, but mainly based on the Lotus reading of the three founding fathers of the Hokke teachings, Zhìyi (*Tiantai* 538~598), Zhànrán (*Myōraku* 711~702) and Saichō (*Dengyō* 766~822).

The same clarifications contained in the *Soya nyūdō dono moto gosho* are also found in the *Kanjin Honzon shō*³ (STN:702), authored while in exile on Sado. Key concepts are the principles explaining that the Thus-Come-Ones and Buddhas in other Sūtras are not endowed with the *trikāya* (Three Bodies of the Buddha). For Nichiren, the Lotus is the only teaching that can save others in the defiled *mappō* era. In the *gosho*, Nichiren explains the principles of the “Five Principles” that are necessary to propagate the Lotus. These are the “Teaching” meaning the highest teaching, which is the Lotus; the “Capacity”, indicating the aptitude of the people who will receive those teachings, “Time” stands for the timing in which the teaching is propagated, followed by the “Country” and the “Sequence” of propagation.

¹ The English title is given as “Differences of the Lotus Sect from Eight Other Sects” (WNS2:15), “Errors of the Eight Schools” (WND2:434) and is extant at Nakayama Hokekyō-ji.

² These are Kusha (Dharma Analysis Treasury), Jōjitsu (Establishment of Truth), Ritsu (Precepts), Hossō (Dharma Characteristics), Sanron (Three Treatises), Kegon (Flower Garland), Jōdo (Pure Land) and Shingon (True Word)

³ Abbreviated titles „Treatise Revealing the Spiritual Contemplation and the Most Venerable One“ (WNS2:126), “The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind” (WND1:534). The treatise is extant at Nakayama Hokekyō-ji.

After the Sado exile, Nichiren substitutes “Sequence” with “Teacher” since neither Zhiyi, Zhànrán or Saichō appeared in the *mappō* era. In the 15th chapter of the Sūtra, Śākyamuni, as Eternal Buddha of the Three Bodies, transmits the *Dharma* (teachings of the Lotus) to the *Jiyū-Bosatsu* (Bodhisattvas of the Earth) to be propagated in the defiled *sabā* world.

The key point here is that propagating the Lotus teachings in the defiled age is extremely difficult and beyond capacity of the Bodhisattvas of the *shakke* “trace teaching” that appear in the first half of the Lotus. Although their appearance is splendid and wonderful, Śākyamuni does not entrust the teaching to them. Because it is so difficult to propagate, he transmits it to the *honge* Bodhisattvas of the “essential teaching” (*honmon*). The Lotus states that the *Jiyū-Bosatsu* are the only ones capable of propagating the Wonderful *Dharma*.

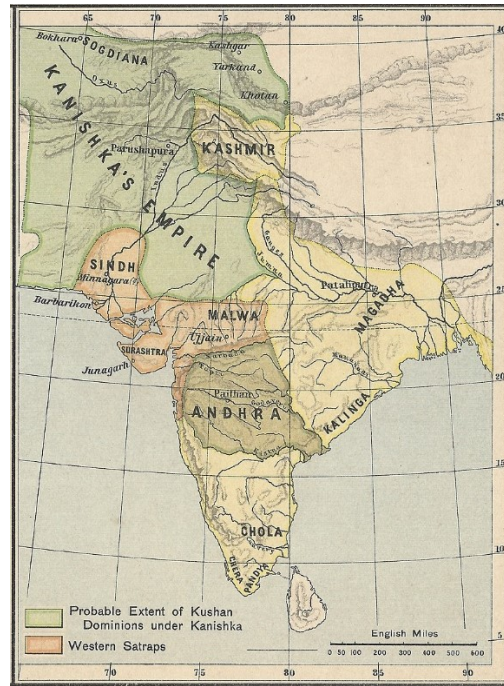
Since Nichiren endured four important persecutions⁴ in order to propagate this *Dharma*, he was convinced to be the manifestation of *Vīśīstacāritra* (Jōgyō), leader of the *Jiyū-Bosatsu*. This belief provided Nichiren with an exceptional mental and emotional strength.

This *gosho* is composed with large ideograms, hence tens of sheets, totaling more than twenty linear meters, were necessary to compose it. The text is structured on three levels. In the first, Nichiren writes about the “Five Doctrines”. From the standpoint of *Jambudvīpa* (the whole World in Buddhist cosmology), “Capacity” indicates the difference between those who had received the seed of enlightenment and those who had not. Nichiren explains this point and his own uncompromising stance with the pattern of “Reverse Relationship”, at the example of Bodhisattva *Sadāparibhūta* (Never Disparaging) and the different type of enlightenment in the pre-Lotus teachings.

In the second level, Nichiren explains about the “Time” in the three periods after the Buddha’s passing, which are defined as *Shōbō*, *Zōbō* and *Mappō*, respectively the Formal, Semblance and Latter Days of the *Dharma*. In the first 500-year period of *Shōbō*, the “Good Medicine” was found in the *Theravāda* School of the Elders represented by the Ritsu, Kusha and Jōjitsu schools based on the teachings of Mahākāśyapa and Ānanda. In the second half of *Shōbō*, Mahāyāna teachings of Aśvaghoṣa, Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu were the correct medicine and the *sangha* represented by the *Sanron* (Three Treaties), *Hossō* (Dharma Characteristics), *Shingon* (True Word) and *Zen* (Meditation) schools.

⁴ Itō, Komatsubara, Matsuba-*ga-yatsu*, Ryūkō (*Tatsu-no-Kuchi*), see „The Person Nichiren“ Vol. 1-4.

As also stated in other writings, such as the *Kaimoku-shō*⁵, in Nichiren's interpretation, the Indian esoteric masters *Śubhakarasiṃha* (Zennui 637~735), *Vajrabodhi* (Kongōchi 670~741) and *Amoghavajra* (Fukūkongō 705~775), drew heavily from the *Ichinen-Sanzon* teachings of Tiantai and incorporated them into their own esoteric doctrines which they transferred from Yuèzhī⁶ to China.



Map of the Kushan empire under King Kanishka around 2nd century C.E.

Saichō had also mentioned this point in his work titled *Ebyō Tendai-shū*, where he describes the Shingon, Keron, Sanron and Hossō doctrines basing himself on the classification of Buddhist doctrines according to the teachings of Tiantai.

Following the Nichiren rationale, Saichō's successors Ennin (Jikaku 793~864) and Enchin (Chishō 814~891) had diverged from the main Tendai doctrine in order to incorporate the esoteric teachings of Kūkai (*Kōbō* 774~835). Of course the principle of “Criticism and Appropriation” and “Legitimation/Delegitimation” has already been explained by Lucia Dolce, Jaqueline Stone and others. Nichiren's invective against Ennin and Enchin is not to be taken literally, but as a strategy for establishing his own discourse, which would have otherwise just become a sub-school of Tendai.

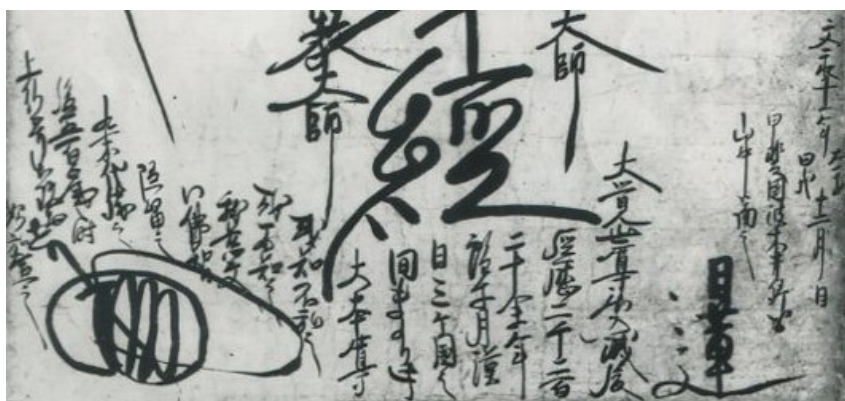
⁵ “Open your Eyes to the Lotus Teachings” (WNS2:29). “The Opening of the Eyes” (WND1:220). The original manuscript was lost in the great Minobu fire in the Meiji era and is extant only as an original copy at Kuon-ji.

⁶ The Kushan Empire was a kingdom in central Asia and northern India, present-day parts of Afghanistan and Kashmir.

Conclusion

It is very interesting that within the original *kanbun* text, Nichiren differentiated between India (*Tenjiku*) and Yuèzhī (*Gesshi*) and specifically mentions Kanishka, the Great king of the Kushan empire. Nichiren had obviously read the “Great Tang Records on the Western Regions” (*Daitō seiki-ki*), which he also quotes in his writings⁷ and where Kanishka is mentioned. Regretfully, this details have been omitted in English translations and both *Tenjiku* and *Gesshi* are translated as India and probably considered as different regions from the same subcontinent. There is however a huge difference, because the Kushan empire (Yuèzhī) was the easternmost point of the Hellenistic world. The constant contact with the Greek and Roman empires is attested by the huge coinage modeled on Roman and Hellenic coins found in the area. If there has been a form of *Graeco-Buddhism* in the Hellenic world, the inclusiveness of Platonism must have hence reached the Kushans. The *Saddharma-pundarika-sūtra* as translated Kumārajīva (344~413) in his version of the *Myōhorengekyō*, is believed to have originated in Yuèzhī and not in India. Nichiren in fact inscribed a special mandala, known as the *Man’nen kyūgo daihonzon*, in the twelfth month of the eleventh year of Bun’ei (1274), where he inserted a very unique laudatory inscription (MNB1:94):

Following the Greatly Awakened World Honored One’s entry into extinction, more than 2,220 years have passed. Even so, within the three countries of Yuèzhī, 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 *Man’nen kyūgo daihonzon*

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”.

⁷ The „Records of the Western Regions“ are quoted or mentioned in several writings such as *Reply to the Priest Takabashi*, *The Selection of Time*, *The Teaching*, *Capacity*, *Time and Country*, *Letter to Konichi-bo* and *Letter to the Brothers*.

While it is not possible to comprise the whole Nichiren doctrine in one single letter, the following points appears evident:

- Nichiren believed to be the manifestation of *Viśiṣṭacāritra* (Jōgyō)
- Nichiren's reading of Tendai Buddhism
- The Lotus evolved in its present form in Yuèzhī and not in India
- The *Sad-dharma-pundarika-sūtra* might have been the original source for the *Mahāvairocana-Tantra* (Dainichi-kyō)

The writing corpus of Nichiren shall therefore never be seen as a sum of separate letters, but holistically as a whole. His letters should be hence always studied with the temporal sequence⁸ in mind and not as a single unit.



Left/center: Kanishka (front), Greek deity Helios (reverse); right: coins of Emperor Trajan found in Afghanistan

⁸ To this purpose „The Catalogue of Nichiren's Writings” has been made available (this footnote is hyperlinked).

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