

CHAPTER III

NICHIREN'S PUBLIC APPEARANCE AND PERSECUTION

THE young monk, now no longer a seeker after truth, but a reformer filled with ardent zeal, bade farewell to the great centre of Buddhism on Hiei and went back to the old monastery on Kiyozumi, which he had left fifteen years before. He visited his parents, and they were his first converts. His old master and fellow-monks welcomed him, but to their minds Nichiren, the former Renchō, was nothing more than a promising young man who had seen the world and studied at Hiei. Keeping silence about all his plans and ambitions, Nichiren retired for a while to a forest near the monastery. Every one in the monastery supposed that he was practising the usual method of self-purification which they themselves employed; but, in fact, Nichiren was engaged in a quite different task, and occupied with his original idea, neither shared nor guessed by any one else.

The seven days of his seclusion, as the tradition says, was a period of fervent prayer, in preparation for launching his plan of reformation and proclaiming his new gospel. When his season of meditative prayer had reached the stage when he was ready to transform it into action, Nichiren one night left the forest and climbed the summit of the hill which commands an unobstructed view of the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean. When the eastern horizon began to glow with the approaching daybreak, he stood motionless looking toward the East, and as the golden disc of the sun began to

break through the haze over the vast expanse of waters, a loud voice, a resounding cry, broke from his lips. It was "*Namu Myōhō-renge-kyō*," "Adoration be to the Lotus of the Perfect Truth!" This was Nichiren's proclamation of his gospel to heaven and earth, making the all-illuminating sun his witness. It happened early in the morning of the twenty-eighth day of the fourth lunar month (May 17) 1253.

The proclamation of the Lotus of Truth, with the sun as witness, was, indeed, the first step in translating into action the ideal symbolized in his name, the Sun-Lotus. After this unique proclamation, Nichiren came back among human beings, and at noon of the same day, in an assembly hall facing south, he preached his new doctrine, and denounced the prevailing forms of Buddhism, to an audience composed of his old master and fellow-monks, and many others. There was none who was not offended by his bold proclamation and fierce attack. Murmurs grew to cries of protest; and when the sermon had been finished, every one assumed that the poor megalomaniac was mad. The feudal chief ruling that part of the country was so incensed that he would not be satisfied with anything short of the death of the preposterous monk. This lord, who was Nichiren's mortal foe throughout the subsequent years of his mission, was watching to attack Nichiren, who was now driven out of his old monastery. His master, the abbot, pitied his former pupil, and gave instruction to two elder disciples to take Nichiren to a hidden trail for escape. It was in the dusk of evening that Nichiren made his escape in this way. The sun, which at its rising had beheld Nichiren's proclamation, the sun which at noon had witnessed Nichiren's sermon, set as the hunted prophet made his way through the darkness of a wooded trail; only the evening glow was in the

sky. What must his thoughts have been? What prospect could he have cherished in his mind for his future career and for the destiny of his gospel?

The expelled prophet now went on missionary journeys in the neighboring provinces, and finally settled down in Kamakura, the seat of the Dictatorial government. While he was studying further the religious and social conditions of the time, and looking for an opportunity to appear again in public, the city of Kamakura was the scene of many frightful events. There were rumors of plots against the Hōjōs, and family strife arose among them; in addition to these things, storms, inundations, earthquakes, famines, comets, followed one another in swift succession. The people were panic-stricken, and the government could only resort to the offerings at Shinto sanctuaries and to the Buddhist rites of the Shingon mysteries. Nichiren himself describes the conditions as follows:¹

We have seen many signs in heaven and in earth; a famine, a plague—the whole country is filled with misery! Horses and cows are dying on the road-sides, and so are men; and there is no one to bury them. One half of the population is stricken, and there is no house that has entirely escaped.

Hence many minds are turning to religion. Others, again, in accordance with the doctrines of the Secret Shingon, use copious sprinkling of holy water from the five vases. . . . Some write the names of the seven gods of luck on pieces of paper, and affix them by the hundreds to the door-posts of their houses, whilst others do the same with the pictures of the five Great Powerful and the various (Shinto) gods of Heaven and Earth. . . . But let men do what they will, the famine and the plague still rage; there are beggars on every hand, and the unburied corpses line the roads.

¹ The quotation is taken from the opening of Nichiren's essay, "*Risshō Ankoku Ron*," of which more will be said later. The English is from the pen of Arthur Lloyd, *The Creed of Half Japan*, pp. 307-309. The language of the original is more rhetorical, in accordance with the style of the time; in later years Nichiren wrote with less flowery rhetoric.

Out of pity, not only for the people stricken by these calamities, but on account of the superstitious practices in which they took refuge, Nichiren pondered in his mind the question, What are the causes of these evils, and how can they be averted ?

In attacking the problem, Nichiren's thought naturally turned to the unique authority of the Lotus, in contrast to the syncretistic practices of the prevailing Buddhism. Yet he was not satisfied until he had made a further investigation of the sacred books and found various prophecies concerning calamities which should befall the people who degraded the true Buddhist religion by resorting to superstitions. He retired, for this investigation, to a monastery furnished with a good library. There he wrote and rewrote his ideas, which finally took shape in an essay entitled "*Risshō Ankoku Ron*," which means "The Establishment of Righteousness and the Security of the Country."¹

In this essay Nichiren fearlessly pointed out the degeneracy of the people and the foolishness of the rulers. The heaviest responsibility for the miseries of the time he ascribed to Amita-Buddhism,² by which both the government and the people were led astray from righteousness. Moreover, he gave a prophetic warning to the nation that, if it did not turn at once to the unique Truth, the country would experience more disastrous calamities, especially a

¹ The first version was finished in 1259, and the final one in 1260. The latter is shorter, and in the form of a dialogue. See Lloyd, chapter xxv, from which the following quotations are made.

² In this essay, the most vehement attack was directed against Amita-Buddhism and its propounder Hōnen; while in Nichiren's other writings from the same period attack was also directed against Zen. Later on, the two other branches, Shingon and Ritsu, were similarly criticized — definitely, first in the letters sent to the authorities in 1268. Hence the adverse criticism against these four branches of Buddhism became an integral part of the Nichirenite dogmatics.

foreign invasion ¹ and a rebellion. His vehement expression runs as follows:

Of all the misfortunes . . . , but one remains that we have not yet experienced, the misfortune of foreign invasion. . . . When I consider these Scriptural prophecies and then look at the world around me, I am bound to confess that both the gods and the minds of the people are confused. You see the fulfilment of the prophecy in the past; dare we say that the remaining prophecies will fail of their fulfilment ?

This warning was followed by an admonition to the nation to be converted to Nichiren's religion, based on the sermon of the Lotus. The vehement prophet would not be satisfied unless all other forms of Buddhism were suppressed and their leaders severely punished. Thus he concludes:

Woe unto them! They have missed the entrance into the gate that leads to the true Buddhism, and have fallen into the prison-house of the false teachings. They are fettered, entangled, bewildered. Whither will their blind wanderings lead them ?

Ye men of little faith, turn your minds and trust yourselves at once to the unique Truth of the Righteous Way! Then ye shall see that the three realms of existence are (in reality) the Kingdom of Buddha, which is in no way subject to decay; and that the worlds in the ten directions are all Lands of Treasures, which are never to be destroyed. The Kingdom is changeless, and the Lands eternal. Then how shall your bodies be otherwise than secure and your minds serene in enlightenment ? ²

Not only were these words preached to the masses on the streets and in the parks, but the written document was presented to the government authorities (in the seventh month of 1260). The government was shocked, the ecclesiastical dignitaries were enraged, and instigation from behind the scenes stirred up a mob which attacked Nichiren's hermitage

¹ This prediction was based on statements in several Buddhist books, and its realization in the following years immensely strengthened Nichiren's faith.

² The idea of the earthly paradise will be seen later. The English version is partly Lloyd's, and partly mine.

and burnt it down. Nichiren escaped the peril through the darkness of the night, and fleeing out of Kamakura, went on a missionary journey in adjacent provinces. There, more converts were made, and among them not a few of the warrior class, the local chiefs who were not under the direct control of the Dictator. The suspicion in which the government held Nichiren increased, and when he came back to Kamakura in the following year, he was officially arrested, and finally sentenced to banishment and sent to the desolate shore of the peninsula Izu (in the fifth month of 1261).

In this place of exile, Nichiren found bare shelter with a fisherman and his wife, in the midst of threatening dangers. How deeply he felt his obligations to these simple and faithful converts is shown in the letters written to them later, wherein they are likened to Nichiren's parents, perhaps in a former life. His hardest trials did not last long. More converts were made, and Nichiren's message found a sincere response in the unprejudiced hearts of the country folk. Yet he was an exile; he had been repeatedly attacked, and had some narrow escapes from death; his future showed no bright prospects, and his hope of converting the nation as a whole seemed to be very remote, if not totally vain. His thought turned to the question whether his mission would be fulfilled, and he re-examined the Scripture with reference to this problem.

Nearly ten years had passed since Nichiren had proclaimed his new gospel, and these years had been full of adventures and dangers. The threats and perils heaped upon him, as well as the disasters which filled the people with terror, seemed to him not mere chance, but the necessary consequence of the conflict between the blindness of the people and the compassionate cure proposed by him. All

this—the causes and effects, the present calamities and the future destiny—gave him new assurance that every prophecy in the Scripture would certainly be fulfilled. The thing which most strongly confirmed his faith in the Scripture and his enthusiasm for it was the discovery that every phrase of the vows of perseverance, as set forth in the chapter on “Perseverance,” had been, and was being, realized, step by step, in his own life. The ardent spirit of the vows found its closest counterpart and echo in his fiery personality and perilous career.

See what the Scripture tells us! Buddha’s disciples, beholding the amazing vision of the Heavenly Shrine, and hearing the encouraging exhortation, take together the vows of fidelity and endurance.

O Exalted One! be little anxious for us!
 After Thy great decease,
 In the evil ages full of fears and dangers,
 We shall proclaim the supreme Scripture.¹

This was what Nichiren had done, and he was now suffering for it.

There will then surely be malignant men,
 And they will deride us and abuse us,
 Lay upon us with weapons and sticks.
 All these things we shall bear with endurance and perseverance.

Does this not mean, Nichiren thought, the laymen, the rulers, and the people, who antagonize the Truth because of their dislike for righteousness? Did they not threaten him with sword and fire? Again:

In the Latter Days there will be monks,
 Who, being malicious and crooked in mind,
 Will pretend to have attained what is not really attained,
 And their minds will be full of vain pride.

¹ This and following passages, Yam., pp. 389-393; Text, pp. 271-274; SBE., pp. 259-261.

Were not the monks always the instigators of the persecutions? Traitors to Buddha, companions of devils, worshippers of strange deities, men of vain pride — these are Nichiren's bitter enemies. Is not the prophecy being fulfilled by them? Further:

There will be those who dwell in forests (*āraṇyaka*),
Living in tranquillity and wearing the regular robes;
They pretend to practise the true monastic life,
And despise all other men.

They will preach to laymen,
Simply for the sake of fame and profit;
And yet they will be revered by the people,
As if they were endowed with the six supernatural powers. . . .

Are not all abbots and bishops men of this kind? Observe how some of them pretend to be Arahants, and are believed by the people!

In the evil days of the ages full of turbulence
There will be many fears and dangers;
There will be men possessed by devils,
And they will abuse and insult us.

By revering Buddha and putting confidence in him,
And by wearing the armor of forbearance,
We shall endure all these perils,
For the sake of proclaiming this Scripture.

We shall never be fearful in sacrificing our bodily life,
But always regard the true Way as the highest cause;
And thus we shall, throughout all coming days,
Stand for the cause committed to us by Buddha.

O Exalted One! Thou may'st be assured,
Even when the vicious monks of the turbulent ages,
Being ignorant of the sermons preached by Buddha,
According to his tactful method,

Shall revile and rebuke us;
And we be repeatedly driven out of our abodes,
And kept away from our sanctuaries.
Even then, we shall endure all these injuries,
By keeping ourselves to Buddha's decrees.

In whatsoever cities or villages,
 There may be any who would seek the Truth,
 Thither we shall surely go
 And preach the Truth entrusted to us by Thee.

We are Thy messengers, O Exalted One!
 We have nothing to fear from any people,
 We shall proclaim the Truth, to deserve Thy commission.
 Thou may'st be assured and rest secure.

Now we take these vows in Thy presence,
 And in the presence of all Buddhas
 Who have come from the ten quarters.
 May'st Thou, O Buddha, know our intention and determination!

Nichiren saw all this being fulfilled in himself, but had to anticipate yet more persecutions. In later years he referred most earnestly to the passage which tells how the preachers of the true religion should be repeatedly expelled from their dwellings, because it was *his* actual experience. Thus he found all his career foretold in the Scripture, and deemed that he was faithfully observing the vows of perseverance. "The Twenty Stanzas of Perseverance" was his favorite expression, which he was proud to embody in his life.

He formulated these reflections and hopes in an essay, and in its conclusion his convictions are vividly set forth:¹

It is said in the chapter in the Scripture on Perseverance (chap. XIII) that, in the fifth five hundred years of the religion, there would appear opponents of the Truth, of three kinds. The present time is just in this period of the fifth five centuries, and I see clearly the existence of the three kinds of opponents. . . . It is said in the fourth fascicle of the Scripture:² "Even in the life-time of the Tathāgata, there are manifold animosities shown toward this Scripture; how much more will it be so after his passing away?" Again, in the fifth fascicle:³ "All over the world, the people find it so difficult to believe that they

¹ *Works*, p. 429.

² *Yam.*, p. 327; *Text*, p. 230, lines 7-10, SBE., p. 219.

³ *Yam.*, p. 418, chapter xiv; *Text*, p. 290, line 12; SBE., p. 275.

antagonize (the Truth)." Further on:¹ "We shall not care for bodily life, but do our best for the sake of the incomparable Way"; and similarly, in the sixth fascicle: "We shall sacrifice even our life." . . . From what we see in these passages it is evident that we are not entitled to be propagators of the Lotus of Truth, unless we call forth the hatred of the three kinds of opponents. One who does so is the propagator of the Truth, and yet he is destined to lose life on this account.

We can here see clearly how Nichiren was prepared for any perils, and how ready to encounter even greater dangers, leaving his fate to the destiny of the true Buddhist as prophesied in the Scripture. To him dangers and persecutions were the very signs of his being the genuine believer of the Truth.

As a man trained in the analytic method of Buddhist philosophy, Nichiren proceeded to determine the position he occupied in the perpetuation of the religion, after the model of his great master Tendai,² deriving his material from the five conditions, or "principles", of his mission. First, as to the doctrine, his gospel was based exclusively on the scripture, Lotus, which was the perfect consummation of Buddhist doctrines, before which the teachings of all other branches of Buddhism must lose weight and authority. Second, as to the capacity of the people taught, mankind in the degenerate age of the Latter Days could be trained only by the simplest expression of truth, not by a complicated system of doctrine, nor by an intricate process of meditation and mysteries. Third, as to the time, his time was the age of

¹ Yam., p. 392, chapter xiii; Text, p. 273, verse 15; SBE., p. 260.

² *Works*, pp. 424-429, dated the tenth of the second month (March 1) 1262. The essay is entitled "*Kyō-ki-ji-koku shō*," or "Treatise on the Doctrine, the Capacity, the Time, and the Country." Cp. the fivefold knowledge (*pañcaññū*) of Buddha, concerning instruction, in *Anguttara*, v. 131: the principle, the truth, the degree, the time, and the congregation.

the Latter Law, in which the scripture, Lotus, alone would remain available for the salvation of all. Fourth, as to the country of its promulgation, Japan was the land where the true Buddhism would prevail, and whence it should be propagated throughout the whole world. Lastly, as to the order of the successive rise and fall of systems, all other forms of Buddhism had severally done their work, and Nichiren's time was ripe for the acceptance of the Lotus, as the sole authority in religion. All the five conditions for the supremacy of the Lotus seemed to Nichiren to be fulfilled, and he regarded himself as the man destined to accomplish the work of realizing the prophecies contained in the Scripture.

This was his conviction and consolation; yet it is noteworthy that the personal thesis is not so clearly and vividly stated in this essay, as it is in his later writings. Let us cite his own words. After having explained the five conditions, he says:

One who would propagate the Buddhist truth, by having convinced himself of the five principles, is entitled to become the leader of the Japanese nation. One who knows that the Lotus of Truth is the king of all scriptures, knows the truth of the religion. . . . If there were no one who "read" the Lotus of Truth, there could be no leader of the nation; without a leader, the nation could do naught but be bewildered, . . . and fall to the nethermost hells in consequence of degrading the Truth.¹

After these remarks, he enumerates the passages concerning the difficulties to be encountered by the promulgators of the Truth, meaning to apply the passages to himself. It was these convictions that consoled Nichiren in the midst of dangers, and inspired him with a firm belief in the future of his mission. But his conviction regarding his destiny, as

¹ *Works*, p. 427.

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well as his remote connection with the sages of the past, remained to be more exactly defined in writings from his second exile. In the essay before us, we see a decided progress in Nichiren's trust in the Lotus of Truth, which had started on a doctrinal basis, and was destined to bring him to more personal conviction of his prophetic mission.