



THE LIFE OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN

This is the first of a two-part article on the life of Nichiren Daishonin. This first installment takes readers from Nichiren's early years to his transformational experience during the Tatsunokuchi Persecution.

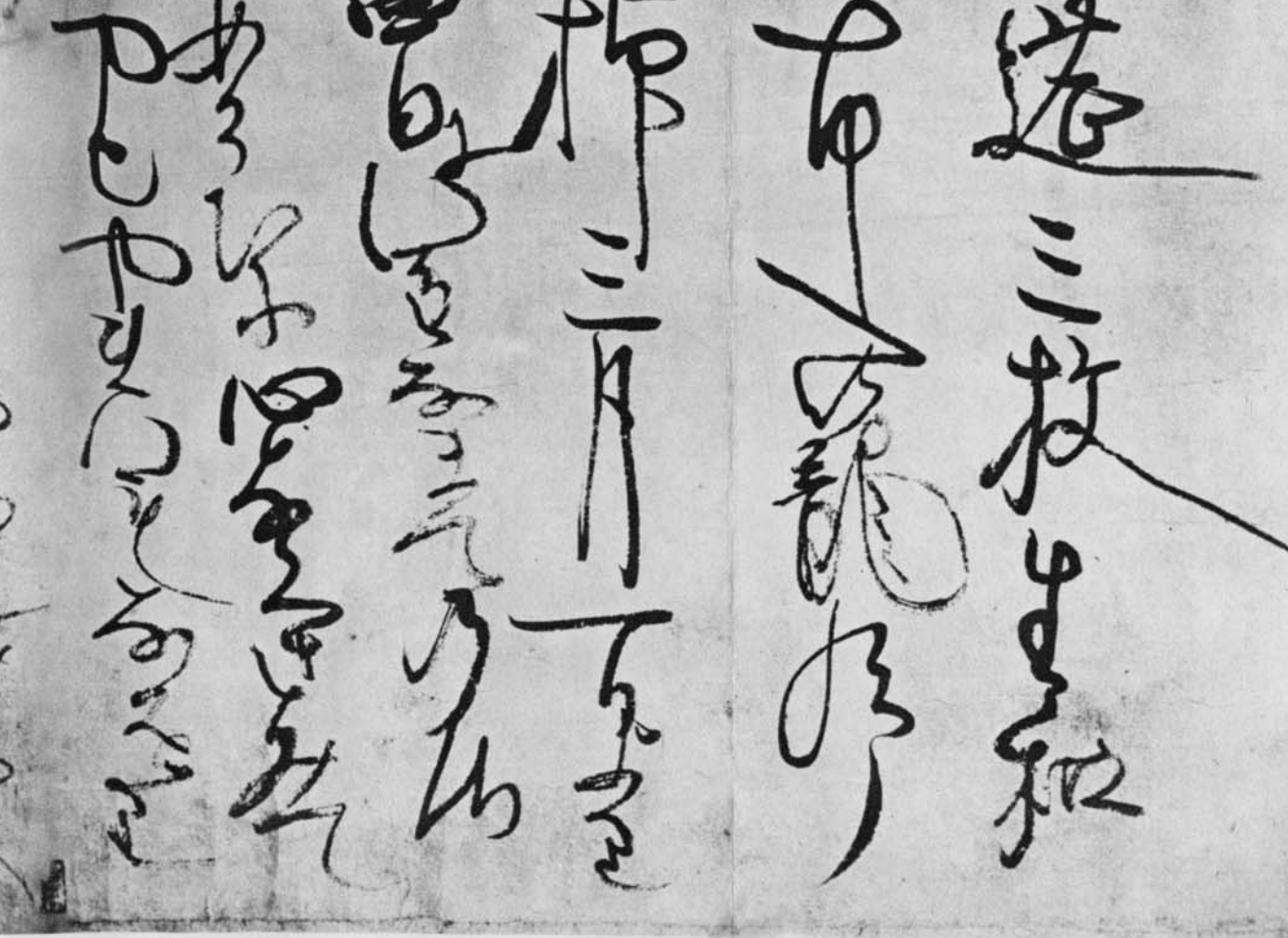
NICHIREN DAISHONIN devoted his life to a compassionate struggle to spread the Mystic Law based on a vow to enable all people to open within themselves the life-state of a Buddha.

At the same time, his was a life spent challenging and calling to account those forces that

sought to obstruct the happiness of ordinary people. In the process, he met and overcame a continuous series of major obstacles and persecutions.

HIS EARLY YEARS

Nichiren Daishonin, whose childhood name was Zennichi-marō, was born on February 16,



A sample of Nichiren Daishonin's handwritten letter "On the Three Seating Mats" (WND-2, 991).

1222, in Awa Province (in modern-day Chiba Prefecture, Japan). His father made a living as a fisherman, and therefore his family belonged to the class of common laborers.

At 12, Zennichi-maro entered Seicho-ji temple, a Buddhist temple in Awa, to obtain the equivalent of an elementary school education. During this period, he prayed "to become the wisest person in Japan" ("Letter to the Priests of Seicho-ji," *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 650).

He resolved to fully grasp and embody in his own life the deepest wisdom of Buddhism, so that he might lead his parents and all people to overcome the fundamental sufferings associated with living and dying. To accomplish this, he decided to become a Buddhist monk and to thoroughly pursue the Buddhist teachings.

In 1237, he was formally ordained as a Buddhist priest and took the name Zesho-bo Rencho. Studying under Dozen-bo, a priest at Seicho-ji, he described having been bestowed during that time "a jewel of wisdom as bright as the morning star" ("The Tripitaka Master Shan-wu-wei," WND-1, 176). By this, he was referring to the wisdom that would enable him to discover and fully grasp the wonderful teaching, or Mystic Law, that could rightly be called the essence or foundation of all Buddhist teachings.

Nichiren then embarked on a quest to visit and study at the various major Buddhist temples of Kamakura, Kyoto and Nara. In the process, he carefully read through all the Buddhist sutras these temples housed and researched the essential doctrines of the major Buddhist schools.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF HIS TEACHINGS

As a result of these studies, he concluded that the Lotus Sutra constituted the highest teaching among the Buddhist sutras and that the Mystic Law to which he had become awakened was the Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the very essence of the Lotus Sutra. Regarding this as the teaching capable of saving all people of the Latter Day of the Law¹ from suffering, he resolved that it was his mission to spread it widely.

Through his intensive studies, he confirmed his mission as well as the method by which he would propagate that teaching. Prepared to meet the great difficulties and persecutions that would certainly arise along the way, he determined to commence propagating the Mystic Law.

Then, around noon on April 28, 1253, at Seicho-ji, he spoke publicly, refuting the teachings of the Pure Land and other major Buddhist schools of Japan. He chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo in a strong voice, and declared it to be the one and only correct teaching capable of saving all people of the Latter Day of the Law. This event is known as Nichiren's declaration of the establishment of his teaching. On that occasion, at age 32, he set forth for the first time the essential elements of his teachings and gave himself the name *Nichiren*, composed of the Chinese characters for *sun* and *lotus*.

In declaring his teaching, Nichiren strictly criticized the self-righteous doctrine of the Pure Land, or Nembutsu, school [which taught that chanting the name of Amida Buddha—a Buddha said to inhabit a pure land in the western reaches of the cosmos—would gain one salvation in the next life, in Amida's pure land. *Nembutsu* means to “contemplate the Buddha” and refers to the chanting of the phrase “Namu Amida Butsu”].

Tojo Kagenobu, the steward of the area where Seicho-ji was located, was a strong Pure Land believer, and he became enraged upon hearing about Nichiren's criticism of the Pure Land teachings. Intent on harming the Daishonin, he sent his men to Seicho-ji to capture him. But with the help of Dozen-bo and other priests at the temple, Nichiren escaped unharmed. He then went to Kamakura, where he took up residence in a simple lodging in Matsubagayatsu of the Nagoe district and commenced activities to propagate his teaching.

While spreading the practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, Nichiren continued to refute the errors of the Pure Land and Zen schools. In his view, these schools, which had become widely popular, exerted a negative influence on the people of Kamakura.

As a result of his propagation efforts, such figures as Toki Jonin, Shijo Kingo and Ikegami Munenaka—who remained his devoted followers throughout life—took faith in the Daishonin's teachings.

REMONSTRATION WITH THE GOVERNMENT INCURS PERSECUTIONS

Natural disasters and climatic disturbances such as extreme weather and earthquakes, as well as famine, fires and epidemics, had successively struck Japan at the rate of nearly one such calamity every year.

In particular, a major earthquake struck Kamakura in August 1257, causing widespread destruction.

This disaster and its aftermath served as an impetus for Nichiren to resolve to illuminate, through Buddhism, the fundamental causes for the miseries besetting his society and to clarify the means to eradicate those causes. To that

end, he went to Jisso-ji temple in Iwamoto (in present-day Shizuoka Prefecture) and made an intensive study of all the Buddhist sutras and texts in the temple's sutra library. It was during his studies at Jisso-ji that he encountered the young man who would in due course be called Nikko and become his closest disciple and direct successor.

Using what he had gleaned from his research, Nichiren authored a treatise titled "On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land" (Jpn *Rissho ankoku ron*; see WND-1, 6). On July, 16, 1260, he submitted this work to Hojo Tokiyori, the retired regent and de-facto ruler at the time.

This was Nichiren's first official remonstrance with the sovereign.

In "On Establishing the Correct Teaching," Nichiren identifies the cause of the continuing onslaught of natural disasters and other calamities assailing the nation. He attributes it to the fact that people throughout the land had for some time been placing their belief in erroneous and misleading Buddhist teachings; the most culpable among these teachings, he points out, is the Pure Land school.

Should the people cease their donations to and support of such evil doctrines and embrace the correct teaching of the Lotus Sutra, he emphasizes, they can establish a land of peace and security.

If, however, they continue to lend support to misleading teachings, then, of the three calamities and seven disasters² that various sutras say will beset a land hostile to the correct Buddhist teaching, the two catastrophes that have yet to occur—"revolt within one's own domain" and "invasion from foreign lands"—will ultimately appear.

The Daishonin admonishes the people to quickly take faith in the correct teaching of the



Lotus Sutra and cease their support of erroneous teachings.

The leaders of the Kamakura shogunate ignored Nichiren's earnest remonstrance. Additionally, priests of the Pure Land school, with the tacit support of powerful individuals in the government, conspired to have Nichiren persecuted.

On the evening of August 27, 1260, a group of Pure Land believers, intent on killing Nichiren, attacked his dwelling at Matsubagayatsu. Fortunately, the Daishonin was not present during the attack, and he subsequently decided to leave Kamakura for a time.

On May 12, 1261, after his return to Kamakura, the shogunate arrested Nichiren and exiled him to Ito on the Izu Peninsula. This came to be known as the Izu Exile.

In February 1263, he was pardoned from exile in Izu and returned again to Kamakura. The next year, he set out for his home province of Awa to visit his ailing mother.

On November 11, 1264, while on the way to the estate of his follower Kudo Yoshitaka in Amatsu of Awa Province, Nichiren and his

party were attacked by a group of warriors led by the local steward, Tojo Kagenobu (the same steward who had sought to attack him when he first declared his teaching at Seicho-ji in 1253). Nichiren's disciple Kyonin-bo was killed in the attack, and Kudo Yoshitaka died later of his wounds; Nichiren himself received a deep cut on his forehead and had his left hand broken. This attack is known as the Komatsubara Persecution.

THE TATSUNOKUCHI PERSECUTION: "CASTING OFF THE TRANSIENT TO REVEAL THE TRUE"

In 1268, an official letter from the ruler of the Mongol empire arrived in Kamakura. It conveyed the Mongols' intention to use military force against Japan should Japanese leaders not respond to their demands for submission and payment of tribute. With this, the prediction of the calamity of invasion from foreign lands that Nichiren Daishonin had predicted in "On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land" would soon be fulfilled.

After learning of this news, Nichiren sent letters of remonstrance to 11 key figures in Kamakura, including the regent, Hojo Tokimune, and priests representing major Buddhist temples. In each letter, he requested that an official public debate be held between him and leading figures of the Buddhist schools. But his appeals were ignored. Instead, the authorities began to view Nichiren and his followers as a threat and contrived to suppress them.

Around that time, the True Word school, which had been holding prayer ceremonies for the defeat of the Mongols, was gaining prestige and influence. Also, a leader of

the True Word Precepts school, the priest Ryokan of Gokuraku-ji temple in Kamakura, had strengthened his ties with government authorities and began to wield significant power. Despite their prominence, Nichiren began to vigorously challenge and refute these erroneous Buddhist schools, which were exerting a negative influence upon the people.

In 1271, Kamakura suffered a severe drought. Ryokan announced that he would conduct a prayer ceremony to bring about rainfall. Hearing of this, Nichiren sent Ryokan a letter containing the following challenge: Should Ryokan succeed in bringing about rain within seven days, Nichiren would become Ryokan's disciple. If no rain were to fall in that seven-day period, however, Ryokan should take faith in the Lotus Sutra.

Ryokan commenced his prayers based on the True Word teachings, but in the course of seven days, not a drop of rain fell. He then requested a seven-day extension, and continued to conduct prayer rituals. Despite all of Ryokan's prayers, not only did no rain fall during that 14-day period, destructive winds struck the city of Kamakura.

Ryokan had clearly lost the challenge. Rather than honestly acknowledging defeat, he grew even more hostile toward Nichiren. Under the name of a priest in his charge, Ryokan filed a lawsuit against the Daishonin. He also appealed to key government authorities as well as to their wives, conspiring to have Nichiren punished.

The public revered Ryokan as a priest of great stature who had mastered the Buddhist teachings. Nichiren, however, saw through Ryokan's benevolent façade and perceived his true nature: that of a priest who had aligned himself with secular power and sought only to fulfill his own ambitions.

On September 10, 1271, Nichiren received a summons from the shogunate. Appearing

before the authorities, he was questioned by Hei no Saemon-no-jo Yoritsuna, deputy chief of the office of police and military affairs, second only to the regent himself.

During that encounter, Nichiren remonstrated with Hei no Saemon, instructing him based on Buddhist principles as to the proper attitude and behavior of a ruler who sought to bring peace and security to the people of his nation.

Two days later, on September 12, Hei no Saemon, leading a party of soldiers, stormed Nichiren's dwelling at Matsubagayatsu and arrested him in a manner befitting a rebel or traitor. On that occasion, Nichiren again admonished Hei no Saemon, pointing out that if he should persist in persecuting him, he would be guilty of the crime of toppling the "pillar of Japan" and would invite upon the nation the two calamities of "revolt within one's own domain" and "invasion from foreign lands" predicted in the sutras. This constituted Nichiren's second remonstrance with the sovereign.

Without any investigation or questioning, Nichiren was transferred after midnight amid a procession of soldiers to a beach just outside Kamakura called Tatsunokuchi, a place used as an execution ground. Hei no Saemon had secretly and illegally conspired with others to have Nichiren beheaded.

Just as the execution was about to take place, however, a brilliant orb of light (which historians believe to have been a large meteorite or comet fragment) appeared to the north over Enoshima Island and moved across the night sky in a northwesterly direction. This startled and terrified the soldiers guarding Nichiren to the extent that they were unable to follow through with his execution. This series of events is known as the Tatsunokuchi Persecution.

The persecution at Tatsunokuchi constitutes a profoundly significant turning point in

Nichiren's lifelong efforts to spread his teachings. That is, at the moment he emerged victorious from this attempt to execute him, he cast off his transient identity as a common mortal and revealed within his life his true identity as the "Buddha of limitless joy from time without beginning." This is referred to as Nichiren "casting off the transient to reveal the true."

From that point on, Nichiren began to fully display the actions of the true Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law, and in that capacity to inscribe the mandala known as the Gohonzon (meaning "object of fundamental respect"—the object of devotion capable of enabling all people to attain Buddhahood).

This article was adapted from the October 2007 Daibyakurenge, the Soka Gakkai monthly study journal.



1. The Latter Day of the Law: The name of the age in which the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha were predicted to lose their power to save the people; that age was thought to begin some 2,000 years after the Buddha's death, and according to views prevalent in Nichiren's time, it had already begun.
2. Three calamities and seven disasters: Catastrophes described in various sutras. The three calamities occur at the end of a *kalpa*. There are two types: the three greater calamities of fire, water and wind, which destroy the world, and the three lesser calamities of high grain prices or inflation (especially that caused by famine), warfare and pestilence, from which human society perishes. The seven disasters include war and natural disasters and are generally held to result from slander of the correct teaching. They are mentioned in the Medicine Master, Benevolent Kings and other sutras. They differ slightly according to the source. Nichiren combined these two different types of calamities in a single phrase to explain the disasters besetting Japan in his time. In his 1260 treatise "On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land," he states, based on the sutras, that they occur because both the rulers and the populace turn against the correct teaching.



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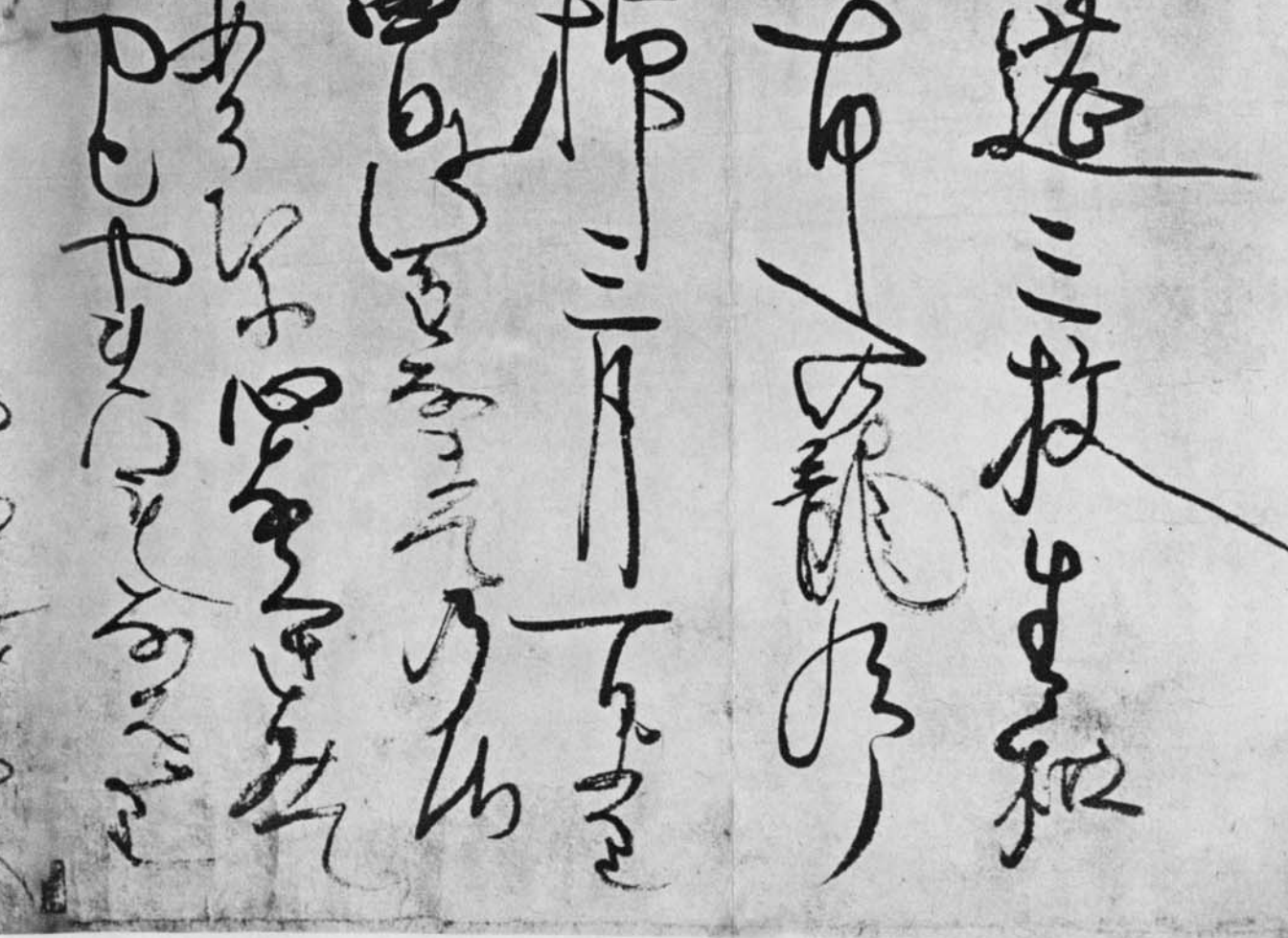
This is the conclusion to the article covering Nichiren Daishonin's life. This installment begins with Nichiren's exile to Sado Island and closes with his final days.

THE SADO EXILE

AFTER THE ATTEMPT to execute Nichiren Daishonin on September 12, 1271, at Tatsunokuchi failed, the government authorities were uncertain what to do with him. He was taken temporarily to the nearby residence of the

deputy constable of Sado Province. Sado, an island off the northeast coast of Japan, was commonly used to exile criminals. Because conditions on the island were so harsh, it was assumed no exiles would survive.

The decision was made to exile Nichiren to Sado Island, and on October 10, 1271, he left the Kamakura region for Sado, arriving on October 28. Nichiren was taken to Tsukahara, a desolate field used for the disposal of abandoned corpses. There, he lived in a small,



A sample of Nichiren Daishonin's handwritten letter "On the Three Seating Mats" (WND-2, 991).

dilapidated shrine, which had been used for funeral services. He was exposed to bitter cold and lacked sufficient food and clothing. He also was subject to constant threats by Pure Land school believers who bore him great hostility for his condemnation of their distortions of the Buddha's teachings.

At the time, government persecution extended also to Nichiren's followers in Kamakura, some of whom were imprisoned and others driven from their homes or deprived of their land and income. Many disciples, either out of cowardice or the desire to protect themselves or their possessions, came to doubt him and eventually abandoned their faith. Because exile to Sado was tantamount to a death sentence, many believed that their teacher had been defeated after all.

In mid-January 1272, several hundred priests and others representing the major Buddhist schools gathered in front of Nichiren's dwelling to challenge him to a religious debate. Nichiren accepted and easily countered the arguments of each opponent, thoroughly refuting the erroneous doctrines and interpretations they put forth regarding Buddhist teachings.

In February 1272, an insurrection within the ruling Hojo clan caused fighting to erupt in Kamakura and Kyoto. This was significant because Nichiren had predicted civil strife five months earlier. At the time of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution, Nichiren had described the impending calamity of "revolt within one's own domain" to Hei no Saemon-no-jo Yoritsuna.

That summer, Nichiren was moved from Tsukahara to a village called Ichinosawa, affording him a little more comfort and convenience. But the threat to his life posed by hostile believers of other schools did not lessen.

Throughout Nichiren's exile, his disciple Nikko Shonin served his teacher and shared in his hardships.

Among new believers in the Daishonin's teachings were an elderly samurai named Abutsu-bo and his wife, the lay nun Sennichi. Throughout their lives, they played a key role in supporting the Daishonin and the growing community of believers. Their example in faith continues to inspire believers today, more than seven centuries later.

While on Sado, Nichiren produced many important writings, including the particularly significant "The Opening of the Eyes" and "The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind." "The Opening of the Eyes," written in February 1272, clarifies Nichiren as the true Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law. For this reason, it is known as the writing that reveals the "object of devotion in terms of the Person." "The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind" clarifies the object of devotion that all people should embrace as the Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. For this reason it is referred to as the writing that reveals the "object of devotion in terms of the Law."

Due in large part to Nichiren's predictions coming true, the government pardoned him from exile in February 1274. The following month, he departed Sado for Kamakura, and the month after that, he again appeared before Hei no Saemon and other officials.

On this occasion, he once again admonished the government for having prayers based on erroneous Buddhist doctrines conducted for the defeat of the Mongol forces. In response to a direct question from Hei no

Saemon, Nichiren predicted that the Mongols would launch an attack against Japan within the year. This encounter would mark his third remonstrations with the authorities.

Not long after, a large Mongol force did indeed land on Japan's southernmost main island, Kyushu. With this, the two calamities Nichiren had warned of in his treatise to the government "On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land"—revolt within one's own domain and invasion from foreign lands—had both occurred, showing his predictions to have been accurate.

As mentioned, the Daishonin had now directly remonstrated with the government concerning these two calamities on three occasions (the first being his submission of "On Establishing the Correct Teaching" to the retired regent Hojo Tokiyori; and the second, his remonstrance to Hei no Saemon during the Tatsunokuchi Persecution). Together, these three warnings are known as Nichiren's "three instances of gaining distinction," deriving from his statement, "Three times now I have gained distinction by having such knowledge" ("The Selection of the Time," *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 579).

ENTERING MINOBU

His three remonstrations with the sovereign having gone unheeded, Nichiren Daishonin left Kamakura for the remote mountain region of Minobu, taking up residence in the province of Kai (present-day Yamanashi Prefecture). The Minobu area was governed by Hakiri Sanenaga (also known as Hakii Sanenaga), the local steward who became a follower of Nichiren after having been converted by Nikko Shonin.

Nichiren entered Minobu in May 1274. In no way did he view this as a retirement

or retreat from worldly troubles. While at Minobu, he authored many important writings, including “The Selection of the Time” and “On Repaying Debts of Gratitude,” in which he clarified his principal teachings, in particular, the Three Great Secret Laws (the object of devotion of the essential teaching, the sanctuary of the essential teaching and the invocation of the essential teaching). Also, through his lectures on the Lotus Sutra (set down in *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings* and other documents), he focused on educating and training disciples who would bear responsibility for spreading his teachings in the future. During this period, he wrote many personal letters to his lay followers. These letters offered encouragement and instruction in faith and practice to enable each person to become a winner in life and establish the state of supreme enlightenment called Buddhahood. Today, Nichiren’s letters and these are compiled in English in *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, volumes 1 and 2.

THE ATSUHARA PERSECUTION

After Nichiren Daishonin entered Minobu, efforts to spread his teachings progressed particularly in the Fuji area of Suruga Province, southwest of Mount Fuji. Among those converting to Nichiren’s teachings were priests and lay believers associated with the Tendai and other Buddhist schools. As a result, the local Tendai temple opposed the propagation efforts of Nichiren’s disciples and put pressure on the priests and lay persons who had converted to Nichiren’s teachings. This gave rise to incidents involving threats and intimidation toward those who had taken faith in the Mystic Law.

On September 21, 1279, 20 farmers from



the Atsuhara area who had taken faith in the Daishonin’s teachings were arrested by authorities on false charges and taken to Kamakura.

At the residence of Hei no Saemon, the farmers were harshly interrogated, tortured and threatened with death should they not renounce their faith. Every one of them, however, refused to give in, each standing by his beliefs. In the end, three of the farmers—the brothers Jinshiro, Yagoro and Yarokuro—were put to death, and the remaining 17 were driven from their land.

This and the preceding series of oppressive incidents are collectively known as the Atsuhara Persecution. Observing the courageous spirit and faith of these believers, who refused to compromise even under threat of death, Nichiren sensed that his disciples had now established faith strong enough to endure any kind of persecution while protecting the correct teaching. And so, on October 1, in a letter titled “On Persecutions Befalling the

Sage,” Nichiren noted that 27 years had passed since he first declared his teaching and that he had fulfilled the “purpose of my advent” in this world (see WND-1, 996–98). In Buddhism, the “purpose of one’s advent” means the objective or purpose for which a Buddha appears in the world.

Then, on October 12, 1279, he established what came to be known as the “Dai-Gohonzon bestowed on Jambudvipa.” *Jambudvipa*, here, means the entire world. In inscribing this large Gohonzon, Nichiren Daishonin responded to the powerful faith exhibited by ordinary people in the midst of the Atsuhara Persecution and expressed his deepest wish and vow for kosen-rufu—the propagation of the Law to free all

people from misery and lead them to genuine happiness.

In response to the Atsuhara Persecution, the Daishonin’s followers united and fought in the spirit of “many in body, one in mind.” Among his followers, a 21-year-old youth, Nanjo Tokimitsu, protected and supported his fellow believers during these trying times.

ENTRUSTING HIS TEACHINGS TO NIKKO SHONIN

In November 1281, Nichiren Daishonin and his disciples completed construction of a permanent priests’ lodging at Minobu and

A TIMELINE OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN’S LIFE

1222 (Age 1—at that time in Japan, as soon as a child was born, he or she was considered to be 1 year old)

February 16: Born in Kataumi, Tojo Village, Nagasa District, Awa Province (today, part of Chiba Prefecture)

1253 (Age 32)

April 28: Declares the establishment of his teaching at Seicho-ji, a temple in Awa Province

1260 (Age 39)

July 16: Submits “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land” to retired regent Hojo Tokiyori—his first official remonstrance with the sovereign

August 27: Matsubagayatsu Persecution

1261 (Age 40)

May 12: Exiled to Izu Peninsula

1264 (Age 43)

November 11: Komatsubara Persecution

1268 (Age 47)

October 11: Sends 11 letters of remonstrance to key figures in Kamakura

1271 (Age 50)

September 12: Tatsunokuchi Persecution

October: Begins inscribing the Gohonzon for his disciples

October 10: Sado Exile begins

named it Kuon-ji, *kuon* meaning the “remote past” and *ji* meaning “temple.”

In September of the following year, Nichiren entrusted the entirety of the teachings he had expounded and spread throughout his life to Nikko Shonin, charging him with the mission and responsibility of accomplishing *kosen-rufu*—the widespread propagation of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

On September 8, 1282, after consulting his disciples, Nichiren set out from Minobu, where he had lived the previous nine years, and headed toward Hitachi, north of present-day Tokyo, to take advantage of the healing properties of that area’s hot springs.

Along the way, he stopped in Ikegami in

present-day Tokyo to visit the residence of longtime follower Ikegami Munenaka. There, he made clear his intentions concerning what was to be done after his death.

On September 25, despite the gravity of his illness, he lectured to his followers on his treatise “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land.” Then on October 13, 1282, Nichiren again declared the entrusting of his teachings to Nikko Shonin, naming him chief priest of Kuon-ji. Later that same day, after 61 years, the noble life of Nichiren Daishonin came to an end.



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1272 (Age 51)

January 16–17: Tsukahara Debate

February: Revolt breaks out in Kyoto and Kamakura; writes “The Opening of the Eyes”

1273 (Age 52)

April 25: Writes “The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind”

1274 (Age 53)

March 26: Returns to Kamakura from Sado

April 8: Meets Hei no Saemon; predicts Mongols will attack Japan within the year

May 17: Takes up residence at Mount Minobu

October: Mongol forces invade the southern island of Kyushu (the Bun’ei Invasion)

1279 (Age 58)

September 21: 20 Farmer believers arrested by Shogunate

October 12: Establishes the Dai-Gohonzon

1281 (Age 60)

May 7: Mongols invade Kyushu a second time (the Koan Invasion)

1282 (Age 61)

October 13: Dies at the residence of Ikegami Munenaka at Ikegami in Musashi Province