Criticism and Appropriation

Nichiren's Attitude toward Esoteric Buddhism

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This paper explores the complex relationship between Nichiren and esoteric Buddhism (mikkyō). It first reconsiders the received view of Nichiren as an intransigent and systematic critic of all forms of esotericism, and suggests that his criticism should be understood as a strategy of legitimation. It then attempts to reevaluate Nichiren's interactions with the Buddhism of his time, focusing on the influence that notions developed in Tendai esotericism (Taimitsu) and rituals in vogue in the early medieval period exercised on Nichiren. In particular, it considers Nichiren's construction of a mandala as the object of worship (honzon) of his Lotus Buddhism. Nichiren used his knowledge of esotericism to reinforce the exclusive faith in the Lotus Sūtra that he advocated. His tendency to amalgamate ideas originating from different traditions places him in a line of continuity with the forms of Buddhism that preceded him. In this respect, the analysis of Nichiren's relation to esoteric Buddhism also becomes significant as a case study for a reexamination of the tenets of early medieval Buddhism (Kamakura Buddhism).

Keywords: esoteric Buddhism (*mikkyō*) — Nichiren — Shingon — legitimation — mandala — Taimitsu — ritual

NICHIREN'S INTRANSIGENT CRITICISM of all other forms of Buddhism than his own, with its insistence on an exclusive reliance on the *Lotus Sūtra,* has contributed to the characterization of him as a unique, and to a certain extent eccentric, figure in Japanese Buddhism. A survey of the variety of works Nichiren has left us, however, shows that his thought was not completely based on the *Lotus Sūtra,* but constructed

through a complex process of adoption, adaptation, or inversion of intellectual categories and ritual practices that were already present in earlier and contemporary forms of Buddhism, including those he criticized. The emphasis on the *Lotus Sūtra* is certainly a crucial aspect of Nichiren's thought, but the measure of its exclusiveness needs reconsidering. This paper attempts to reevaluate Nichiren's interactions with the religious milieu of his time, through an investigation of his ambiguous interpretation of esoteric Buddhism (*mikkyō* 密教).

Japanese scholarship produced by the Nichiren schools, while recognizing that Nichiren's early thought was affected by esoteric Buddhism, tends to negate any such influence on the mature Nichiren, and rather stresses his constant criticism of *mikkyō*. Although certain aspects of Nichiren's thought, such as the construction of a mandala as the main object of worship (*honzon* 本尊), have obvious esoteric roots, it is denied that Nichiren maintained a strong interest in esoteric Buddhism and its ways of expression throughout his life. Undoubtedly, Nichiren's colorful invective against the esoteric tradition, which he calls Shingon 真言, is a striking feature of his writings: "The Shingon school, in particular, leads to the ruin of both this country and China" (*Misawashō, STN* 2: 1449). "The calamities [caused] by the two schools [Pure Land and Zen] have no parallel with those caused by the Shingon school; the views of the Shingon school are greatly distorted" (*Senjishō, STN* 2: 1033). Yet the nature of this criticism and the question of whether it really was aiming to undermine the essence of esoteric Buddhism have hardly been explored.

A positive relationship between Nichiren and esoteric Buddhism is also denied in an influential interpretation of Japanese Buddhist history. Kuroda Toshio, whose theories have been crucial in reformulating the nature of medieval Japanese religion, included Nichiren in the category of "heterodox Buddhism" (*itanha* 異端派), together with the other exponents of what was traditionally known as "Kamakura New Buddhism." In so doing, he contrasted Nichiren's form of Buddhism with the ideologically and institutionally dominant stream, which he called "orthodox Buddhism" and which had at its core a pervasive use of esoteric practices and exoteric doctrines (*kenmitsu* 顕密). In other words, Kuroda's theory (1994, pp. 8–9) would imply that the most important component of medieval Japanese religion, namely, esotericism, was not present in the heterodox movements. One may agree with Kuroda that Nichiren's advocacy of a single practice stood in contrast to the plethora of practices accepted in orthodox Buddhism, and that his experience of persecution placed him at the margins of mainstream religious life. Yet Nichiren does not fit easily into a category conceived in opposition to esotericized forms of Buddhism. In fact,

aspects of Nichiren's religious thought coincide with the ways of expression of orthodox Buddhism: the use of esoteric ideas and icons together with doctrines from the *Lotus Sūtra*; the recognition of the importance of a practice that not only leads to enlightenment but also produces worldly benefits; the inclusion of beliefs associated with kami; the stress on the mutual dependence of state and religion and a concern with the fate of Japan. Kuroda, while reshaping the image of a medieval Buddhism centered on the new schools, reformulated the opposition between old and new that strengthened the idea of a break in continuity between the two forms of Buddhism. A certain degree of estericization in the new movements (including Nichiren's), KURODA admitted, but only for a later period, when the movements came to be institutionalized in schools (1994, p. 20).

In a similar way, a shift of focus from Nichiren to the early Nichiren community has occurred in studies exploring the influence that the Tendai notions of original enlightenment (*hongaku shisō* 本覚思想) had exerted on the exponents of Kamakura Buddhism (TAMURA 1965, STONE 1990). This research presents a number of instances of esoteric elements in Nichiren's works. However, by concentrating on writings of the Nichiren corpus that have come to be regarded as apocryphal (works produced by Nichiren's disciples), it still leaves room for the conviction that Nichiren himself remained basically unaffected by esoteric Buddhism.

In the following pages I shall reconsider Nichiren's interpretation of the esoteric tradition and point out how some esoteric notions and rituals exerted influence on Nichiren. Nichiren's textual and devotional practices suggest that he operated within the confines of the *kenmitsu* logic, renovated categories of esoteric Buddhism and, to a certain extent, popularized esoteric practices by taking them out of the hands of ritual specialists. The issues surveyed in this article, although not exhaustive of the variety of patterns in which Nichiren used *mikkyō*, may serve to shed light on his uninterrupted concern with esoteric Buddhism.

The Received View

The position of much Japanese scholarship, according to which Nichiren's relation to *mikkyō* should be understood only in negative terms, is affected by a sectarian agenda. It is epitomized in the words of a prominent Nichiren scholar of the early part of this century, Asai Yōrin:

> No matter how much Nichiren may have been influenced by his times, it is unthinkable that he would have adopted Tōmitsu,

> which he denounced as the doctrine that destroys the country,
> or Taimitsu, which… he accused of confusing the provisional
> with the true. If one assumes that Nichiren did indeed adopt
> esoteric Buddhism, where would be the foundation for his crit-
> icism of Tōmitsu and Taimitsu?   (ASAI 1945, pp. 325–26)

Such a stance reveals at least three flaws in the interpretation of Nichiren. First of all, there is a summary dismissal of the hermeneutic dimension, that is the relevance of the historical moment in which Nichiren lived as an interpreter of a religious tradition, responding to contemporary needs and influenced by contemporary models. Asai Yōrin's interpretation assumes a suprahistorical space in which Nichiren is supposed to have acted and pursued his idealistic goals. Second, the reasons for Nichiren's antagonistic attitude towards esoteric Buddhism are simplistically understood as a moral and social evaluation of the consequences of an adherence to *mikkyō*. In this, Nichiren's words are uncritically taken at face value, without considering that his depiction of "wrong teachings" may be part of a strategy of self-legitimation that makes use of consolidated mechanisms. Third, the distinction made between the two major forms of Japanese esoteric Buddhism, Tōmitsu 東密 and Taimitsu 台密, suggests that Nichiren came into contact with two different schools of esotericism (that of the Shingon school and that of the Tendai school) and clearly discerned between them. This retrospectively applies categories developed much later than Nichiren's time, and contributes to a distorted image not only of Nichiren's understanding of esoteric Buddhism but also of medieval esoteric Buddhism itself.

Asai Yōrin's interpretation has occasionally been challenged. In a brief study, the historian Ienaga Saburō suggested that Nichiren may have most severely criticized the forms of Buddhism that most deeply influenced him. Ienaga remarked that in his interpretation of Japanese history Nichiren at first did not consider esoteric Buddhism to be "the ruin of the country" (*bōkoku* 亡国); only later did he apply this category, originally used for the Pure Land school, to esoteric Buddhism, although he maintained the importance of prayers (*kitō* 祈禱) for the protection of the state (IENAGA 1976, pp. 105–6). Unfortunately, Ienaga did not further elaborate on his analysis, and by and large, Asai Yōrin's view has been perpetuated in a more nuanced rendering. After an early esoteric infatuation, Nichiren is supposed to have begun a systematic process of criticism of *mikkyō*, which included all forms of esoteric Buddhism. Following a threefold division of Nichiren's biography now widely accepted as an interpretative pattern of his life, scholars distinguish three phases in Nichiren's position with

regard to *mikkyō*. In the first phase, Nichiren addressed Kūkai's esotericism (Izu period); in the second, he targeted the Indian and Chinese patriarchs of esoteric Buddhism (Sado period); and in the final phase, during his retirement at Minobu, he mounted an offensive against Tendai esotericism (KOMATSU 1974; *Ibun jiten*, 585b–c). Although this schematic representation of the development of Nichiren's thought during his lifetime may be heuristically useful, in practice it has often encouraged fixed interpretations of how Nichiren should have acted in a given period.

Early Adherence to Mikkyō

In spite of the fact that scholars agree on the early esoteric influence on Nichiren, there is a lack of precise information on Nichiren's career prior to his open proclamation of faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*, which forces us to use circumstantial evidence when trying to determine his training. Curiously, no clear description of his early education can be found in his own writings, rich in autobiographical details as they often are, and this suggests a deliberate attempt on Nichiren's part to minimize his experience in order to construct a purely Lotus-oriented image of himself. Scholars have assumed that Nichiren's earliest education was based on the esotericism developed in the Tendai school, because the temple he first entered, Kiyosumi-dera 清澄寺, was supposedly affiliated to the Yokawa 横川 branch of Taimitsu (TAKAGI 1970, pp. 20–21). However, to correctly identify the affiliation of Kiyosumi-dera in the period in which Nichiren was a young monk has proved quite difficult, and scholars have not been able to produce definitive evidence. Although the temple may have been originally related to Tendai (its reconstruction in the Heian period is attributed to Ennin 円仁), this did not mean that people and texts from Tōmitsu centers were excluded from it. The presence and activity of monks affiliated to the Shingi 新義 Shingon school (initiated by Kakuban 覚鑁, 1095–1143) are registered for the years that Nichiren spent there after returning from the Kinki area (KUBOTA 1993). At the end of the Kamakura period, Kiyosumi-dera was indeed affiliated to Shingi Shingon (*Kokushi daijiten* 8: 235).

Curiously, a link with this tradition of esotericism also emerges from two documents related to Nichiren's early years. One, a holograph dated 1251, bears a distinctively Tōmitsu signature: it is a copy of *Gorin kuji hishaku*, an important work of Kakuban, which Nichiren is thought to have transcribed during his studies in the Kinki area (colophon, *STN* 4: 2875). The other, dated 1254 and also surviving in

holograph, is probably the first piece Nichiren compiled after formally proclaiming his faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*. It consists of two drawings of the two Kings of Knowledge, Acala (Fudō) and Rāgarāja (Aizen), with mantras related to the two deities, and two inscriptions in which Nichiren identifies himself as belonging to the twenty-third generation of a lineage directly descending from Mahāvairocana (*Fudō Aizen kankenki*, *STN* 1: 16). Scholars have suggested that at this time Nichiren was still in close contact with a Tōmitsu monk from the Kinki area, who had recently arrived at Kiyosumi-dera and whom Nichiren allowed to copy his own manuscript of the *Gorin kuji hishaku* (KUBOTA 1993, pp. 322–23). In fact, another manuscript of Kakuban's work, dated 1254, exists and is signed by a certain Nichiun 日吽 living in Kiyosumi-dera.

If one presumes a convergence of different esoteric traditions at Kiyosumi-dera, the notions that Nichiren expressed in his first essay-long writing appear less contradictory. The *Kaitai sokushin jōbutsugi*, written in 1242, while Nichiren was still staying at Kiyosumi-dera, contains statements identifiable as originating from either Taimitsu or Tōmitsu. Nichiren claims that the nine worlds (that is, the nine kinds of beings) represented in the *Lotus Sūtra* can all attain immediate buddhahood (*sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成仏), and that the two Buddhas of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna, represent the dharma-body of the Buddha (*hosshin* 法身). These are Taimitsu ideas that Nichiren developed in his later writings. At the same time, however, he regarded the *Lotus Sūtra* as an "introduction" (*shomon* 初門) to Shingon, an expression used by Kūkai in his classificatory works. In the end, Nichiren reaffirms the fundamental tenet of Heian esoteric Buddhism, that is, the superiority of esoteric over exoteric teachings (*STN*: 1, 14). One may conclude that the kind of esoteric doctrine Nichiren was exposed to was not clearly defined in terms of Taimitsu or Tōmitsu, but combined elements of the two. It is also possible that Nichiren received both a Tōmitsu and a Taimitsu initiation into esotericism. This was not uncommon at the end of the Heian period, when monks such as Kakuban and Jichihan 実範 (ca. 1089– 1144), who were to be known as exponents of Tōmitsu, had both Taimitsu and Tōmitsu masters.

Nichiren maintained his positive attitude towards *mikkyō* even after he had supposedly become set in his conviction regarding the superiority of the *Lotus Sūtra*. His hagiography puts the beginning of Nichiren's Lotus Buddhism (*rikkyō kaishū* 立教開宗) at 1253. In a full-length essay Nichiren wrote six years later, however, he still revealed a *kenmitsu* position: he advocated the superiority of a form of Buddhism he named *hokkeshingon* 法華真言, a combination of Lotus and esoteric notions, which reflected what he may have practiced in *kenmitsu* centers (*Shugo kokkaron*, *STN* 1: 104, 107). The association of Lotus and

esoteric thought is also a characteristic of Tendai esotericism. Nichiren's defense of *hokkeshingon* thus suggests that he interpreted contemporary esoteric Buddhism in Taimitsu terms. This is further illustrated by his later definitions of *mikkyō*.

Nichiren's Classification of Esoteric Buddhism

The terms most often used by Nichiren when addressing esoteric Buddhism are *shingon* or *shingonshū*. These labels do not indicate the present-day Shingon school, but esoteric Buddhism in its totality. Undoubtedly Nichiren was aware that institutionally the *shingon* he was talking about was constituted by two major entities, since at times he did distinguish between "Shingon of the Eastern Temple" (*tōji no shingon* 東寺之真言, that is, Tōmitsu) and "Shingon of Mt. Hiei" (*hiei no shingon* 比叡の真言, that is, Taimitsu). Yet he never made explicit how they doctrinally differed from each other, nor does it emerge from his writings that the two were in competition doctrinally. A clearer view of how Nichiren defined this *shingonshū* can be derived from the diagrams that chart his understanding of Buddhist texts, lineages, and doctrines (*ichidai goji zu* 一代五時図). These diagrams, of which a number drawn in different periods survive in holographic form, follow the basic pattern of the Tendai system of classification of doctrines (*kyōhan* 教判) into five periods, hence the name of "charts of the five periods of Buddha's life." Esoteric Buddhism is found under the category of "expanded teaching" (*hōdōbu* 方等部), which corresponds to the third period in the fivefold Tendai scheme. This placement reflects one of the positions of the Tendai establishment immediately after Saichō's 最澄 death, when the problem arose of including esoteric teachings in a classificatory system that originally did not contain them (cf. *Tōketsu*, NDZ 42: 364–65, 393–94; ASAI 1973, pp. 222–26). The allocation to the third period of Buddha's preaching allowed Tendai monks to maintain the superiority of the *Lotus Sūtra* as the "last teaching." Nichiren reused this explanation time and again. His classification of esoteric Buddhism may therefore be seen as evidence of his adherence to a more conservative type of Tendai, which had tried to dismiss the challenge presented by *mikkyō*. At the same time, it seems to crystallize his rejection of the alternative solutions offered by another stream of Tendai monks, who had responded to that challenge by placing the esoteric teachings in the last period of the fivefold classification, together with the *Lotus Sūtra*. As we shall see, Nichiren regarded Ennin (794–864) and Enchin 円珍 (814–889) as the major exponents of this stream. I believe, however, that Nichiren's

adherence to the conservative model was only formal. Although he maintained the taxonomic justification of "last teaching" for the *Lotus Sūtra* alone, his response to esoteric Buddhism ultimately depended on developments set in motion by Ennin and Enchin.

In his diagrams Nichiren defined esoteric Buddhism through various elements. First, he listed the canonical texts of *shingonshū*: three esoteric scriptures, the *Darijing*, the *Jinggangdingjing*, and the *Suxidijieluojing*, indicated as the "three Mahāvairocana sutras" (*Dainichi sanbu-kyō* 大日三部経, *STN* 3: 2356). The importance Nichiren gives to the *Suxidijieluojing* definitively reflects a perception of *mikkyō* in Taimitsu terms: this sutra is considered only a ritual manual and not a major scripture in Tōmitsu, whereas it plays a central role in Taimitsu doctrine. Secondly, Nichiren presents the lineage of the school. Under the one single rubric of *shingonshū* one finds the Indian and Chinese patriarchs Śubhākarasiṃha (Shanwuwei 善無畏, 637–735), Vajrabodhi (Jinggangzhi 金剛智, ?–741), Amoghavajra (Bukong 不空, 705–774), and Yixing 一行 (683–727), the founder of Japanese Shingon Kūkai (774–835), and the Tendai abbots Ennin and Enchin (*STN* 3: 2385). The order of their inclusion appears to be chronological, and does not reflect the different lineages of Tōmitsu and Taimitsu. At times the list is enlarged to include the Chinese master of Kūkai, Huiguo 慧果 (746–805), or the founder of Japanese Tendai, Saichō (767–822), and even the Chinese master of esotericism of Saichō, Shunxiao 順暁 (n.d.) (*STN* 3: 2300; *STN* 3: 2356 and 2388). The latter examples are significant since they illustrate another contradiction in Nichiren's evaluation of *mikkyō*: he openly criticized only Saichō's successors Ennin and Enchin as the exponents of Tendai compromise with esoteric Buddhism, but at the same time he correctly identified Saichō as one of the channels through which esoteric Buddhism had been transmitted to Japan. Finally, some diagrams also record the classification of doctrines used by the *shingonshū*. Nichiren listed the two *kyōhan* that characterized Kūkai's establishment of esoteric Buddhism: the opposition between esoteric and exoteric teachings and the ten stages of mind (*jūjūshin* 十住心; *STN* 3: 2335).

In conclusion, Nichiren's definition of *mikkyō* mostly relies on Taimitsu categories, but does not ignore the doctrines of Tōmitsu. One could guess that Nichiren was not entirely aware of two doctrinally different esoteric traditions because he first absorbed the Tōmitsu tradition through texts that had already been influenced by Taimitsu terminology (Kakuban's works, for instance), and later became acquainted with the esoteric literature produced by Tendai monks who had assimilated Kūkai's ideas. Apparently, distinctions were blurred in the esoteric context of Japanese mediaeval Buddhism. For

instance, the collections of esoteric rituals compiled in the Kamakura period, the *Kakuzenshō* and the *Asabashō*, to which I shall return later, both contain doctrinal interpretations of Taimitsu as well as Tōmitsu, even though one is supposed to record transmissions of Tōmitsu lineages and the other of Taimitsu (FRANK 1986–1987). The developments of esoteric Buddhism in the late Heian period presumably produced a merging of influences in both ritual practices and doctrinal particularities. It is in this context that Nichiren developed his idea of *mikkyō* as one tradition, which embraced both Tōmitsu and Taimitsu but expressed itself primarily in Taimitsu terms.

Criticism of Mikkyō

If the distinction between the different forms of esoteric Buddhism does not emerge in Nichiren's definition of *mikkyō*, to what extent can it be discerned in the way he addresses *mikkyō* in his criticism? Let us consider the main figures Nichiren attacked in each of the three phases in which scholars have divided his condemnation of esoteric Buddhism.

KŪKAI

Japanese scholars identify Kūkai as the target of the first phase of Nichiren's criticism of *mikkyō*, when he directed his attention to Tōmitsu; this is supposed to have started during his Izu exile. In one essay written in that period, in fact, Nichiren briefly cites Kūkai for having regarded the *Lotus Sūtra* as inferior to the *Huayanjing* 華厳経 and *Darijing* (*Kyōkijikokushō, STN* 1: 243). Nichiren here refers to one of the *kyōhan* systems elaborated by Kūkai, the so-called "ten stages of mind," in which the Tendai school is identified with the eighth stage. This placement, which Nichiren interprets as a classification of the *Lotus Sūtra* below the esoteric sutras, is the major objection to Kūkai one can find in Nichiren's writings. It is significant to note that Kūkai's taxonomy had already been the object of Taimitsu critiques, in their effort to create an alternative esoteric hermeneutics. Nichiren used exactly the same arguments that had been developed by Taimitsu writers against Kūkai's interpretation, quoted from them, and seldom added his own explanation. For instance, Nichiren mentioned "five mistakes" (*goshitsu* 五失) in Kūkai's classification of the *Lotus Sūtra*, to the effect that this classification was not based on the four major canonical texts of the esoteric school nor on its patriarchal tradition (*Shingon tendai shōretsuji, STN* 1: 356). These errors had been one of the major aspects of the revision of Kūkai's classification formulated by Annen in his *Kyōjimondō* (T. 75.400c–403c; cf. ASAI 1973,

pp. 681–88). Therefore, what at first appears as Nichiren's criticism of Tōmitsu merely reiterates Taimitsu positions and most likely would not have existed without Nichiren's previous knowledge of Taimitsu.

On the other hand, Nichiren hardly commented upon one basic tenet of Kūkai's system, the opposition of esoteric versus exoteric, although he recognized the distinction, listing it in his diagrams and referring to it in his *Kaitai sokushin jōbutsugi*. He downplayed its meaning by superimposing the traditional Tendai five-period *kyōhan*, and resorting to the category of the "last teaching" to prove that the *Lotus Sūtra* is the most valid scripture. When he did comment on the opposition, he apparently attached another meaning to the term "esoteric" than Kūkai's. He ignored the different nature and purpose of the esoteric discourse that, according to Kūkai, sets apart the esoteric and the exoteric scriptures. For Nichiren esoteric primarily meant the use of mantras and mudras. He wondered whether in India a version of the *Lotus Sūtra* that contained mantras had existed, but had not been translated in China, or whether the translator of the *Darijing* had just added a few mantras and mudras to the *Lotus Sūtra* and called that version *Darijing* (*Teradomari gosho, STN* 1: 514; *Senjishō, STN* 2: 1034–35). In this way Nichiren acknowledged a certain degree of identity between the two scriptures, which left open the possibility of giving the *Lotus Sūtra* an esoteric status. While the idea strongly contrasts with Kūkai's understanding of "esoteric," such a possibility had been formalized in the history of Japanese esotericism by Taimitsu writers who, in their own respective ways, had classified the content of the *Lotus Sūtra* as esoteric.[1] It is from this Taimitsu perspective that Nichiren can overlook the intrinsic difference between esoteric and exoteric and, as we shall see, approach the problem of the superiority of the Lotus scripture in terms of the presence or absence of mudras and mantras.

THE PATRIARCHS OF ESOTERICISM

Nichiren's focus on issues that had been raised in Tendai esotericism is even more evident when one considers his criticism of the Indo-Chinese patriarchs of esoteric Buddhism, in particular Śubhākarasiṃha and Amoghavajra. Nichiren denounced Śubhākarasiṃha for holding the view that, though the teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* was doctrinally identical with that of the *Darijing*, the *Lotus Sūtra* was inferior in terms of praxis (*Zenmuishō, STN* 1: 410). However, these terms of evaluation

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[1] Nichiren discusses the relation between the two scriptures also in terms of the identity of the buddhas who preached the two sutras (*Shingon tendai shōretsuji, STN* 1: 479–80). This is another topic that had been explored by Taimitsu writers.

belong to Japanese Tendai, and were first employed by Ennin, as we shall see below. Thus Nichiren misrepresented the position of Śubhākarasiṃha, who actually had only asserted that the teachings of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Darijing* have the same value, and had not distinguished between doctrine and practice.[2] In other words, Nichiren read the formulations of later Taimitsu into Śubhākarasiṃha's text. What is regarded as criticism of Śubhākarasiṃha was in fact criticism of Taimitsu (cf. ASAI 1973, p. 264). One of the early essays in which Nichiren's position towards Śubhākarasiṃha is expressed was written in 1266, well before the Sado exile, and almost a decade before he went to Mt. Minobu (*Zenmuishō, STN*: 1, 409–10). This means that the criticism of the patriarchs of esotericism did not begin during the Sado period, as the three-stage division suggests. It also implies that the theory according to which Nichiren's criticism of Taimitsu truly started only after he had retired to Mt. Minobu lacks a firm basis, even though the names of the Taimitsu monks Ennin and Enchin most often appear in relation to the idea of the inferiority of the *Lotus Sūtra* in the letters and essays of the Minobu period.

Nichiren's criticism of Amoghavajra, on the other hand, mainly concerns the attribution of authorship of a major canonical text of esoteric Buddhism, the *Putixinlun* (*Senjishō, STN* 2: 1022–23; *Myō-ichinyo gohenji, STN* 2: 1781). This was a subject that Enchin had already dealt with. The *Putixinlun*, whose compilation was traditionally attributed to Nāgārjuna, had been used by Kūkai to claim the uniqueness of Shingon as a gate to enlightenment, since one of its passages establishes the esoteric practice as the only means to attain buddhahood in this very body (*sokushin jōbutsu*). Whether Nāgārjuna was to be considered the author of this commentary and Amoghavajra its translator was a fundamental question for Taimitsu, in its attempt to revalue the Tendai form of *sokushin jōbutsu*. Enchin had suggested that Amoghavajra was not the translator of the text, but the author, diminishing the canonical authority of the text as a proof of the uniqueness of the esoteric path (*Sasagimon*, CDZ 3: 1038a; cf. ASAI 1973, pp. 581–87). Nichiren's criticism thus once more comes straight from Taimitsu texts, in defense of a position that supported Taimitsu ideas of the possibility of attaining immediate enlightenment through the *Lotus Sūtra*. Nichiren also mentioned Amoghavajra in relation to texts and context of the Lotus rituals (*hokkehō* 法華法). There, as we shall consider below, he seems to assign an important role to Amoghavajra

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[2] In his *Darijingshu* Śubhākarasiṃha explained the esoteric scripture by using concepts, images, and terminology of Tendai philosophy. For an analysis of the relevant passages from the *Darijingshu* see ASAI 1986 and 1987.

within the history of Lotus Buddhism, because the latter had created a *honzon* centered on the *Lotus Sūtra.*

TAIMITSU

In the third phase of his criticism of *mikkyō,* Nichiren is supposed to have started targeting the Tendai monks who, in various ways, had denied the ultimate superiority of the *Lotus* by contrasting it with the more effective practice of esoteric Buddhism. Nichiren summarized this position in the expression *ridō jiretsu* 理同事劣: "equivalence in the *concept* of absolute reality of the *Lotus Sūtra* and esoteric sutras, inferiority of the *Lotus Sūtra* in the *practice* which opens to buddhahood." Although the idea behind this *kyōhan* had been specifically expressed in Ennin's *Soshijjikyōsho* (Commentary on *Suxidijieluojing*), Nichiren ascribed it to other texts, and to other esoteric masters as well, unifying a large part of esoteric Buddhism under this rubric (*Senjishō, STN* 2: 1042–3; *Hōonshō, STN* 2: 1212–13). The primary object of his attacks were Ennin and Enchin, but he never discussed the differences between their two interpretations of the relation between *mikkyō* and Lotus thought. He condemned Enchin's ambiguous concern with both the defense of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the superiority of the esoteric teachings (*Hōonshō, STN* 2: 1214), referring to the fact that Enchin had written some works from an orthodox Tendai point of view and others from an esoteric perspective. However, by insisting on Enchin's lack of consistency, Nichiren deliberately ignored the fact that the traditional double curriculum on Mt. Hiei allowed both perspectives, and had even made it into a duty for an abbot to master both. (This is in spite of the fact that Nichiren knew, and quoted, the imperial edict concerning the training of the abbot. Cf. *Hōonshō, STN* 2: 1214 and *Zasuki* 1, quoted in Asai 1973, p. 377). All along Nichiren concentrated his attention on the problem of classification. A survey of his negative statements concerning Ennin or Enchin proves that he did not critically address other specific aspects of their thought. When his criticism appears to become harsher, the substance remains the same; it only becomes more colorful and irreverent: "[Ennin] is like a bat, which is not a bird and is not a mouse.... He eats his father, the *Lotus Sūtra,* and gnaws up his mother, the devotee of the *Lotus Sūtra*" (*Hōonshō, STN* 2: 1219).

Nichiren's criticism touches less on the third, and perhaps more famous representative of Taimitsu, Annen. On the few occasions when Nichiren explicitly mentions Annen, the latter's interest in Zen is addressed, rather than his esoteric ideas (*Senjishō, STN* 2: 1041, 1052). This is quite curious if one knows that Nichiren derived much of his knowledge of Taimitsu from Annen. Many of Nichiren's quotations

from the works of Ennin and Enchin actually come from Annen's writings. Also, when Nichiren identified the "equivalence of principle" (*ridō*) with the presence of the concept of *ichinen sanzen* 一念三千 (three thousand worlds contained in one single thought-moment) in both Lotus thought and esoteric Buddhism (*Teradomari gosho, STN* 1: 513; *Senjishō, STN* 2: 1043), Nichiren spoke in Annen's terms, for among the Taimitsu monks only Annen had advanced this idea. The lack of a direct criticism of Annen in relation to *mikkyō* may have to do with the fact that Annen never took over the position of abbot of the Tendai school (*zasu*) and therefore did not have the institutional weight of figures such as Ennin and Enchin.

In conclusion, to present Nichiren's attitude towards esoteric Buddhism as a criticism that evolved from Tōmitsu to Taimitsu appears misleading, because it presupposes a more complex and systematic reconsideration of esoteric Buddhism than the evidence in Nichiren's writings warrants. On the contrary, one may point out that Nichiren addressed the same objection to any representative of esoteric Buddhism he attacked: the failure to affirm the absolute superiority of the *Lotus Sūtra*. In criticizing Kūkai or Amoghavajra, Nichiren maintained the point of view of those esoteric thinkers who, after Kūkai, revised the latter's *kyōhan* in order to put forward their own interpretations of esoteric Buddhism—a perspective internal to esoteric Buddhism itself, one might say. When criticizing Ennin and Enchin, he resorted to arguments of failed loyalty to the founder of Tendai, Saichō, who had not applied distinctions between principle and practice to the fundamental equality of the Lotus and the esoteric paths. The individual characteristics of each exponent of *mikkyō* and the differences in their interpretative strategies with regard to the *Lotus Sūtra* disappear in Nichiren's discourse.

The distinctions made by Saichō's disciples between doctrinal content and praxis explain why Nichiren was concerned with the validity of the *Lotus Sūtra* in terms of efficacious practice, which in his eyes had been downplayed by Taimitsu. In the process of reevaluation Nichiren used many arguments that alluded to the esoteric potentialities of the Lotus scripture, from the possibility that in India there might have existed a version of the *Lotus Sūtra* containing mantras and mudras, to the assertion that prayers (*kitō*) for rain based on the *Lotus Sūtra* are more efficacious than *kitō* based on esoteric sutras (*Sansanzōkiu no koto, STN* 2: 1065–72). Nichiren was also interested in the mandalic representation of reality, which properly belongs to esoteric Buddhism: he criticized the six esoteric masters Śubhākarasiṃha, Vajrabodhi, Amoghavajra, Kūkai, Ennin, and Enchin not only for mis-

leading people about the superiority of the scriptures, but also for fabricating and propagating wrong kinds of mandalas (*Misawashō STN* 2: 1447). Against these he put forward his own mandala. In short, Nichiren did not attack the practice of esoteric Buddhism *per se,* nor did he consider his Buddhism intrinsically different from esoteric Buddhism. Rather, he criticized *mikkyō* because it was a rival practice against which he had to affirm his own. Nichiren's criticism was directed towards historical figures of Japanese *mikkyō,* more than toward contemporary esoteric Buddhism, and it took the form of a sectarian criticism aimed at finding legitimation for his own doctrine. The fact that Nichiren censured Ennin and Enchin, but not Annen, who had no official status as representative of a school, confirms this agenda. If legitimation is seen as the moving force behind his attacks on thinkers of the Tendai school, it is only natural that Nichiren's criticism became more pervasive in Minobu, at the time when he became more aware that he was creating his own form of Lotus Buddhism.

Nichiren's choice to tackle issues of classification also places his opposition to *mikkyō* in the context of a strategic discourse. *Kyōhan* had proved successful as a means of self-assertion in the ideological conflicts of Buddhist history that yielded new interpretations or led to the creation of new religious movements (Gregory 1991, pp. 114–16). It is not surprising that Nichiren, well versed in textual studies, utilized the sectarian function of sutra-classification for his own purposes. Not only did he express his need of establishing the "correct" doctrine with an insistence on the superiority of one single sutra, he also wrote essays in which he articulated his own hierarchical distinction between the *Lotus Sūtra* and the esoteric sutras (*Shingon tendai shōretsuji, STN* 1: 477–83; *Shingon shichijū shōretsu, STN* 3: 2312–18). In this sense Nichiren was bound to the traditional, scholastic modes of interpretation of Buddhist doctrine (Dolce 1995, 1998).

Appropriation of Esoteric Buddhism

NICHIREN'S INTEREST IN *MIKKYŌ*: THE *CHŪ-HOKEKYŌ*

An extensive reading of the Nichiren corpus makes clear that Nichiren studied Taimitsu doctrinal texts and esoteric material in general. Even if one would concede that the primary reason for his study of *mikkyō* was to master what he wanted to criticize, one should also recognize that these texts supplied him with a background of knowledge that he eventually used to formulate his own epistemological and ontological paradigms.

One work in particular sheds light on the way Nichiren related eso-

teric doctrines to Tendai Lotus teachings: his own copy of the three-fold *Lotus Sūtra*, the so-called *Chū-hokekyō* (YAMANAKA 1980). This text can be considered a sui generis form of commentary that, rather than explaining the canonical scripture, wraps it in a net of correspondences with other texts of Buddhist literature that otherwise appear to be unrelated. Rather than an annotation of the sutra it is an index to what Nichiren himself read and was interested in, and to the way he associated ideas. Although at times the connection between a scriptural passage and the "annotation" seems unfathomable, quotations from different texts concerning the same topic are often listed one after the other, and this allows the reader, albeit with a certain degree of approximation, to follow Nichiren's flow of thought. Of the more than two hundred passages transcribed in the *Chū-hokekyō,* one-fourth comes from doctrinal, ritual, and iconographical esoteric texts, including the major sutras and their commentaries, and from essays by Kūkai, Ennin, Enchin, and Annen. Thus, although the compilation is not exhaustive of the totality of esoteric material Nichiren refers to, this much-neglected text is a remarkable source for documenting the esoteric context in which Nichiren's thought developed.

Because of the conspicuous presence of esoteric writings, and an equally striking absence of works related to Pure Land or Zen thought, YAMANAKA Kihachi suggests that the *Chū-hokekyō* was compiled during and after the Sado exile, when Nichiren's concern with *mikkyō* became stronger (1980, pp. 648–50). Another hypothesis, advanced by Shigyō Kaishū, regards the text as existent before the Sado exile and explains the quantity of esoteric quotations by the fact that Nichiren's early formation was Taimitsu (YAMANAKA 1980, p. 649). It may well be that in an earlier period Nichiren had another copy of the *Lotus Sūtra*, now lost, which he used as a canonical reference and a notebook during his years of study in the Kinki area; this was in fact one of the learning methods followed by young monks, as the existence of a similar *Chū-amidakyō* by Shinran indicates (TAKAGI 1970, p. 38). Textual correspondences within the Nichiren corpus that Yamanaka points out, however, are convincing evidence that the *Chū-hokekyō* was compiled during the Sado years. Yamanaka also argues that Nichiren's purpose in recording this esoteric material was to build up textual support for the formulation of his criticism of *mikkyō*, but this may be questioned. Several passages recorded in the compilation do not concern the target of Nichiren's attack, the *kyōhan*; others he used in his writings in a context that had little to do with criticism, and on the contrary would suggest a positive appreciation of esoteric ideas. In fact, the esoteric material transcribed in the *Chū-hokekyō* happens to furnish an important

clue to the models Nichiren followed when, during the Sado exile, he constructed a mandala as the object of worship (*honzon*) and emphasized the mantric nature of the recitation of the title of the *Lotus Sūtra* (*daimoku* 題目).

A "GREAT MANDALA" AS THE *HONZON* OF LOTUS BUDDHISM

We cannot go into a detailed analysis of all the elements of Nichiren's mandala and their function in this article, but certain features need to be reassessed here to show their affinity to esoteric conceptions rather than to orthodox Tendai.

Nichiren's mandalas are graphic configurations that have inscribed in their middle the Chinese logographs of the title of the *Lotus Sūtra* and, around it, the names of deities who appear in the *Lotus Sūtra* or who, through a set of correspondences, had come to be associated with it in medieval Japan. One hundred and twenty-eight of Nichiren's holographic mandalas have been preserved, dating from 1271 to 1282 (YAMANAKA 1992). The mandalas vary in size, format, and pattern, and this makes a typological classification of the entire group difficult. The two pictures shown here illustrate a general division of Nichiren's mandalic corpus.[3]

The first (see fig. 1), in the so-called "formal style" (*kōshiki* 公式), is a more comprehensive type of mandala with the title of the *Lotus Sūtra* inscribed in the middle, and around it, arranged in pairs or groups in different sections of the icon, are inscribed the two Buddhas of the *Lotus Sūtra* (Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna) and the four representative bodhisattvas of the original section of the scripture (*honmon*); four other bodhisattvas from the *Lotus Sūtra* (Samantabhadra, Manjuśrī, Maitreya, and Bhaiṣajya-rāja); two or more disciples of the Buddha; and a host of guardian deities among whom are Indra and Brahmā, dragons, and female demons. At the four corners there are the names of the Four Heavenly Kings and at the right and left sides of the icon *siddham* letters representing two Kings of Knowledge, Acala and Rāgarāja. This type of mandala also has inscribed the two kami Amaterasu and Hachiman, the lineage of Nichiren's Buddhism, and a rationale for the creation of this *honzon*. The second type of mandala is an "abbreviated" (略式) representation, which places fewer figures at the sides of the central element: in the one included here, for instance, the bodhisattvas of the *honmon* are left out, and the corners

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[3] The two pictures have been published with the gracious permission of the Hiraga Hondo-ji in Matsudo, Chiba Prefecture; Yamanaka Seitoku of Risshōankokukai; and Yūzankaku Shuppansha, Tokyo. I wish to thank Noguchi Shinchō, of Risshō University, for his help in obtaining permission.

Figure 1. Mandala drawn by Nichiren. No date; attributed to Bun'ei 11 (1274). One of the largest honzon Nichiren inscribed for his followers: made of twenty sheets of paper, it measures 189.4 x 112.1 cm. It is one example of the "formal" style.
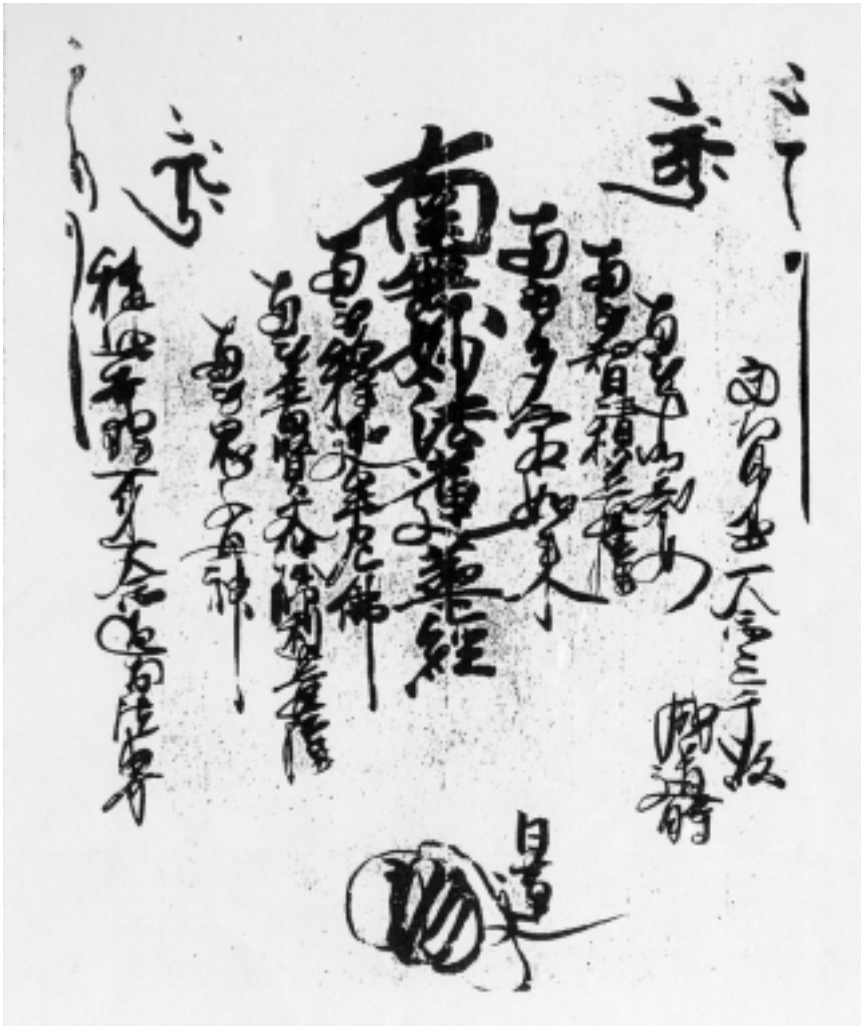
Figure 2. Mandala drawn by Nichiren. Not dated; attributed to Bun'ei 9 (1272). Known as the *ichinen sanzen gohonzon* because it also has inscribed a phrase from a Tiantai Chinese text on the idea of *ichinen sanzen*. It is small (39.7 x 30.3 cm) and may be regarded as an example of the "abbreviated" style.

are not marked by the logographs of the Heavenly Kings (see fig. 2).

There are two levels at which one should consider Nichiren's appropriation of *mikkyō* ideology with regard to the mandala: (1) the idea of creating a diagrammatic icon, and (2) the specific content of his mandalas.

THE MANDALA OF THE TEN WORLDS

On the first level, the significance of the establishment of a *honzon* that Nichiren himself called mandala (*dai mandara* or *hokekyō dai mandara*) and that responds to the rules of representation proper to an esoteric mandala is self-evident. The idea of "charting the venerables" (*shosonzu* 諸尊図) is unequivocally esoteric, and prescribes a specific order in the arrangement of the various figures inscribed, which we also find in Nichiren's mandala, especially in its most complete form. Here one may differentiate registers for deities of different status, and perceive the construction of a closed structure of which the frame is well defined by the names of guardian deities. This esoteric character of Nichiren's *honzon*, however, is often ignored because Nichiren's mandala is rather seen as a representation of the distinctive Tendai doctrine of the interdependence of the ten worlds (*jikkai gogu* 十界互具).

It is certainly possible to draw correspondences between the various classes of figures Nichiren inscribed and the classes of beings codified in the ten-world scheme (KIRIYA 1994). A correlation between the doctrine and the mandala emerges also in Nichiren's writings. First of all, the notion of the interdependence of the ten worlds plays a central role in his teachings. On the ontological level, it presents reality as an integrated unity in which all aspects are included and it corresponds to another concept in Tendai philosophy dear to Nichiren, that of *ichinen sanzen.* On the soteriological level, the doctrine rationalizes the possibility of buddhahood for all kinds of beings: the hell of non-enlightened beings is included in the Buddha realm, and buddhahood is contained in the realm of hell. The opening pages of one of Nichiren's major works, the *Kanjin honzonshō*, are almost entirely devoted to the explanation of these ideas (*STN* 1: 702–7). The structure of this work provides evidence for the relation between the ten worlds and the mandala. The long digression on the attainment of buddhahood by the beings of the ten worlds is in fact followed by a section that discusses an all-inclusive Buddha and presents the *dai mandara* as the object of worship. Thus in Nichiren's mind the two issues certainly are connected. In a letter Nichiren is explicit about this:

> The endowment of the ten worlds (*jikkai gusoku*) means that the ten worlds, without exception of any, are [contained] in one world. Thus I call [this *honzon*] *mandara. Mandara* is a word from India. Here it means both "the perfect endowment of a circle" (*rin-en gusoku* 輪円具足) and "the gathering of merits" (*kudoku-shū* 功徳聚). (*Nichinyo gozen gohenji, STN* 2: 1376)

One might conclude therefore that Nichiren's inscribing a mandala is a natural consequence of his overall adherence to orthodox Tendai

Buddhism. Nevertheless, one crucial question remains: how did Nichiren conceive of the translation of the doctrine of the inter-dependence of the ten worlds into a *honzon* that he called *dai mandara*? There is no doubt that Nichiren uses the word *mandala* in its esoteric meaning since the definition that he gives looks identical to the classic definition of the *taizōkai* 胎蔵界 mandala given in the fourth fascicle of Śubhākarasiṃha's *Darijingshu*: "Mandala means circle 輪円.... Further, it has the meaning of assembly 衆集.... The true merits 功徳 of the Tathāgata are gathered and exist in one place (*Darijingshu*, T. 39.425a–b, 426a).

Surveying esoteric sources, one finds that the connection between the concept of the ten worlds and the notion of mandala had some precedents in Taimitsu literature. Annen's writings are crucial in this regard. Annen is usually regarded as the thinker who transposed Shingon doctrine (that is, Tōmitsu) into Tendai, but in his attempt to unify the two forms of Buddhism, he also worked the other way around, transferring Tendai ideas into the esoteric context. Using as textual evidence esoteric canonical sources, he demonstrated that the concept of *jikkai gogu* also exists in *mikkyō* texts (*Bodaishingishō*, T. 75.491c). Furthermore, he set forth a correspondence between the ten worlds and the Buddha of esoteric Buddhism, and applied it to the two fundamental mandalas of the esoteric tradition. As Asai Endō has suggested, by identifying the external sections of the *kongōkai* 金剛界 and *taizōkai* mandalas with the first eight worlds of the tenfold scheme, Annen created a combination with the worlds of the buddhas and bodhisattvas depicted in the central sections of the mandalas, so that the mandalic structure in its totality came to represent all the ten worlds. Annen emphasized that the Dharma-world (*hokkai* 法界), of which the esoteric mandalas are representations, includes not only the world of enlightenment of the Buddha, but also the other nine worlds, beginning with the realm of hell. Therefore, from this angle, too, he disclosed the possibility of seeing the mandala as an expression of the interpenetration of the ten worlds (Asai 1973, pp. 661–66).

Nichiren was certainly aware of Annen's formulations of the fundamental unity of Tendai and esoteric doctrine. In fact, in his *Chū-hokekyō* he recorded a passage from Annen's *Bodaishingishō* that asserts the presence of the concept of the ten worlds in esoteric teachings (Yamanaka 1980, p. 54; cf. *Bodaishingishō*, T. 75.456c). Further evidence of Nichiren's familiarity with Annen's views emerges if one considers how Annen used the other Tendai image of interdependent reality, that of *ichinen sanzen*. It has been mentioned earlier that, when Nichiren regarded *ichinen sanzen* as the notion on which Taimitsu thinkers had built the "identity of principle" between esoteric and

Lotus Buddhism, he based his understanding on Annen's interpretation. Annen illustrated the correspondence between the reality of the three thousand worlds (*sanzen*) and the one Buddha of esoteric Buddhism using different expressions. For instance, he asserted that what Tendai calls "hundred worlds, thousand suchnesses and three thousand beings, altogether is another name for Mahāvairocana" (*Kyōji-mondō*, T. 75.423a). Various passages from his works indicate that he understood the Tendai concept as equivalent to the dharma-body of the Buddha (the body of self-enjoyment, which he called *hosshinjiju* 法身自受).

ASAI Endō (1973, p. 735) has pointed out that, in so doing, Annen revived a correspondence already articulated in a work attributed to Saichō, the *Himitsu shōgonron* (no longer extant), and linked it to his idea of the mandalic expression of Mahāvairocana. Nichiren reiterated Annen's pattern of correspondences: he cited the passage from the *Himitsu shōgonron*, which claims the identity (*soku* 即) of *ichinen sanzen* and the body of self-enjoyment (*jijuyūshin* 自受用身) of Mahāvairocana, and connected this equivalence with his mandala. In the letter containing the definition of the mandala I have quoted above, Nichiren presented the passage (which he ascribed to Saichō) as one of the textual grounds on which his honzon should be regarded as "the great mandala that had not existed before" 未曽有の大曼陀羅 (*Nichinyo gozen gohenji, STN* 2: 1375–76).

Thus Nichiren seems to be in line with Taimitsu ideas. A correspondence between Tendai and esoteric expressions of the world of absolute reality existed in the Taimitsu tradition, whether it really had been established by Saichō or not. Annen applied it to the esoteric mandalas, and Nichiren, redeploying Tendai terminology, produced a concrete object that could represent the esoteric concern with visualizing the ultimate reality in a diagrammatic icon. The passage from the aforementioned letter, in which Nichiren combines the idea of mandala with that of the interdependence of the ten worlds, remains quite obscure when one tries to understand it with standard Tendai doctrine in mind, but becomes comprehensible if placed within a Taimitsu perspective of correspondences.

THE RITUALS OF THE *LOTUS SŪTRA*

While Taimitsu theories of the correspondence between esoteric and exoteric expressions of the ultimate reality opened new avenues to Nichiren for his representation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the ritual dimension of contemporary esoteric Buddhism provided him with specific models for his *honzon*.

The second level of Nichiren's appropriation of esoteric patterns,

which regards the content of his mandalas and the reasons for the insertion of certain deities, may be clarified by an examination of one particular liturgy: the rites centered on the *Lotus Sūtra* (*hokkehō*). The *hokkehō* were probably developed in Taimitsu circles, but they acquired great popularity among all branches of esoteric Buddhism in late Heian and early medieval Japan. Collections of rituals such as the *Kakuzenshō* (compiled by Kakuzen of the Tōmitsu Onoryū between 1183 and 1213) and the *Asabashō* (compiled by Shōchō of the Taimitsu Anōryū between 1242 and 1281) devote considerable space to the *hokkehō* and present an impressive variation in the renderings of specific steps of the ritual or in the interpretation of the theories that were behind certain forms of it.

These collections document the influences Nichiren may have been subjected to, and in this respect are a necessary complement to Taimitsu doctrinal works, both because they illustrate how ideas were concretely applied and because the material they contained also covers the period from the last Taimitsu exponent mentioned by Nichiren (Annen) to Nichiren's times, filling a gap in the sources. Here and there in his copy of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Nichiren recorded various passages from texts related to the Lotus rituals, such as their canonical source (*Fahuaguanzhiyigui*), which was attributed to Amoghavajra; an iconographical text probably introduced in Japan at the beginning of the Kamakura period (*Weiyixingsejing*); a text attributed to Enchin (*Kōen hokkegi*); and sequences of mantras. Elsewhere he discusses questions of textual inconsistencies in the canonical manual (*Senjishō*, *STN* 2: 1022), and explicitly refers to iconographical details of the ritual. (*Zenmuishō*, *STN* 1: 410; *Hōonshō*, *STN* 2: 1219) It seems quite safe, therefore, to assume that he had a certain familiarity with the practice.

In the following pages I shall point out distinctive features of the esoteric rituals that lend themselves to a comparison with Nichiren's mandala: the *honzon* used in the liturgy, the types of deities who play a central role in it, and the use of the title of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

The honzon used in the *hokkehō* is a Lotus mandala iconographically derived from the central hall of the *taizōkai* mandala. It depicts a lotus flower in the centre of which is the jewelled stupa described in the *Lotus Sūtra*, with the two Buddhas Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna sitting inside. Eight bodhisattvas from the scripture are placed on the eight petals of the lotus flower and four sravakas at the corners of the first hall. Several guardian deities are situated in the external halls, among whom are the Four Heavenly Kings, Four Kings of Knowledge, Indra and Brahmā, demons and dragons (*Fahuaguanzhiyigui*, T. 19.595b–596a). The Lotus mandala thus has inscribed classes of deities similar

to those one finds in Nichiren's *honzon*, although Nichiren simplified the esoteric assembly, leaving out many figures of the external halls of the Lotus mandala. The iconographic pattern is different in that Nichiren's mandala is a calligraphic *honzon*, and arranges the various venerables not concentrically, but at the sides of the central element. In both cases, however, the center from which the other figures emanate is formed by similar symbols of the *Lotus Sūtra* (the stupa and the two Buddhas, and the title of the sutra and the two Buddhas)[4] and the frame of the icon is marked by guardian deities.

The comparison between the esoteric mandala and Nichiren's *honzon* is not arbitrary, for Nichiren himself refers to the Lotus mandala in several writings, and seems to regard it as one of the forerunners of his *honzon* because it was centered on the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Honzon mondōshō, STN* 2: 1573–74). He treats it as one of not-yet-perfected representations of the scripture and its Buddha, and attributes the same significance to it as to the *honzon* used during the exoteric Tendai Lotus *samādhi*, that is, the rolls of the *Lotus Sūtra*.[5] It may appear contradictory that Nichiren did not hesitate to link a Tendai and an esoteric practice. A relation between the two *honzon,* however, had already been established within the *hokkehō*: not only had the ritual extensively borrowed from the *samādhi* in terms of stages of performance (ASAI 1973, pp. 466–71), but also in the *hokkehō,* as it was practiced in Japan, the scripture itself occasionally replaced the mandala as *honzon (Asabashō*, DNBZ 59: 1109–10; *Kakuzenshō*, DNBZ 54: 628). With this background Nichiren would hardly feel a contradiction between an iconic *honzon* and the scripture as *honzon.*

Nichiren's *honzon* appears to have been even more affected by the esoteric ritual where the way of inscribing the venerables is concerned.

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[4] Nichiren never drew a stupa in his mandalas, but in his writings he described the *honzon* as having in its center the stupa, with the *daimoku* inside. It is possible to discern the visual image of a stupa in the graphic arrangement of Nichiren's *honzon* (DOLCE forthcoming).

[5] Nichiren here quoted the canonical text for the Lotus samādhi, Zhiyi's *Fahuasanmeichanyi* (T. no. 1941), which prescribes the installation of a copy of the *Lotus Sūtra* on the ritual platform and forbids the use of images or other scriptures. The Lotus samādhi (*fahuasanmei*, Jpn. *hokke zanmai* 法華三昧) is one of the four kinds of meditations developed in the Tendai school (STEVENSON 1986). In China it was extremely popular, and not limited to the Tiantai community. In Japan it was adopted by Saichō and became the core of one of the two curricula Tendai monks had to follow on Mt. Hiei. Scholars, however, have suggested that in Japan it rather was the esoteric rite of the Lotus (*hokkehō*) that enjoyed a popularity comparable to that of the Lotus samādhi in China (UMEDA 1927). In the Kamakura period, Nichiren was not the only one to see a relation between the exoteric and the esoteric practices of the Lotus. Myōe (1173–1282), for instance, discussed the similarity between attaining enlightenment by performing the Lotus samādhi and attaining it by performing the *hokkehō* (*Shinmonshū, Myōe Shōnin shiryō* 3, pp. 251–52).

Nichiren did not just write the logographs of the name of the deities, but also a word expressing veneration and praise: *namu* 南無. In several mandalas this word precedes the names of all the deities included in the *honzon*, buddhas and bodhisattvas related to the *Lotus Sūtra* as well as guardian deities (for instance, fig. 1). Thus the content of such *honzon* is like an invocatory sequence. It is helpful to compare this with some sections of the esoteric Lotus rituals. The *Kakuzenshō*, for instance, records under an entry for the Buddhas to venerate (*raibutsu* 禮佛):

> Namu Mahāvairocana Buddha, Namu the four bodhisattvas of wisdom, Namu Śākyamuni Buddha (three times), Namu Prabhūtaratna Buddha, Namu the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wondrous Dharma [Namu-myōhō-renge-kyō], Namu bodhisattva Samantabadra, Namu bodhisattva Manjuśrī, Namu bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, Namu bodhisattva Maitreya, Namu [the two Heavenly Kings] Vaiśravaṇa [Bishamon] and Dhṛtarāṣṭra [Jikoku], Namu the ten female demons, Namu all the Buddhas and the great bodhisattvas of the *kongōkai*, Namu the *taizōkai* of great compassion.   (*Kakuzenshō*, DNBZ 54: 607)

The beginning and end of the invocation addresses Mahāvairocana and his assembly, because Mahāvairocana, as the one Buddha of esoteric Buddhism, is present in all rituals. The reference to both his manifestations, the *kongōkai* and the *taizōkai*, points at the specific characteristic of the Lotus ritual that combines elements from the *kongōkai* and *taizōkai* mandalas. The other deities appear in the *Lotus Sūtra*, and were already associated with each other in the invocations used during the Lotus *samādhi*. All the names (except for Avalokiteśvara) figure in Nichiren's mandalas. One may argue, therefore, that Nichiren used the invocations recited during the esoteric ritual as models for his *honzon* and wrote down his own combination of deities to be venerated.

At the same time he added other elements that also played a role in the *hokkehō*. For instance, certain versions of the *hokkehō* insert the mantras of Acala and Rāgarāja in the ritual (*Kakuzenshō*, DNBZ 54: 123), and one finds traces of both in the *siddham* embodying these two Kings of Knowledge that Nichiren included in his *honzon*. Acala and Rāgarāja bear no relation to the *Lotus Sūtra* and should not appear in a Lotus representation. Hence their presence in virtually all the mandalas Nichiren drew is a strong indication of the dependence of Nichiren's *honzon* on the esoteric ritual. Acala is already mentioned in the Chinese canonical sources of the *hokkehō*, while Rāgarāja seems to be a later Japanese addition, probably related to the popularity that

this King of Knowledge acquired in the late Heian period, especially in rituals for protection.[6] As we have seen at the beginning of this article, Acala and Rāgarāja were the subject of one of Nichiren's earliest works, the *Fudō Aizen kankenki*. Nichiren's appropriation of the two esoteric figures thus continued throughout his life.

Another significant element is the place that Nichiren gave in his *honzon* to deities who only marginally appear in the sutra, but who played a role in the Lotus rituals. The female demons are one example. Whereas these deities do not seem to have been popular in the iconography or literature of his time, they were worshiped during the *hokkehō*, their mantras were recited, and the chapter of the sutra in which they appear ("Dhāraṇī") was one of the chapters chanted during the Lotus rituals according to the canonical prescriptions. Nichiren inscribed them in most of his mandalas, whether collectively as the "ten rākṣasī" (*jūrasetsu* 十羅刹) or listing their names one by one.

MAHĀVAIROCANA IN NICHIREN'S MANDALAS

The most striking example of a figure external to the narrative of the Lotus scripture whom Nichiren places in his *honzon* is Mahāvairocana. Figures 1 and 2 document two instances of this inclusion. The first, a mandala probably drawn in 1274 and now kept at Hiraga Hondo-ji in Matsudo, inscribes the logographs of the two aspects of Mahāvairocana, Mahāvairocana of the *taizōkai* and Mahāvairocana of the *kongōkai*, respectively after the names of Śākyamuni and of Prabhūtaratna, and both preceded by the invocation *namu* (fig. 1; YAMANAKA 1992, p. 65) The second example, an undated mandala also kept at the Hondo-ji (believed to have been produced in 1272), contains two other *siddham* apart from those of Acala and Rāgarāja drawn in the upper part of the icon, at the sides of the title of the *Lotus Sūtra* (fig. 2; YAMANAKA 1992, p. 45) To identify these two graphemes is quite difficult, for they are not drawn in a standard form. I think that the *siddham* on the left side of the mandala is the seed-letter (*shuji* 種字) used to represent Mahāvairocana of the *kongōkai* (*āṃḥ*), while the *siddham* inscribed on the right side may be one of the seed-letters of Mahāvairocana of the *taizōkai*, written incorrectly.

At first it may appear curious that, in spite of his harsh condemnation of esoteric Buddhism, Nichiren could include Mahāvairocana among the deities to venerate in a mandala representing the world of the *Lotus Sūtra*. In the traditional exegesis of Nichiren scholarship the two Mahāvairocana are classified in the category of "transformation

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[6] On the development of rituals centered on the Kings of Knowledge, in particular Rāgarāja, in the late Heian period, see HAYAMI 1975, pp. 104–22.

bodies" (*funjin* 分身, the emanations of Śākyamuni) and their inscription in the *honzon* is thought to be motivated by Nichiren's wish to prove that Mahāvairocana is inferior to Śākyamuni. According to Nichiren, however, not only the two forms of Mahāvairocana but all Buddhas of the universe are emanations of Śākyamuni (*Kaimokushō*, *STN* 1: 576). Why is it, then, that Mahāvairocana alone, among the buddhas of systems alien to the *Lotus Sūtra*, is inscribed in his mandalas, and Amida, for instance, whom Nichiren also holds to be a *funjin* of Śākyamuni, is never included? Again, the correspondence that the esoteric tradition had posited between Mahāvairocana and the *Lotus Sūtra* in the context of the *hokkehō* appears to be a key to Nichiren's iconography.

Above we have seen one example of the sections of the liturgy that describe the deities to venerate, in which the invocations to Mahāvairocana of the *kongōkai* and Mahāvairocana of the *taizōkai* are listed together with invocations to figures from the *Lotus Sūtra*. It is of even greater relevance that the identity of Śākyamuni with Mahāvairocana of the *taizōkai* and of Prabhūtaratna with Mahāvairocana of the *kongōkai* is extensively discussed in the texts of the *hokkehō*, though at times the identifications are reversed (*Kakuzenshō*, DNBZ 54: 624–5). This seems to be reflected in Nichiren's allocation of the logographs of the two Mahāvairocana next to the two Buddhas of the Lotus (fig. 1). Furthermore, the symbolic inscription of Mahāvairocana by using two *siddham* placed above the two Buddhas of the *Lotus Sūtra* (fig. 2) is reminiscent of practices of visualization related to the *hokkehō*, in which the two Mahāvairocana emerge from a sequence of transformations of Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna.[7]

It is in this esoteric perspective that the two Mahāvairocana can take a "legitimate" place in Nichiren's mandala and become elements of the Lotus world that that mandala represents. Taimitsu conceptions of the identity of Mahāvairocana and Śākyamuni certainly contributed to Nichiren's idea of a Śākyamuni as the Buddha who encompasses all other Buddhas as his manifestations, including Mahāvairocana himself. The ritual context of the *hokkehō*, however, appears to have been the direct model for the specific cases in which Mahāvairocana was included in Nichiren's *honzon*.

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[7] The correspondences between the two Mahāvairocanas and the two buddhas of the *Lotus Sūtra* are also illustrated in a text that is certainly related to the *hokkehō*, the *Rengesanmaikyō* (ZZ no. 204). Shioda Gison and Asai Endō have suggested that Nichiren borrowed important elements of his mandala from this text (Shioda 1982; Asai 1974, pp. 261–71). A detailed discussion of the text and of its relation to the esoteric ritual is presented in my dissertation (see Dolce forthcoming).

THE *DAIMOKU* AND THE "ESSENTIAL MANTRA OF THE *LOTUS SUTRA*"

The analysis of the Lotus liturgy indicates that even the invocation of the title of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which is considered to be the most pronounced characteristic of Nichiren Buddhism, can be traced back to the esoteric context. In the invocatory sequence cited above, the title of the scripture is listed among the deities to venerate during the ritual, in the same formulation we find in Nichiren's mandala: namu-myōhō-renge-kyō.[8] This establishes a precedent for the insertion of the *daimoku* into Nichiren's mandala and, consequently, for the recitation of the *daimoku* as the practice advocated by Nichiren.

There are several instances of the recitation of the *daimoku* in non-esoteric contexts, which predate Nichiren and should not be dismissed when talking of precedents (IENAGA 1976, pp. 95–96; TAKAGI 1973, pp. 430–65). However, these instances present features that make it unlikely that they served as the model for Nichiren's insertion of the title of the *Lotus Sūtra* in his *honzon*. In the cases examined by Takagi Yutaka, for example, the recitation of the *daimoku* is associated with Amida or Avalokiteśvara, as the title of the *Lotus Sūtra* is invoked together with the names of these two Buddhas. Takagi also records cases of an independent recitation of the *daimoku*; these cases occur as the last act of devotion on the deathbed. They point to a use of the *daimoku* as an alternative to the recitation of Amida's name (the *nenbutsu* 念佛) in order to attain rebirth after death. The use of the *daimoku* in the *hokkehō*, on the other hand, is directly related to the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the *Lotus Sūtra* and to other venerables who reappear in Nichiren's mandala. Furthermore, it is part of a liturgy aiming at the attainment of immediate enlightenment through the scripture, a primary purpose also for Nichiren. Thus, if the context of usage is taken into consideration, Nichiren's *daimoku* presents a greater affinity with the esoteric pattern than with the Pure Land *nenbutsu*.

The *hokkehō* also offer material for exploring Nichiren's mantric conception of the *daimoku*. In his writings Nichiren never denied the power and the efficacy of mantric formulas; often he seemed to advocate replacing the esoteric mantras with the *daimoku,* which he presented as a much more powerful mantra (*Hōonshō, STN* 2: 1243–44). There is an example in which Nichiren explained the *daimoku* by explicitly referring to a mantra that was very important in the esoteric ritual: the "mantra of the essential meaning of the *Lotus Sūtra*" (*hokke*

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[8] Alternative versions of the rituals included in the *Kakuzenshō* and the *Asabashō*, and in other similar compilations, also present variants of the invocatory pattern, in which the praising of the scripture is expressed in a more complex way than the simple namu-myōhō-renge-kyō. See, for instance, *Asabashō*, DNBZ 59: 1110.

kanjin darani 法華肝心陀羅尼). This mantra is included in several versions of the *hokkehō*, with glosses explaining its meaning and the lineages in which it was transmitted (*Kakuzenshō*, DNBZ 54: 633–34, 666). In one of his major works compiled during the Sado exile, while speaking of the title of the *Lotus Sūtra* in Sanskrit, Nichiren cited the mantra in its entirety, attributing it to Śubhākarasiṃha and specifying that it was revealed inside an iron stupa in Southern India (*Kaimokushō*, STN 1: 570). Nichiren also transcribed this mantra in his *Chūhokekyō* under the entry "*hokke kanjin darani*" and added an entry for the lineage of its transmission and a final annotation that it is a secret mantra (YAMANAKA 1980, p. 633). This again suggests that Nichiren possessed a certain awareness of the direct line of continuity that linked his *daimoku* to the esoteric practice of the Lotus.

Far from being embodiments of the *Lotus Sūtra* mediated by Tendai doctrine, Nichiren's *honzon* and his *daimoku* appear to have passed through the filter of the esoteric rituals of the *Lotus Sūtra*. I think that these rituals were important for Nichiren in other ways as well. Reading the texts of the *hokkehō*, one finds that other elements incorporated in the ritual or used as doctrinal backing for it coincide with fundamental aspects of Nichiren's thought: the emphasis on the sixteenth chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*; the distinction between the two sections of the scripture, *honmon* and *shakumon*; and even the claim of the validity of the Lotus mandala for the *mappō* period.

Conclusion

A comprehensive analysis of the Nichiren corpus, including his more scholastic works, such as the annotations to his copy of the *Lotus Sūtra*, and a reconstruction of the roots of his mandalas, present mounting evidence that Nichiren was influenced by the esotericism of his times, to the extent that some aspects of Nichiren's Buddhism cannot be fully understood without taking esoteric precedents, both in the domain of doctrine and of practice, into account. Nichiren preserved two important elements of the esoteric praxis: the mandala and the mantra. He applied to his *honzon* the symbolic value of a visualization of the absolute that a mandala has in esoteric doctrine. Furthermore, he stressed not only faith in what the object represents, but also its apotropaic efficacy as a talisman.[9] In the same way, he credited the

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[9] Protection is an important function that Nichiren attributes to his *honzon*. The constant presence of guardian deities in the mandala, and the allusions to their protective action that one finds in Nichiren's writings, suggest that he assimilated not only the imagery proper to esoteric Buddhism, but also its purposes. The apotropaic quality of the *honzon* may also be

daimoku with the magical power to bring both enlightenment and worldly benefits that is intrinsic to a mantra.

Nichiren's discourse on Buddhism was, in my view, a conscious effort to construct an alternative to existent esoteric religious forms of practice. His criticism of *mikkyō* should therefore be seen as a necessary step for his legitimation as a religious leader and his claim to orthodoxy. The discursive strategies he used employed traditional patterns such as the classification of doctrines, with the consequent judgments of value that this device implied. In spite of his condemnation of esoteric Buddhism, Nichiren's endeavor to articulate a "new" practice implied a complex process of appropriation of esoteric categories and icons that one can hardly imagine to have been unconscious.

I am convinced that Nichiren, far from forsaking *mikkyō* after his definitive commitment to the *Lotus Sūtra*, continued to pursue his study of esotericism, and from this source drew inspiration for his reformulation of Tendai Lotus thought. His interest in esoteric notions and practices perhaps even increased with time, together with his apparent criticism of the esoteric tradition. Prime evidence of this process is the fact that Nichiren devised his mandala in its complete form at the climax of his career, during the years of the Sado exile, and produced most of his mandalas in Minobu, when his Lotus teachings had reached their full maturity.

I have discussed Taimitsu influence on Nichiren because this is the form of esoteric Buddhism that emerges most conspicuously in Nichiren's writings. This influence should be explained not so much by reference to Nichiren's early training, which as we have seen cannot be clearly defined, but rather by the fact that Nichiren's concerns appear to correspond to the themes that Taimitsu monks had addressed. Nichiren, however, used elements that today would be classified under the labels of both Taimitsu and Tōmitsu, and this suggests that the relation between the various forms of esoteric Buddhism in mediaeval times was more fluid than sectarian interpretations of the history of esoteric Buddhism would have us believe. Further study of Japanese esotericism will be helpful to more fully understand the environment in which Nichiren moved.

There are, of course, factors other than esotericism that contributed to the formation of Nichiren Buddhism, the influence of Pure Land

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regarded as the reason for which Nichiren drew mandalas of a very small size, which could be used as personal talismans. Letters that probably accompanied the handing over of a *honzon* to a follower refer to the object of worship as *omamori* (talisman), to be used for protection of the believer or of a member of his or her family (*Myōshin amagozen gohenji, STN* 2: 1105; *Nichigennyo shakabutsu kuyōji, STN* 2: 1623). Nichiren invited his followers not only to believe in the *honzon*, but "to tie the *honzon* on their bodies," "to carry it on their bodies."

thought being a significant component. Nevertheless, the analysis of Nichiren's complex relation with esoteric Buddhism, of which here I have given only a few examples, and in a rather simplified fashion, remains crucial for a less dogmatic view of his system of Buddhism.

The combinative tendency that Nichiren displayed in his appropriation of esoteric Buddhism raises questions, moreover, with regard to the discontinuity between the "new," "heterodox" type of Buddhism of the Kamakura period and the "old," "orthodox" type, which historians and sectarian scholarship alike have assumed, different as their agenda may be. Hence Nichiren's relationship with *mikkyō* offers a critical angle from which to rethink not only his position in Japanese religious history, but also the nature of Kamakura Buddhism as a whole.

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DNBZ   *Dai Nihon Bukkyō zensho* 大日本佛教全書, 150 vols. Bussho Kankōkai 佛書刊行会, ed. Tokyo: Bussho Kankōkai, 1912–1922.

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1254   *Fudō Aizen kankenki* 不動愛染感見記. *STN* 1: 16.

1259   *Shugo kokkaron* 守護国家論. *STN* 1: 89–136.

1262   *Kyōkijikokushō* 教機時国鈔. *STN* 1: 241–46.

1266   *Zenmuishō* 善無畏抄. *STN* 1: 408–14.

1268   *Ichidai goji keizu* 一代五時鶏圖. *STN* 3: 2299–2303.

1270   *Shingon shichijū shōretsu* 真言七重勝劣. *STN* 3: 2312–18.

1270   *Shingon tendai shōretsuji* 真言天台勝劣事. *STN* 1: 477–83.

1271   *Teradomari gosho* 寺泊御書. *STN* 1: 512–17.

1272   *Kaimokushō* 開目抄. *STN* 1: 535–609.

1273   *Kanjin honzonshō* 観心本尊抄 (Full title: *Nyorai metsugo gohyaku-saishi kanjin honzonshō* 如来滅後五百歳始観心本尊抄). *STN* 1: 702–21.

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1275   *Myōshin amagozen gohenji* 妙心尼御前御返事. *STN* 2: 1105.

1275   *Sansanzōkiu no koto* 三三蔵祈雨の事. *STN* 2: 1065–72.

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