

Myokei Caine-Barrett, Shonin

*Living the Lotus Sutra*

Week Two: “Nichiren Shonin’s Difficult and Remarkable Life”

February 8, 2020



I’m Myokei Caine-Barret, Shonin. This week’s topic in our series, “Living the *Lotus Sutra*,” is on the life of Nichiren Shonin, the founder of the Nichiren Shu order and the one person who established the *Lotus Sutra* as the teaching for all time.

Nichiren Shonin was born on February 16th, in 1222, in Kominato, Chiba, Japan. Now, we don’t necessarily have a perfect biography of his life, and many of the stories that we know are from his own writings or that of his followers. So this might sound like legend or mythology.

It is said that Nichiren Shonin’s mother dreamed of the sun entering her body at the time of conception, and lotus flowers bloomed during the off-season on the shores of Kominato when he was born. His given name was Zen-nichi-marō, and his parents were Nukina Jiro Shigetada and Umegiku. He was thought to be the son of a fisherman, but tradition also suggests that he had some connections to a samurai family or he was born to a samurai family.

At the age of 12, he entered Seicho-ji Temple in Kiyosumi for his basic education and to clarify questions about his faith. He was a Tendai practitioner at that time, and also practiced the *nembutsu* [“Namu Amida Butsu,” the Pure Land mantra]. His name at this time was changed to Yaku Omato and he made a vow to Kokuzo Bosatsu or Kokuzo Bodhisattva during that same year to become the foremost man of wisdom and knowledge in the land. Now, because he lived in a rural area, and people were not extremely well educated; there were few resources for education. He eventually had to leave, and at age 16, he was ordained under his master, Dozen-bo. He was given the name Zensho-bo Rencho, and as he yearned to continue his studies he traveled to Kamakura, where he studied in various temples and started to resolve some of his issues around the Nembutsu. He remained there for about five years.

From Kamakura, he traveled to Kyoto to study at Mount Hiei (Hiei-zan), a Tendai temple which still exists today. He remained there and continued his journey until he was about 32 years old, when he returned to Seicho-ji after traveling to various temples and libraries around the country to satisfy his thirst for knowledge. By this time, when he returned to Seicho-ji, his master Dozen-Bo and everybody in the temple, in the city, were so excited that he had returned, because they thought he was a brilliant student and they thought that he would bring back so much greater knowledge and information from them. But he had concluded that the *Lotus Sutra* was the true teaching of the Buddha, and so he himself changed his name to Nichiren, “Nichi”

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coming from Chapter 21, and “ren,” from Chapter 15 of the *Lotus Sutra*. Basically, his name translates as “Sun Lotus.”

He returned to Seicho-ji also to express his gratitude to Kokuzo for allowing him to achieve his goal of becoming what he thought was the wisest man of all Japan. On April 28th, 1253, he faced the rising sun over the Pacific Ocean and chanted, “Namu myoho renge kyo,” for the very first time to declare his vow to spread the *Lotus Sutra*. Later that afternoon, he delivered his first sermon on the *Lotus Sutra* before the monks and other important persons from the community. He believed that society was corrupt and people were suffering as a result, and the only way to save society was through the correct practice of the *Lotus Sutra*. He was run out of town, and indeed, there were efforts to kill him at the time, and his master Dozen-Bo and other monks helped him to escape.

In 1257, a strong earthquake hit Kamakura. Most of the houses were destroyed and many people died. There were also typhoons and other disasters, famine, and disease. Temples and shrines throughout the country were ordered to pray for calm and to alleviate such disasters, without much success. It was these conditions that led Nichiren Shonin to write the *Rissho Ankoku Ron* (*On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land*) after studying various prophecies about the future of Japan. He concluded that the root cause of disasters was that people had turned away from the correct teachings and were following transitory teachings. His first remonstrance in the form of the *Rissho Ankoku Ron* was submitted to the shogunate in 1260.

This led to even further persecutions. In 1260, a mob of *nembutsu* followers attempted to kill him and burn down his hermitage. He managed to escape. In 1260, in May, he rebuilt his hermitage and continued to teach. He was arrested and banished to Izu peninsula. He was left on a reef at Izu and rescued by a fisherman, and in 1263, he was pardoned and allowed to return to Kamakura and reunite with his disciples. In 1264, he went back to Kominato, where his mother was near death, and as he was traveling to the home of a believer, he and some of his disciples were attacked by Nembutsu followers. He received a cut on his forehead and a broken arm, but he escaped.

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In 1271, he issued a second admonition to the shogunate. He was arrested and taken to Tatsunokuchi, the place of execution, where he was expected to be beheaded. Miraculously a comet appeared in the sky, striking fear into the hearts of the soldiers, and he was placed under arrest and held at Tatsunokuchi in a cave.

He was then exiled to Sado island in October, and these became significant years as he wrote the *Kaimoku-sho* or, *The Opening of the Eyes* and *Kanjin Honzon Sho*, on spiritual contemplation. He also initially began to inscribe the “Omandaligo [ph?] Honzon.” Word had reached the shogunate about an impending Mongolian invasion. The regent, remembering Nichiren Shonin’s words in the admonitions, issued an edict in 1274 to end his exile. He was summoned to an interview with the government about the pending Mongol invasion. There’s an old Chinese saying that “if you admonish them three times and they fail to hear, then you must leave.” So when he was summoned by the government, he again remonstrated, and since they did not listen, he retired to Mt. Minobu in 1274. He became seriously ill in 1277, as a result of his years of deprivation and hardship, and although he recovered from this illness, he never fully regained his strength. He lived at Minobu, continuing to teach and receive his followers from all across Japan who were willing and able to make the journey, and if one can imagine, today we can make the journey in four hours by bus from Tokyo to Mt. Minobu. That if you imagine someone walking or on horseback, trying to get to visit Nichiren Shonin at Mt. Minobu, it was indeed a very difficult journey.

In 1282, he became ill once again, and at the suggestion of his disciples, set out for the hot springs. He arrived at Ikegami, which is just outside of Tokyo, and he could go no further. On 1282, in September, he gave his last lecture about the *Rissho Ankoku Ron*. He assigned six senior priests and instructed them on how to carry out his work after his death, and at age 61, on October 13th, 1282, he passed away, surrounded by his disciples and followers. He was cremated on October 15th, and the ashes were returned to Mt. Minobu, according to his wishes.

The *Rissho Ankoku Ron* still exists today and is well regarded. It’s known as *On Securing the Peace of the Land through Practicing the Correct Teachings*. October 13th is celebrated throughout Japan with overnight chanting, Mondo parades, even for those who are not followers

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of Nichiren Shonin. It is a day of celebrating his life and the magnificent accomplishments of a life lived in deprivation and hardship but still managing to accomplish his goal.

Nichiren Shonin led a very difficult life, and what was remarkable about his life was that he was able to use his life to its fullest extent to share the dharma. He saw the difficulties he encountered as proof that he was destined to do this. He saw his difficulties as an impetus to continue, to persevere. He did not allow anything to stop him from spreading the dharma, from remonstrating, to continue to try and change the minds of the people, and he spread the dharma far and wide throughout his entire life, as much as was possible in that time, and today we can see the results, that it is now spread around the world with millions of followers and people who chant the *daimoku* to this day.

This week we talked about Nichiren Shonin and the issues in his life that led him to practice Buddhism, to develop the practice of chanting, the *odaimoku*, “Namu myoho renge kyo,” and how he was able to use the problems in his life to fuel his desire to share the dharma.