# NICHIREN, THE BUDDHIST PROPHET

## CHAPTER I

### NICHIREN AND HIS TIME

IF JAPAN ever produced a prophet or a religious man of prophetic zeal, Nichiren was the man. He stands almost a unique figure in the history of Buddhism, not alone because of his persistence through hardship and persecution, but for his unshaken conviction that he himself was the messenger of Buddha, and his confidence in the future of his religion and country. Not only one of the most learned men of his time, but most earnest in his prophetic aspirations, he was a strong man, of combative temperament, an eloquent speaker, a powerful writer, and a man of tender heart. He was born in 1222, the son of a fisherman, and died in 1282, a saint and prophet.

His time was a most significant epoch in the history of Japan, in political and social, religious and moral aspects. New energies were at work on every side, and new inspirations were the need of the time. Nichiren passed his life of sixty years in combating the prejudices of the age and in giving warnings to the authorities and the people, not only in religious matters but in state affairs. His personality was partly a product of his time, but he lived both in the past and in the future, being convinced of his predestined message and aspiring for future realization of his ideals.

Nearly seven hundred years had passed since the introduction of Buddhism into Japan. It had become the religion of the state, and its hierarchies had attained the power and dignity of state authorities, but inner decay was manifesting itself, and the corruption of the clergy was becoming appalling. The central government, firmly established since the seventh century, was disintegrating through the degeneration of the court bureaucracy. The actual power was transferred to the hands of the military clans. The passing of the luxury and grandeur, " Peace and Ease," of the court nobles in Miyako, and the establishment of the military dictatorship at Kamakura, far away in an eastern province, impressed the people immensely. The cherry blossoms, in full bloom, were suddenly scattered by a frosty storm. Not only did the poets so feel and sing, but the people were aware of the great changes going on around them.

In addition to these changes, the minds of the Buddhist leaders were in turmoil, excited by the prophecy of a great crisis to occur about that time — a crisis not only for Japan, but for the whole world. An old Buddhist tradition distinguished three periods of the Buddhist religion (*Dharma*, or Law) after the death of its founder. The first thousand years made up the age of the Perfect Law, in which the monastic discipline was strictly observed and the believers were sincerely pious. The second millennium, the age of the Copied Law, was a time during which faith and morality declined, but piety was shown in the foundation of numerous temples and sanctuaries. The third age, the ten thousand years after that, was to be the age of the Latter Law, a reign of vice and strife. Though there were minor variations in the tradition as regards the time divisions, all Japanese Buddhists believed in the apocalyptic legend as a whole.

And since they put Buddha's death in 949 B.C., they believed that the last of the three ages began in the year 1052 A.D., twenty-four years after the death of the Regent Michinaga, with whom the pomp and splendor of the court life in Miyako reached its culmination.

What form of Buddhism would be best suited to the coming days of degeneration was a question which had occupied the thought of many Buddhist leaders since the ninth century. Saichō, who founded a new centre of Buddhism on Mount Hiei, near the then new capital Miyako, in the beginning of the ninth century, meant the foundation to be a preparation for the approaching days of the third age. He said: "Approaching is the end of the age of the Copied Law, and nigh is coming that of the Latter Law; the ripe time for the propagation of the unique truth expounded in the Lotus of Truth."[1] Thenceforward, none of the leaders escaped the influence of the prophecy, and serious thought on the Latter Days was growing during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. And it was Nichiren who came to the front as the most ardent follower of Saichō, and was destined to encounter perils on that account.

When Nichiren appeared in public with his cry of warning, two hundred years had passed since the supposed beginning of the Latter Days. The vicissitudes of the rising and falling clans, culminating in the establishment of the military dictatorship by the Minamotos, seemed to manifest the dangerous signs of the times. The irremediable corruption of the hierarchies gave clamorous testimony to the decline of the religion. Let us consider the political and religious con-

[1] Or, The Lotus of the Perfect Truth, Saddharma-puṇḍarīka in Sanskrit, the most important scripture of Japanese Buddhism, of which we shall learn more later on.

ditions against which Nichiren stood forth as a warning prophet.

Early in the thirteenth century, the power of the ruling clan Minamoto passed gradually into the hands of their usurping major-domos, the Hōjō family. The latter ruled with the modest title of *Shikken*, or Commissioners, with the puppet dictatorship ostensibly over them. Their government was famous for strict execution of justice and for simplicity of administration; and the Commissioners themselves set examples of simple life and stern justice. But their modesty was, in the eyes of those who regarded them as usurpers, merely a means to their ambition — the ambition to secure popularity — and their equity but a method of solidifying their rule. Indeed, the Hōjōs understood how to sacrifice everything *in titulo* to the power *de facto*, and to become the real rulers of the nation by pushing aside the Imperial family and the titulary Dictator. A firm peace was established, and economic conditions prospered; but there was something lacking in it. There prevailed a feeling among the thoughtful minority that the "country of the gods" [1] was not being actually ruled by its legitimate rulers, the descendants of the Sun-goddess.

Availing themselves of this unexpressed dissatisfaction, the Imperial party framed a plot against the Hōjōs in 1221, a few months before the birth of Nichiren. The plot was defeated, and the Commissioner government dared to banish prominent members of the Imperial family to remote islands, and to put an infant on the throne. Thus, the Hōjō power was consolidated and immensely increased, although these rulers still retained the modest title of Commissioner. The

[1] This appellation of Japan came into vogue after the latter half of the twelfth century, and was closely connected with the belief that the Imperial family were descendants of the Sun-goddess, the chief national deity.

resentment of the discontented patriots only grew deeper in consequence of the forcible suppression of the movement, but politically their cause had already been hopelessly lost. It was under these circumstances that Nichiren appeared on the public platform as a spokesman of the patriotic cause whose utterances were deeply tinged with religious fervor. He declared that the nation would be ruined, unless the fundamental principle of the national life should be restored, that is, unless the people were governed by rulers legitimate both in title and authority. Herein lay the national standpoint of his religious ethics, and this plea attracted to his teaching many warriors who were imperialists in principle or covert malcontents against the existing régime. This was also the reason why the Hōjō government, as we shall presently see, treated the clamorous protestant as a traitor.

Turning to another matter, the religious conditions, Nichiren saw similar evils, closely connected with the political and social disorders. The far-reaching plan of Dengyō, the reformer of the ninth century, for establishing the centre of Japanese Buddhism on Mount Hiei and unifying its church organization, had been partly realized. But even this partial attainment of the ideal of a state church was of merely temporary duration, because the relations established between the church hierarchy and the government bureaucracy had had a corrupting influence on both of them. The centralization of government and the consequent accumulation of wealth in the capital were concomitant with the development of ecclesiastical power and the growth of secular aims and motives among the clergy. The government fell into the hands of the Fujiwara oligarchy, who now became the supporters of the church with

its rituals and mysteries; and the priesthood degenerated into tools of the ambitious aristocrats, by promising them the supernatural aid of religion, and by supplying them with elaborate ceremonies for the gratification of their over-refined tastes. The final result was the collapse of the effeminate court nobility and the rise of the military class. To the eyes of those — few in number — who adhered to the ideal of Dengyō, the political disintegration seemed to be a necessary consequence of the ecclesiastical degeneration. Nichiren was one of these, and the one who was most severe in attacking the existing régime — both political and ecclesiastical.

The chief cause of the degeneration of the Buddhist Church lay, as Nichiren thought, in its promiscuous adoption of Shingon mysticism, a form of Buddhism contaminated with Hinduism and other alien elements. It was this admixture that appealed to the court nobles and supplied them with brilliant spectacles and occult mysteries. It was this secularization, or vulgarization, of religion that had obscured the high ideals of Dengyō and reduced his institutions on Hiei to instruments of greed and vice. Even after the fall of the Fujiwara nobles, the supporters of Hiei, this religion of occult rites exercised its influence far and wide among the people at large through the superstitious practice of magic and sorcery. Therefore, Nichiren's bitterest attacks were directed against this corrupt religion and its centre, Hiei. He firmly believed that the sole way to restore Dengyō's religion consisted in adhering faithfully and exclusively to the scripture, the Lotus of Truth.

Another form of Buddhism, in which Nichiren saw a curse, was the worship of the Buddha Amita. This was a special development of Buddhist faith which emphasized the

simple-hearted devotion to Amita, the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life, the Lord of the Western Paradise. This worship seemed to Nichiren to be a desertion of the Buddha Śākya-muni, the genuine founder of Buddhism and the Lord of the Universe, as he was revealed in the Lotus of Truth. The gospel of salvation by the all-redeeming grace of Amita Buddha had crept into the institutions of Hiei, and, later, produced an independent sect, through the personal inspiration of the pietist Hōnen and by its appeal to distressed hearts in the turbulent times toward the end of the twelfth century. Amita Buddha was, in the eyes of Nichiren, nothing but a usurper of the true dignity of Buddha, and the piety of multitudes toward the supposed savior but a manifestation of the hysterical tendency of the age. Nichiren boldly declared that those who believed in this usurper were destined to fall to the nethermost hell, while the Shingon mysticism was denounced by him as a religion that was ruining the vitality of the nation.

Nichiren's third object of attack was a school of Buddhist monastic discipline. In the twelfth century a reaction against the corruption of the hierarchy took, with certain reforming leaders, the shape of enforcing a strict observance of the monastic rules. They systematized the principles of Buddhist ethics from the standpoint of monastic discipline. This school was called *Ritsu*, or Disciplinary School, and developed a one-sided rigorism, which manifested in the course of time the evils of formalism. Training in morality, under rules, cultivated a tendency to practise virtue merely for the sake of individual salvation. Self-satisfaction easily grew into self-conceit, which often tempted the adept in these extraordinary ways of life to make his attainments the means of attracting popular admiration and reverence.

Moreover, the slavish and formal observance of disciplinary rules which had originally been intended for Hindu monks, aroused antagonism in those who adhered to Japanese ideas and customs. Nichiren, as a nationalist and an advocate of a broader Buddhism, could not fail to protest vigorously against the *Ritsu* Buddhists. He called them traitors to their country.

The introduction of a new Buddhist school, called *Zen*, or the Meditative School, increased the religious confusion. Zen was a simple method of training intuitive insight by the practice of meditation, which aimed at revealing the primordial purity of the cosmic soul in each individual soul. Riddle-like questions were given by the master which the disciples had to solve, sitting in meditation, by avoiding the usual process of reasoning and trying to discover an unexpected light by a flash of illumination. This new method of mental training and spiritual drill commended itself to the minds of military men, and they found in it a very beneficial exercise for keeping their composure and preparing for resolute action. Not only did Zen reject systematic thought on religion and ethics, but it induced those robust but rude men to take pride in self-assertion and often to run to an excess of individualism. Nichiren saw in this new method of Buddhist meditation a rebellion against the genuine Buddhism of the Lotus, as well as a fruitful source of rampant selfishness. "Devil" was the name given by Nichiren to the Zenist, and the "devils" were threatening the national integrity of Japan and the authority of the true Buddhism.

Shingon occultism ruining the nation, Ritsu methodism betraying the country to foreign customs, Amita-Buddhism leading people to the hells, and Zen meditation alluring men to devilish pride — these four were declared by Nichiren to

be the greatest curses of the age. The violent antagonism of Nichiren was due to his exclusive faith in the teachings of the scripture, Lotus, as representing the genuine and deepest truth of Buddhism. Now, we shall see why and how he arrived at this conviction, and what the Lotus of Truth is.