

## CHAPTER VIII

### RELEASE AND RETIREMENT, FURTHER CONFIRMATION OF HIS FAITH

**E**VER since Nichiren was exiled, his followers, especially the warriors connected with the government, had been trying to have him recalled. Nichiren disapproved their plan, and bade them abstain from agitation of that kind. His idea seems to have been that the perils and sufferings heaped upon him were necessary as a means of strengthening the evidence of his mission; it had ever been his conviction that the more faithful the propagator of the Truth was, the stronger would be the opposition and the more severe the persecution. Another reason, as we have seen before, was the idea of expiation; his sufferings, as he conceived it, were all to be endured as the necessary means of expiating the sins accumulated from all eternity by estrangement from the Lotus of Truth.

These subjective reasons for opposing efforts for his release were reinforced by an external consideration. All the steps taken by him up to that moment had for their end the conversion of the government and the nation to his faith. He had done everything he could to bring this about, and finally was sentenced to death. His return to the main island would be useless, unless something new should happen to hasten the accomplishment of his ideals and ends. His release would be acceptable only in case the government authorities should repent of the measures they had taken toward him, and be converted. "I shall never return,

until they are willing to yield to my proposals." Judged from several of his own utterances, this seems to have been his determination.<sup>1</sup>

In this frame of mind, Nichiren was watching current events, and looking for the possible repentance of the government. What he especially desired was the fulfilment of his prophecies about approaching dangers from internal disturbances and foreign invasion. And, indeed, events seemed more and more to confirm these predictions. While Nichiren's case was pending, a Mongol ship with one hundred men arrived, causing a panic, although it finally proved not to be a warship. In the following years, 1272 and 1273, Mongol envoys came repeatedly and urged a reply to the messages of the Khan, and the Japanese government was busily engaged in plans for defence, as well as in offering prayers to Shinto and Buddhist deities. Beside the danger from the Mongols, a serious struggle broke out between two Hōjō brothers, which ended in a fratricide. It was after this event that the government, as has been related above, ordered the governor of Sado to give Nichiren a better abode, and to take good care of the exile. Nichiren regarded these occurrences as signs of his success, and at the same time rejoiced in his sufferings as being evidence of his mission. About this time, also, an influential member of the Hōjōs, of the name Tokimori, began to revere Nichiren, and often sent him presents and comforting letters. Although Tokimori seems to have had the superstitious motive of securing Nichiren's intercession with Buddha, and his prayers to avert the threatened invasion, yet he gave progressive evidence of sincere conversion to Nichiren's religion. This was another sign of Nichiren's triumph.

<sup>1</sup> For instance, *Works*, pp. 1414, 1416.

The Hōjōs were not unanimously hostile to Nichiren. Tokimori, the elder, not only showed his good-will toward him, but finally sent a precious sword as a token of the conversion of his Samurai soul to the Lotus of Truth. Nichiren thanked him heartily for it, and advised the convert further to solidify his faith. The letter reads: <sup>1</sup>

I, Nichiren, am perhaps the most intractable man in Japan. I warned you that all manner of disasters would take place, because you worshipped Amita, Dainichi, and those Buddhas whom you held dearer than your parents and more precious than your sovereign; and that you were destined, in this world, to ruin yourselves and cause the fall of the country, and in the future life, to sink to the nethermost hell. Because I gave these warnings incessantly, I am suffering from persecutions . . . I am suffering from the perils heaped upon me by my adversaries, three in kind, simply because I am the one who lives the life of the Lotus of Truth. That you have become a follower of such a man is something beyond common expectation; there must be some significance in the fact. Be strenuous in your faith, and prepare yourself to partake in the communion of the Paradise of Vulture Peak!

You have sent one sword, with its mate, as your offering . . . to the Lotus of Truth. The swords were, while in your hands, weapons of malice; now, being offered to Buddha, they are weapons of good. . . . These swords will serve as staves in your journey beyond. Know that the Lotus of Truth is the staff for all Buddhas on their way to enlightenment! Especially rely on me, Nichiren, as the staff and pillar! . . . The Sacred Title will be your guidance and support on the journey after death. The Buddhas Prabhūta-ratna and Śākya-muni, as well as the four chief Bodhisattvas, will surely lead you by the hand. If I should be there before you, I, also, will not fail to welcome you. . . . I cannot say all I have to say in this letter. Put your faith in all the deities (the guardians of the Truth)! March indefatigably on in the way of faith, and reach your final destiny! Tell your ladies also of all this! Sincerely in reverence.

This letter is indeed significant as evincing Nichiren's affection for a member of the Hōjōs, and as a sign that they were inclining more to him. It is dated the twenty-first of

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, pp. 1032-1034.

the second month (March 30), 1274, just when the sentence of release was on the way to Sado.

Nichiren had in various ways inspired awe in the Hōjōs, and their own troubles caused them to think again of the exile who had spoken like a prophet, and whose predictions seemed to be having their fulfilment. The opinions of the authorities were divided, and Nichiren still had many implacable enemies, but the Commissioner Tokimune finally decided to recall Nichiren to Kamakura. It seems that an intimation of this outcome had been given by Tokimori in the message accompanying the swords. The edict for his release was issued on the fourteenth of the second month (March 23), and reached Sado in the following month, two weeks after the letter above quoted was written, on the eighth of the third month (April 16). Nichiren complied with the order, bade farewell to his followers in the island, and left his abode of two years and a half, as signs of spring were appearing after a long winter, on the thirteenth of the third month (April 21). His religious opponents made attempts on his life at several points on the way, but the guards furnished by the government protected him, and brought him in safety to Kamakura, where he arrived on the twenty-sixth of the third month (May 4), after a journey of two weeks.

It was a triumphal entry for Nichiren. Not only did his old disciples and followers rejoice over the fulfilment of their long-cherished hope, but the government circles seemed to listen to Nichiren, and to seek his advice about the measures to be taken in view of the threatened Mongol invasion. Ten days after the return, on the memorable eighth of the fourth month (May 15), Nichiren was invited to the Commissioner's office. It now became the duty of Hei no Saemon,

his bitter enemy, to communicate the good-will of the Commissioner and to make advances to Nichiren. Let Nichiren himself tell the story.<sup>1</sup>

All of them received me courteously — something quite different from their former attitude. Some asked me questions about Amita-Buddha, others about the Shingon mysteries, others again about Zen. Hei no Saemon himself put questions concerning the efficacy of the teachings current before the revelation of the Lotus. I replied to them all by citing the Scriptures. Hei no Saemon, on behalf of His Excellence, the Commissioner, asked me when the Mongols would come over. I answered that they were to be expected within this year, etc.

Thus the officials showed some readiness to yield to Nichiren's propaganda. He, on his part, did not fail to take the opportunity to renew his strong remonstrances and warnings. His attitude was as aggressive as before, and he showed no disposition to compromise. Nothing would do but that the nation as a whole should at once adopt his religion, while all other religions should be prohibited, and their leaders severely punished. He commented on the many wrongs done by the Hōjō government, not only to himself, but to the religion of Buddha and to the country. Nichiren retired from the palace, and the government was put in a serious dilemma, whether to comply with the demands of the intransigent prophet or to ignore him. Either course seemed to them not only unwise but impracticable. Finally they adopted a compromise, and offered the prophet a great donation, together with high ecclesiastical rank and a public grant for his propaganda. Although the document embodying these proposals which is preserved by the Nichirenites is certainly not authentic, there is little doubt that the authorities wished to see Nichiren's polemics subdued,

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, p. 1406, in a writing containing his reminiscences, written in 1276 — two years after the event, therefore. Similarly, *Works*, p. 1169 (written in 1275); pp. 1241, 1283, 1579.

and to have him join in the prayers for the repulse of the Mongol invaders. Naturally, the prophet would hear to no compromise, but persisted in his demands.

While the question of Nichiren's propaganda was being discussed, the government gave fresh evidence that it had undergone no change of heart, but put its confidence as before in the Shingon mysteries. It was a time of a long drought, and the authorities called on the other Buddhists to pray for rain, as was customary. Nichiren was very indignant. He saw in the offers made to him a deceptive bait, and in the measures taken for rain an open dishonor done to himself. He protested again and again, but the government always vacillated; while his opponents were renewing their accusations and intrigues. The sequel of the triumphal entry was an irreconcilable breach. Nichiren left Kamakura, on the twelfth of the fifth month (June 17), and, taking only a few disciples and retainers, set out for a place among the mountains on the west side of Fuji.

The clamorous prophet was now suddenly changed to a silent recluse or a voluntary exile. Five days' journey brought him to his new abode, and the local chief of the place, Lord Hakiri, one of his warrior followers, welcomed him. A little hut was built in a deep valley in the midst of high peaks, and there the recluse began his new life with a few of his beloved disciples. This place, called Minobu, became Nichiren's home for the last eight years of his life, and, as we shall see later, he regarded it as a paradise on earth because of his residence there.

The change was perhaps quite unexpected, even to his intimate followers, but was a premeditated plan on the part of Nichiren. Various motives have been conjectured for this sudden turn in his life, but he himself, better than any

one else, tells us why he made it. The simplest explanation of the matter is given in the words: "I had always resolved to repeat my remonstrance three times, and to retire if these attempts should prove a failure." Now the "three times" is in accordance with an old Chinese proverb, and Nichiren had delivered his message thrice: in 1260, when he had presented his *Risshō Ankoku Ron*; in 1268, when he had repeated the remonstrance as a kind of ultimatum; and now, when he had pressed his demands after the return from Sado. But when we read between the lines, the retirement meant a continuation of his life in exile. It had been his determination not to return to Kamakura, unless the Hōjōs should be completely converted, and now his return had proved a failure. How could he remain peacefully in Kamakura? If he should continue his protests, his fate was plain — another execution or another exile! He was not so blind as to expect anything better. Why should he not become a voluntary exile, instead of a compulsory one? The reception of his third and last remonstrance was the occasion of his retirement, but not its true cause. His motives lay deeper. Let us see what they were.

The first was negative, the idea of expiation. We have already seen that Nichiren conceived his suffering as expiation. His idea was, "Expiation of my sins is the fulfilment of my mission to perpetuate the Lotus of Truth to the coming ages. Sins are not extinguished until the aim be attained." Since his triumphal entry had proved a failure, he must continue the expiation as he had been doing in Sado. Naturally, he associated with expiation a measure of suffering. Whenever he suffered from the extreme cold of Minobu, he must have reminded himself of his first winter in Sado; and he always rejoiced to liken his suffering with the self-castigation of Buddha during his years of self-train-

ing among the mountains. "The height of the hermitage is only seven feet, while the depth of snow is ten feet. Ice makes up the walls, and the icicles are like the beads of garlands decorating shrines."<sup>1</sup>

Whenever his followers at a distance sent him food or clothing, he wrote touching letters thanking them for the presents, and likened his benefactors to his parents or to those persons who supplied food to Buddha. His life at Minobu was one of extreme simplicity and austerity, and he never left the obscure spot. The uninviting place, a small piece of level ground, "as large as the palm of a hand," surrounded by high peaks, was his abode for eight years. Here he constructed a hermitage, and rejected Lord Hakiri's offer to erect a larger edifice. It was only in the year before his death that he at last consented to the building of an assembly hall of moderate size; but he enjoyed his abode there as if it were a paradise.

"Expiation" was the thought that constantly occupied his mind, but this idea was, after all, a negative one; the positive, and by far more important, reason of his retirement was his solicitude for the future of his religion. As we have had repeated occasion to note, Nichiren associated every step of his life with some feature of the Scripture, and especially regarded his life in Sado as the chief part, the climax, of his life. Now the last stage was to be inaugurated, and dedicated to the consummation of his mission and to the perpetuation of his religion, just as the last twelve chapters of the Scripture made up the consummation of the Truth. He had proclaimed the Sacred Title at the outset of his ministry; he had furnished the object of worship and spiritual introspection by the graphic representation of the Supreme Being; one thing alone remained — to prepare for,

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, p. 1939 (written in 1280).



or establish, the central seat of his religion. These three instruments of his propaganda were called the "Three Mysteries." Although there are some allusions to them in his writings before this time, Nichiren proclaimed this trinity for the first time in the first essay written after his retirement. This treatise is dated the twenty-fourth of the fifth month (June 24) — just a week after his arrival at Minobu. The great plan which he had long been meditating, and the motive which led him to retire from the present world, and to work for the future, was the establishment of the "*Kaidan*," or the Holy See of the Catholic Church of Buddhism.

In the essay just referred to he says:

What, then, is that mystery which Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu, Tendai and Dengyō have not revealed during the more than two thousand years since Buddha's decease? It is nought else but the Supreme Being (*Honzon*), the Holy See (*Kaidan*), and the five characters of the Sacred Title (*Daimoku*), all according to the truth of the primeval Buddhahood. . . .

Behold the tribulations and commotions coming one upon another! They are, indeed, the signs heralding the appearance of the sages, Viśiṣṭa-cāritra and the others. They will appear and establish the Three Gateways to the truth of the primeval Buddhahood. Then, throughout the four heavens and the four quarters will prevail universally the Lotus of the Perfect Truth. Can there by any doubt about this?

<sup>1</sup> The essay is entitled "*Hokke Shuyō-shō*," or "A Treatise on the Quintessence of the Lotus of Truth"; *Works*, pp. 1035-1045.