



Yukio Matsudo, *Nichiren, der Ausübende des Lotos-Sūtra*.

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THIS GERMAN-LANGUAGE volume is based on Yukio Matsudo's Habilitation thesis submitted to the University of Heidelberg and approved in 2001. The title translates in English as "Nichiren, Practitioner of the *Lotus Sutra*," echoing the Japanese title of a book by ANESAKI Masaharu (*Hokke-kyō no gyōja Nichiren*, republished in 1983), which emerged out of a series of lectures given at Harvard University and published in 1916 in English as *Nichiren, the Buddhist Prophet*.

Matsudo has authored a number of books on Nichiren's thought in Japanese prior to this volume. *Nichiren, der Ausübende des Lotos-Sūtra* is a crystallization of Matsudo's years of work on Nichiren, calling the attention not only of scholars and adherents of Nichiren Buddhism as such, but also of students of Japanese religion and philosophy, and of comparative thought in general. This review will first give a summary of the contents, and then offer critical and evaluative comments.

The introductory chapter describes the "object, method, and extent" of this study on Nichiren's life and thought. Matsudo cites a 1999 work of SASAKI Kaoru on "the structure of Nichiren's thought" listing four areas that have hitherto occupied scholars studying Nichiren in Japan. These are

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1. historical investigations of Nichiren's life and thought in the context of the neo-Buddhist movements of the Kamakura period,
2. doctrinal studies on Nichiren's teaching from the point of view of adherents of his religious heritage,
3. research on historical developments surrounding the communities of Nichiren's followers after his death, and
4. philological studies on Nichiren's writings, with special attention to questions of authenticity of certain works attributed to him.

Matsudo then describes other disciplinary areas wherein further research on Nichiren can yield fruit. These include Japanese studies, Buddhist studies, philosophical studies, historico-scientific studies (including questions on relations between religion and politics, orthodoxy and heresy, institutional history, etc.), sociology, history of religions, ethnology, and comparative studies. He keeps these other perspectives on the horizon and makes relevant observations along the way.

The first part, consisting of two long chapters, is a detailed description and analysis of Nichiren's religious career (Chapter 1) and teaching on ultimate reality (Chapter 2). This part takes up the bulk of the volume, with more than four out of five hundred and some pages of Matsudo's text. The second part, in two much shorter chapters, focuses on doctrinal disputations with clerics of Nichiren Shōshū (Chapter 3), and on themes related to Nichiren's reception in the West (Chapter 4). In these two parts, originally prepared as two autonomous tracts but put together in this single volume, Matsudo presents his own interpretation of Nichiren's religious thought, underscoring the historical significance of Nichiren as a reformer of Japanese Buddhism, and calling for a fresh look at the implications of his religious message for the contemporary world.

The first chapter is a detailed and well-documented biographical account of Nichiren, beginning with questions related to his birth (1222) and intellectual and spiritual formation, going through the main stages of his religious career, until his last journey that led to his death in October of 1282. Matsudo skillfully weaves in descriptions of cultural, philosophical, and religious themes as they relate to the various events and stages that marked Nichiren's life, from his initial proclamation of his message of the supremacy of the *Lotus Sutra* above all other Buddhist scriptures and teachings (1253), his entry into the political domain with his submission of his treatise *On Establishing Correct Doctrine and Securing Peace in the Land* (*Risshō ankoku ron* 立正安国論) to the retired Regent Hōjō Tokiyori (1260), the various persecutions to which he was subjected, culminating in his exile to the island of Sado (1271–1274), and his final years of retreat into Mt. Minobu (1274–1282). With ample citations from the corpus of writings attributed to Nichiren as well as footnoted references from traditional sectarian commentators and from recent scholarship, Matsudo presents a multi-dimensional portrait that gives the reader a view of the subject from various disciplinary angles listed in the introductory section. This

chapter, in fact, with nearly two hundred pages, can putatively stand on its own as an insightful and well-crafted biographical treatment of Nichiren. Matsudo's account brings into consideration relevant features of Japanese culture and society that enhance our understanding of this major Buddhist figure in the context of his times, and also summarizes the contents and points out the religious significance of Nichiren's key writings in the various stages of his career.

The second chapter, entitled "Nichiren's teaching on the Essential (das Wesentliche)," expounds on Nichiren's view of ultimate reality, with four subsections. The first subsection gives a summary of T'ien-t'ai hermeneutical strategies, which provide the basis for Nichiren's critique and rejection of other Buddhist schools in his proclamation of the supremacy of the teaching of the *Lotus Sutra*. The second subsection develops the T'ien-t'ai cosmological view cached in the phrase *ichinen sanzen* 一念三千 (three thousand worlds in a single thought-moment), as a way of laying the ground for an exposition of Nichiren's distinctive stance on this doctrine. This subsection concludes with a citation from a letter written (in 1278) by Nichiren to a disciple, noting the difference between Nichiren's doctrine of *ichinen sanzen* and that of traditional Tendai, from Chih-i down to Saichō (eighth century) to be as wide as "the difference between Heaven and Earth" (314).

The third subsection goes into a detailed exposition of Nichiren's view of the ultimate teaching of the *Lotus Sutra*, revolving around the notion of the "eternal Original Buddha" (Der ewige Urbuddha), which is what provides the basis for unveiling the teaching on the original enlightenment of all beings. The fourth subsection then unpacks Nichiren's ultimate teaching, underscoring its distinctiveness within the entire Buddhist tradition. This ultimate teaching becomes fully manifest in the light of Nichiren's vivid awareness of the human situation and of its infinite possibilities in the period known as "the Latter Days of Dharma."

At the heart of Nichiren's religious message is the vision of the cosmic dimensions contained in title of the *Lotus Sutra*, Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō 南無妙法蓮華經. Chanting this august title, especially in the period of the Latter Days of Dharma, activates and deploys the immanent Buddha-nature in all beings, and manifests the Buddha realm that is inseparable from the other nine realms of being. This recitation reveals the "universal Law of Life," and leads to the full manifestation of the "ontological structure of the enlightened way of life, symbolized by the Lotus blossom" (430). This act of chanting the august title then is understood as a pivotal event that activates the Wisdom of the Buddha, transforming all negative aspects of life, and opens out into a creative and joy-filled way of living. The effective power of the chant does not remain with the individual, but rather, as it transforms the negative Karma borne by the individual, it also effects an opening out to a way of life that recognizes one's responsibility to society as a whole, empowering one to engage oneself to work toward the realization of true peace in the entire world. This transformation that happens in the individual practitioner, which opens one out to this social responsibility and concern for the entire world, Matsudo avers, is what Nichiren sought to

convey in his notion of “Establishing Correct Doctrine and Securing Peace in the Land” (ibid.).

The second part takes a different turn, with chapter 3 being a recapitulation of Matsudo’s arguments in response to critiques against his published works in Japanese, as raised by representatives of Nichiren Shōshū. This latter, which literally means “The Correct School of Nichiren,” is a clerical group that traces its origins to Nikkō, one of the six original disciples of Nichiren, and had been the matrix organization of Sōka Gakkai, a dynamic and influential lay group of Nichiren devotees (founded in the early twentieth century) that now has a wide international following. Precipitated by institutional as well as doctrinal differences, Sōka Gakkai and Nichiren Shōshū formally separated in 1991. Matsudo emphasizes that his critiques of doctrinal and institutional positions of Nichiren Shōshū is not an apologetic that one-sidedly defends Sōka Gakkai against the former. Rather, he directs his critiques against certain “doctrinal elements” that have become institutionalized and which continue to function in the authoritarian structures of the Nichiren Shōshū and the Sōka Gakkai as well.

The disputation with the Nichiren Shōshū gives Matsudo a convenient venue for unpacking concrete implications of his position on Nichiren’s religious thought, which he had systematically laid out in the first part of the book. Five points of emphasis are lined up.

First, Nam-myōhō-rence-kyō, the “august title of the *Lotus Sutra*,” is the manifestation of the Dharma as Mystic Principle and origin of Life. This is in contrast with the Nichiren Shōshū view regarding Nam-myōhō-rence-kyō as “the Name of the eternal Original Buddha” identified with Nichiren himself. This identification of Nichiren himself with the eternal Original Buddha, incidentally, is a doctrinal development that had become “official teaching” in the Nichiren Shōshū, as expounded by Nichikan (1665–1726), the twenty-sixth high priest in this tradition.

Second, this Mystic Principle embodied in the chant is also what grounds the ontological structure of the Bodhisattva, a being that opts to remain in the Nine Realms of sentient beings out of compassion, but who also realizes the Nine-Realms-as-Buddha-Realm, as well as the oneness of ordinary being and Buddha. In contrast, Nichiren Shōshū upholds that this oneness (expressed in the formula “Oneness of Person and Dharma,” *ninpō ikka* 人法一箇) has been realized by Nichiren alone, as the self-embodiment of the eternal Original Buddha.

Third, the ordinary being, thrown in the midst of life’s uncertainties and impermanence, through the chanting of this august title, activates this Mystic Principle, and thereby manifests the fullness of the Buddha’s enlightenment in the midst of the sorrows of this realm of Life-and-Death, transforming this realm into Nirvana. Nichiren Shōshū teaching, in contrast, emphasizes that it is Nichiren, the leader of all the Bodhisattvas of the Earth that became incarnate in this world in the period of the Latter Days of Dharma, who can bring all unenlightened beings to the Buddha realm.

Fourth, the Gohonzon, or “Object of True Worship,” a calligraphic representation

of Nam-Myōhō-enge-kyō representing the eternal Original Buddha surrounded by other Buddhas and bodhisattvas and guardian deities, symbolizes this Buddha nature inherent in all beings. As one chants the august title before it, it effectively mirrors and opens one to the activation of this inherent Buddha nature. Nichiren Shōshū meanwhile emphasizes that the Gohonzon, with its original enshrined in their home temple Taisekiji and under the protective custody of its clerics, was bequeathed by Nichiren to all human beings as the Object of True Worship that will effect their liberation.

Fifth, Nichiren was a human being who awakened to this universal Dharma in his own life, and who thereby in his own mode of being and in the context of his historical existence became a model of the principle of the “Oneness-of-person-and-Dharma.” He thus showed the possibility of what all human beings can also realize in their own lives, namely, “the Buddha of the Three Bodies in one’s own being.” Nichiren Shōshū orthodoxy, however, contends that Nichiren transmitted this capacity and authority of his teaching to the High Priest of the Nichiren Shōshū. This High Priest is thus to be regarded as the “Nichiren of the present day,” entrusted with full religious authority to lead other human beings to enlightenment.

Set in this contrast with the doctrinal positions of Nichiren Shōshū, Matsudo’s reading of the texts attributed to Nichiren stands out in fresh relief, presenting Nichiren as conveying a “humanistic-centered” religious message, as opposed to an “authoritarian and institution-centered” religious orthodoxy espoused by Nichiren Shōshū. The latter has come to deify Nichiren into an absolutized being that is now regarded as an “Other Power” that endows unenlightened beings who seek assistance through faith in the *Lotus Sutra* with assistance “from above.”

Chapter 4 begins with a listing of the stereotypical and distorted images of Nichiren that have appeared in general works in Western languages up to recent times. These often depict Nichiren as “un-Buddhist,” “patriotic and nationalistic,” “militant,” or even as “psychologically imbalanced,” with caricatures that sorely miss the point and ignore Nichiren’s religious message. This is what Matsudo intends to rectify. Matsudo’s work not only throws fresh light on this oft-misunderstood figure, but also opens new avenues in comparative thought, as Nichiren’s religious teaching is situated within the arena of world philosophical and religious currents.

Let us now offer critical and evaluative comments on the volume.

In his introductory chapter, Matsudo describes the nature of the sources available to us in approaching the historical figure of Nichiren. These can be classified into five categories, namely, genuine writings (“Echte Schriften”) handed down in Nichiren’s own hand; authenticized writings (“Authentische Schriften”) handed down through manuscripts by immediate disciples or their own disciples; questionable writings (“Fragliche Schriften”), which are in neither of the two above categories and appeared in later centuries; apocryphal writings (“Apokriphen”), clearly determined as works of others though presented in Nichiren’s name; and Lecture Notes (“Aufzeichnungen”) said to have been taken by disciples listening to Nichiren’s discourse.

This classification of textual sources can be seen against the backdrop of an ongoing debate among scholars regarding the status of certain writings attributed to Nichiren. A landmark work in this regard is ASAI Yōrin's study on Nichiren's teachings published posthumously in 1945, which questioned the authenticity of those texts that contained elements of the Tendai doctrine of original enlightenment, asserting that this doctrine was not in consonance with Nichiren's own teaching. Asai's study sparked lively discussions among scholars, and Jacqueline STONE has carefully documented and evaluated the various issues in this debate that has involved many prominent scholars over the years, and herself sets the discourse in new light (cf. her doctoral dissertation [1991], and her award-winning book on *Original Enlightenment* [1999]). SUEKI Fumihiko has also offered some fresh angles on this discussion in his introduction to Nichiren (2000). There are many aspects in the debate too intricate to lay out in this review, but the main point that calls for comment here is Matsudo's use of sources in his endeavor to lay out various facets of Nichiren's religious thought.

In his exposition of "Nichiren's doctrine," Matsudo cites many passages from those works he himself has listed and acknowledged as "questionable writings," as well as from the category of "Lecture Notes," which scholars have also come to question in terms of authenticity. He takes a hint from SUEKI (2000), who offered a norm for adjudicating on those writings, based on whether they are seen as "consistent or not with Nichiren's thought." Matsudo, however, begs the question, in simply assuming that the citations from this category of writings dispersed throughout this volume are in themselves expressions of Nichiren's own thought, whether they should be regarded or not as "consistent" with it. To this reviewer, this is the most unsatisfactory feature, if not the major flaw, of the entire volume. The same can be said in critique of ANESAKI Masaharu's 1916 work, *Nichiren, the Buddhist Prophet*, which portrayed Nichiren in glorious terms as embodying features of both mystic and prophet (two typologies often set in contrast in religious studies), but which based these portrayals largely on texts that later scholars (beginning with Asai Yōrin) earmarked as "questionable." Matsudo does not address the concerns of Asai and others scholars about the reliability of certain texts handed down in Nichiren's name that contain elements of Tendai original enlightenment doctrine (texts which Matsudo amply uses in his citations), but simply skirts the issue. The fact that, aside from a single mention of Asai's name without footnoted documentation (374), the latter's landmark work is not even listed in the bibliography is a telling feature on this point.

Matsudo's intent is to shed fresh light on Nichiren's image as a religious thinker and reformer of Japanese Buddhism, who conveyed a message centered on the human being's capacity for the Infinite, unleashed and activated in and through the chanting of Nam-myōhō-enge-kyō. To this reviewer, also currently engaged in a study of Nichiren's texts, a careful examination of the writings considered "genuine" and "authenticated" could possibly give one sufficient ground for such a portrayal, though perhaps with less literary flair and less dramatic imagery as provided

by those writings under the “questionable” and (suspect) “Lecture Notes” categories that Matsudo employs throughout his work.

In this vein, Matsudo could have taken a hint from Jacqueline STONE (1991, 1999) who examined such writings not so much from the perspective of determining whether they were in fact Nichiren’s own or not, but with a view to understanding them better and appreciating them as developments in Nichiren’s thought that, putatively, his later followers had amplified and elaborated upon as part of the Nichiren legacy. If Matsudo had followed this line of argumentation, his volume would have been more convincing and had a greater cogency in its presentation of “Nichiren’s thought,” seen from a wider angle of its history of effects. Matsudo could reframe his task, not as one of expounding on the thought and teaching of the historical Nichiren (using, as he does, sources that can be questioned for “authenticity,” thereby rendering a flaw in his presentation), but rather as one of laying out the religious message of Nichiren as received and elaborated upon by followers in successive generations. This may be a point easily glossed over by adherents themselves, but is not one to be overlooked by historians and scholars of religion. Matsudo’s expressed intent to cast Nichiren as a reformer of Japanese Buddhism may be behind this implicit insistence on his authorship of those questionable writings, giving the historical Nichiren the honor for many of those aspects Matsudo extols in his religious teaching, rather than acknowledging credit also to the later followers putatively responsible for some of those writings further developing Nichiren’s line of thinking.

Also, one may concur with Matsudo’s thesis that Nichiren can be regarded as a reformer of Japanese Buddhism based on the reasons Matsudo lays out in this book, but this need not be taken in an exclusive sense that would ignore or play down the significance of other figures like Hōnen, Shinran, Dōgen, and others who also can be regarded as “reformers” of Japanese Buddhism in their own different ways (though without needing to revisit the old arguments on this issue among scholars as to whether the comparison with the Christian Reformation is valid or not).

There are items in this volume that historians of religion and scholars of Buddhism may quibble about. The question about the use of sources has already been described above. A comment that the Mahayana treatise on *The Awakening of Faith* was “composed by Ashvaghosa in the second century and translated into Chinese by Paramartha (499–569) in 557” (366) ignores the debates among scholars over the last decades concerning the authorship and origins of this well-known work.

The last chapter on “Nichiren’s Reception in the West” accentuates the negative images of Nichiren in the West, as well as distortions from the standpoint of other religious traditions, that stand to be corrected with Matsudo’s re-portfolio of Nichiren’s personality and teaching in this volume. In making his case, Matsudo has apparently chosen not to mention some recent works that also cast Nichiren’s thought in new light, such as the special issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* on “Revisiting Nichiren” (STONE and HABITO, 1999). This is a collection of articles and reviews highlighting key aspects of Nichiren’s thought and its contemporary signifi-

cance, with a six-page bibliography of Western language works on Nichiren, most of which Matsudo is either oblivious of, or has chosen to ignore.

Nichiren's legacy is also receiving renewed attention in Japan with scholarly as well as popular-oriented works that have come out in the last few years, some of which Matsudo cites or at least lists in his bibliography. Of those he does not, the work of the late UEHARA Senroku (1899–1975), a non-sectarian lay devotee of Nichiren, included in a set of collected works of 28 volumes (1987), deserves special attention, as it opens ways to a renewed appreciation of Nichiren's religious message for our times, though in a different way that Matsudo does in this volume.

On a positive note, Matsudo is able to highlight appealing features in the religious message of Nichiren (and followers) in contrasting Nichiren's thought with the doctrinal positions of Nichiren Shōshū (chapter 3). Here he makes comparative remarks on the religious message of Jesus set against what is generally taken as the "orthodox position" of Roman Catholicism, bringing his point home effectively. Matsudo's aim is to contrast these standpoints of institutional orthodoxy with the religious teaching of Jesus, who proclaimed sinful human beings to be nevertheless children of God in whom God's love and grace reside, seen in parallel with the religious message of Nichiren, who affirmed ordinary beings to be the bearers of the infinite Wisdom and Compassion of the Buddha. The observations Matsudo makes comparing two religious orthodoxies set against the message of their respective founders can serve as useful pointers for further reflection and study on interreligious themes.

In sum, Yukio Matsudo's work on Nichiren makes contributions in three of the four areas of Nichiren studies that have traditionally occupied scholars in Japan, and expands this discourse into a Western language. First, it puts together findings from recent studies that recast the figure of Nichiren in the context of his time, that is, the Kamakura period of Japanese history. Second, it makes a distinctive contribution in the area of doctrinal studies that address theoretical and practical aspects of Nichiren's teaching from the point of view of adherents. Third, it provides descriptive accounts of developments among Nichiren's followers, notably Nichiren Shōshū, though seen in adversarial light. The technical issues cited above notwithstanding, Matsudo's work is a noteworthy contribution in what can be called Nichiren Buddhist "systematic theology." This latter phrase is used following John MAKRANSKY and Roger JACKSON (2000), referring to critical and constructive tasks of intellectuals who study and reflect on Buddhist traditions. Matsudo takes on his task with a passion, and with a deep familiarity with the textual sources (in the five categories listed above). He offers creative and refreshing insights into an important religious figure who remains influential in our day, not only in Japan but in different parts of the world where followers of Nichiren's *Lotus* teaching have established communities of practice. Scholars in various related disciplines (Japanese studies, Buddhist studies, comparative religious studies, religious philosophy) able to traverse the contours of the German language may also find in this study on Nichiren's life and thought relevant hints for their own fields of interest, such that ploughing through this hefty tome can be a worthwhile undertaking.

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