

Dr. Jacqueline Stone on the Object of Worship

Nichiren uses the term "object of worship" or *honzon* to mean not only a physical icon used for ritual, contemplative, or devotional purposes--the common meaning of the word in his time--but also the principle or reality which that object is said to embody. His various writings explain the object of worship in this latter sense from two perspectives. From one view, it is the original Buddha. For example:

[The people of] Japan as well as of Jambudvipa should as one take Sakyamuni, master of teachings, of the origin teaching as their object of worship--that is to say, Sakyamuni and Many Jewels within the jeweled stupa along with all the other Buddhas, flanked by Superior Conduct and the others of the four bodhisattvas.

In other writings, the object of worship is said to be the *Lotus Sutra*, or *Myohorenge-kyo*, itself:

Question: What should ordinary worldlings in the evil days of the last age take as their object of worship?

Answer: They should make the *daimoku* of the *Lotus Sutra* their object of worship....

Question: ...Why do you not take Sakyamuni as the object of worship, but instead, the *daimoku* of the *Lotus Sutra*?

Answer: ...This is not my interpretation. Lord Sakymuni and T'ien-t'ai [Chih-i] both established the *Lotus Sutra* as the object of worship.... The reason is that the *Lotus Sutra* is the father and mother of Sakyamuni and the eye of all Buddhas. Sakyamuni, Dainichi, and the Buddhas of the ten directions were all born of the *Lotus Sutra*. Therefore I now take as object of worship that which gives birth [to the Buddhas].

These two views at first seem contradictory. However, if "Sakyamuni" in the passage first cited is understood to be the eternal Buddha, the apparent contradiction dissolves. The eternal Sakyamuni and the Dharma (i.e., the *daimoku* of the *Lotus Sutra*) are two aspects of an identity; the "three thousand worlds in one thought-moment as actuality" for Nichiren described both the insight of the original Buddha and the truth by which that Buddha is awakened.

Whether imagined as Dharma or as Buddha, Nichiren's "object of worship of the origin teaching" is perfectly inclusive. As Dharma, its all-encompassing nature has already been discussed: *Myohorenge-kyo* contains all teachings, all phenomena, all merits. As Buddha, it is no less embracing:

Zentoku Buddha in the eastern quarter, Dainichi in the center, the [other] Buddhas of the ten directions, the seven Buddhas of the past, the Buddhas of the three time periods, Superior Conduct and the

other bodhisattvas, Manjusri and Sariputra, the great heavenly King Brahma, King Mara of the sixth heaven, King Indra, the sun god, the moon god, the gods of the stars, the seven stars of the Big Dipper, the twenty-eight constellations, the five stars, the seven stars, the eighty-four thousand countless stars, the asura kings, the *kami* of heaven, the *kami* of earth, the mountain *kami*, the *kami* of the seas, the *kami* of the clans, the *kami* of the villages, the persons who rule the various lands in all worlds--which of them is not the Lord Sakyamuni? Tensho Daijin and Hachiman Daibosatsu also have Sakyamuni, master of teachings, as their original ground (*honji*). Sakyamuni is like the single moon in the sky, while the various Buddhas and bodhisattvas are like its reflections in myriad bodies of water. One who makes an image of Sakyamuni [thereby] makes [images of] all Buddhas of the ten directions.

This passage appears to draw on the *Lotus Sutra's* representations of all Buddhas as emanations of Sakyamuni, as well as on Mikkyo concepts of an all-pervading Dharma-body Buddha. One notes not only that all Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and Buddhist tutelary deities emanate from Sakyamuni, but that the Japanese *kami* all have Sakyamuni as their original ground. This reflects Nichiren's distinctive, *Lotus*-centered *honji-suijaku* thought, in which all *kami* are seen as the local manifestations of Sakyamuni.

In accordance with traditional T'ien-t'ai thought, as well as that of medieval Japanese Tendai, Nichiren understood the Sakyamuni of the original teaching as eternal and possessing all three bodies. However, the "Tathagata of original enlightenment" seen in medieval Tendai texts, while nominally triple-bodied, tends to be described chiefly as an all-pervasive Dharma body. The passage just cited presents a similar view. Nichiren's writings as a whole, however, present a spectrum of concepts of the Buddha, drawing on the implications, not only of the Dharma body, but of the recompense and manifested bodies as well. Nichiren's Buddha is at once both immanent and transcendent. He is "our blood and flesh"; his practices and resulting virtues are "our bones and marrow." Yet at the same time, he is "parent, teacher, and sovereign" to all beings of this, the Saha world. In this connection, Nichiren also stressed that Sakyamuni was only the Buddha who, out of compassion for its beings, had actually appeared in this world--a frequent point in Nichiren's criticism of devotion to Amida. Sakyamuni is lord of this threefold world; all lesser rulers hold their territories in fief from him. With this concept of the Buddha, Nichiren asserted the superior authority of the *Lotus Sutra* over that of worldly rule. Sakyamuni also presides over a pure land, the Pure Land of Eagle Peak (*ryozen jodo*), discussed below, and Nichiren often assured his followers that their deceased relatives were with Sakyamuni there. In short, Nichiren's concept of the object of worship not only posits a Buddha who encompasses all things, but itself attempts to encompass all views of the Buddha.

In addition to its meaning as ultimate truth or principle, Nichiren also used the term *honzon* in its more conventional sense to mean a physical icon forming the focus of practice, in this case, *Lotus Sutra* recitation and the chanting of *daimoku*. His *honzon*

in this sense had plural forms. During Nichiren's lifetime, the *honzon* most commonly used by his followers appears to have been a calligraphic mandala of his own devising, which he referred to variously as the "great mandala" (*daimandara*) or the "revered object of worship" (*gohonzon*). On this mandala the *daimoku* is written vertically as a central inscription, flanked by the names of Sakyamuni, Many Jewels, and the other personages who were present at the assembly in open space above Eagle Peak where the core of the origin teaching of the *Lotus Sutra* was expounded. Nichiren widely inscribed these mandalas for individual followers as personal *honzon*. More than 120 of them still survive [most are online here], and there are likely to have been many more. Some larger mandalas may have been enshrined in Hokkedo--lodging temples of disciples or other chapels maintained by lay followers--where congregations met. Nichiren's writings also refer occasionally to the scrolls of the *Lotus Sutra* being enshrined as an object of worship. At the same time, at least three of his extant letters suggest that he or his disciples occasionally performed the eye-opening ritual (*kaigen kuyo*) for Buddha images made by his followers. He is also known to have kept by him throughout much of his life a small personal image of Sakyamuni Buddha, which he enshrined wherever he happened to be living. Yet another form of *honzon* possibly adopted during Nichiren's lifetime is known as the "one Buddha and four attendants" (*isson shishi*). It probably derives from passages in Nichiren's writings such as the following, in a letter to his follower Toki Jonin (1216-1299), dated 1279:

You say in your letter: "I have heard before that an object of worship should be made of the Lord Sakyamuni of the origin teaching, who attained enlightenment in the remote past, and that, as attendants, [images] should be made of the four leaders of the bodhisattvas emerged from the earth who are his original disciples. But when [is this object of worship to be established] as I have heard?"

...Now in the Final Dharma age, in accordance with the Buddha's golden words, [an object of worship] should be made of the original Buddha and his original attendants.

And in fact, Toki Jonin's index of the writing, icons, and ritual implements preserved at the temple he established after Nichiren's death includes "a standing image of Sakyamuni and also the four bodhisattvas (in a small shrine)." The presence of the four bodhisattvas signals that the central icon is the original or eternal, rather than the merely historical, Sakyamuni. The "one Buddha and four attendants" came into fairly widespread use among Nichiren's followers as a *honzon* almost immediately after his death. There was also a more complex configuration consisting of the two Buddhas, Sakyamuni and Many Jewels, seated together in the jeweled stupa and flanked by the four bodhisattvas (*itto ryoson shishi*). The earliest attested grouping was made by Jogyoin Nichiyu (1298-1374) of the Nakayama lineage in 1335.

The variety of explanations in Nichiren's writings concerning the object of worship and the plurality of its iconic forms gave rise to considerable controversy after his death. Scholar-monks within the sect debated whether his true intent was

represented by the "object of worship as Buddha" or as "person" (*butsu-honzon*, *nin-honzon*), or by "the object of worship as Dharma" (*ho-honzon*). Some argued that one represented Nichiren's true intention and the other a skillful means, while others tried in various ways to reconcile the two. These contraversies have continued down to the present. A related point of contention has concerned whether the physical object of worship employed in actual practice should be an image of Sakyamuni or Nichiren's calligraphic mandala. This represents one of the earliest fault lines along which rival factions among Nichiren's followers aligned themselves after his death. It is addressed primarily in writings of the Fuji School, originating with Byakuran Ajari Nikko (1246-1333), whose differences with other leading disciples led to the first schism within the Nichiren community. Fuji documents cite as one reason for the schism Nikko's opposition to the use of Buddha images and conviction that the mandala alone should be revered as the object of worship.

From a contemporary perspective, it may seem puzzling that Nichiren himself did not clarify such matters more definitively. However, as the late Shioiri Ryodo pointed out, the expectation that each sect of Buddhism should have a unified object of worship had not yet come into being in his time. Nichiren's treatment of the object of worship as a central issue of doctrine was, in Shioiri's view, of "epochal significance in the history of [Japanese] Buddhism." Other research indicated that differentiation in *honzon* may have contirbuted to the formation of sectarian conciousness long before Nichiren's time. Nonetheless, as Shioiri suggests, the debates that raged among Nichiren's successors over the meaning and form of the object of worship were instrumental in defining the power of a particular tradition's *honzon* to unify its faith and doctrine and to express its sense of unique identity.

Nichiren spoke of his object of worship as embodying "the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment as actuality," a statement that may be understood in two ways. First, as understood by recent studies in Buddhist art history, icons and mandalas in premodern Japan were seen not as merely symbolic or representational but as participating in and actively embodying the sacred powers of the beings or principles they depicted. Nichiren explains this idea in terms of the concept of the Buddhahood of grasses and trees (*somoku jobutsu*), or more broadly, of insentient beings, a principle encompassed by the doctrine of the three thousand realms in one thought-moment:

Both inner and outer writings permit the use of wooden and painted images as objects of worship, but the reason for this has emerged [only] from the T'ien-t'ai school. If plants and trees did not possess cause and effect [i.e., the nine realms and the Buddha realm] in both physical and mental aspects, it would be useless to rely on wooden and painted images as objects of worship.... Were it not for the Buddha-seed which is the three thousand realms in one thought moment, the realization of Buddhahood by sentient beings and [the efficacy of] wooden and painted images as objects of worship would exist in name but not in reality.

For this reason, Nichiren insisted that only the *Lotus Sutra*, the textual source of the *ichinen sanzen* principle, was efficacious in the eye-opening ritual for consecrating Buddha images.

Second, the object of worship not only is held physically to embody the three thousand realms in one thought-moment but also represents an attempt to depict this reality visually. In the case of configurations of statues, this enlightened reality of the eternal Buddha, described in the *Lotus Sutra* as the assembly in open space above Eagle Peak, is only suggested by the presence of the Buddha's original disciples, the four bodhisattvas, or by the two Buddhas, Sakyamuni and Many Jewels (Prabhutaratna, Taho), seated side by side in the jeweled stupa. Nichiren's mandala, however, is much more detailed. *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* is written vertically in large characters down the center. At the top, this central inscription is flanked by the two Buddhas, Sakyamuni and Many Jewels, who are in turn flanked by the four bodhisattvas. Below them, in the next row, are representatives of the bodhisattvas who are followers of the Buddha of the provisional and trace teachings, such as Fugen (Samantabhadra) and Monju (Manjusri), and the great voice hearers, Sariputra and Maudgalyayana, flanked by the Buddhist tutelary deities Brahma and Indra, and King Mara of the *deva* realm. In lower rows still are representatives of the six realms: the *devas* of the sun, moon, and stars, King Ajatasatru, the wheel turning king, the asura king, the dragon king, the *raksasa* Kishimojin (Hariti) and her ten daughters, and the Buddha's cousin and traitorous disciple Devadatta. Also represented in the assembly are the sun goddess Tensho Daijin and Hachiman Daibosatsu, who for Nichiren together represented the *kami* of Japan. Beside them, the patriarchs T'ien-t'ai Ta-shih (Chih-i) and Dengyo Daishi (Saicho) are also accorded a place. The four *deva* kings guard the four corners of the mandala, and to either side appear the Siddham "seed characters" for the esoteric deities Fudo Myoo and Aizen Myoo, representing, respectively, the doctrines of "samsara is nirvana" (*shoji soku nehan*) and "the defilements are bodhi" (*bonno soku bodhi*). Passages from the sutra, expressing its blessings and protection, are inscribed to the right and left sides of the assembly; the choice of inscriptions sometimes varied according to the individual mandala. At the bottom is Nichiren's signature and the words: "This is the great mandala never before revealed in Jambudvipa during the more than 2,220 years since the Buddha's nirvana."

As will be seen from the description above, Nichiren's mandala includes not only Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and deities but also representatives of the evil realms, such as *raksasa* demons and the treacherous Devadatta. In including such figures, Nichiren followed not the text of *Lotus Sutra* itself--in which all beings in the six realms of transmigration are removed before the jeweled stupa is opened--but the principle of three thousand realms in one thought-moment, according to which even the Buddha realm contains the nine unenlightened states. In short, the mandala depicts the mutual inclusion of the ten realms. As noted above, Nichiren saw this concept as central to the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment, an emphasis visible in the mandala. A writing attributed to Nichiren explains:

The "Jeweled Stupa" chapter states: "All in the great assembly were lifted and present in open space." All the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and great saints, and in general all the beings of the two worlds [of desire and form] and the eight kinds of [nonhuman] beings who assembled in the introductory chapter, dwell in the *gohonzon*, without a single exception. Illuminated by the light of the five characters of the Wonderful Dharma, they assume their originally inherent august attributes. This is called the object of worship.

Nichiren's mandala draws on a number of earlier, sometimes overlapping iconographic traditions. Representations of the Buddhas and their auditors found in the sutras revered in particular schools, ranged together in mandala-like "assemblies" with the patriarchs of those schools, are attested in Japan as early as the eighth century and appear to have played a role in expression of sectarian doctrine and the formation of sectarian identity; Nichiren's mandala may well represent an extension of these older forms. It is certainly linked to the extremely widespread and varied iconographic depictions of the two Buddhas Sakyamuni and Many Jewels seated side by side with the jeweled stupa. Such representations appear in the Tendai tradition early on; for example, a jeweled stupa of Taho Nyorai together with images of Sakyamuni Buddha flanked by Manjusri and Maitreya are said to have formed the central images of the ordination platform erected on Mt. Hiei five years after Saicho's death. Jeweled stupa representations are also associated with Taimitsu and with broader, nonsectarian currents of *Lotus*-centered practice and devotion. Nichiren's use of a mandala as an object of worship was also clearly influenced by the use of mandalas within esoteric Buddhism, in which contemplation of mandalas or deities represented thereon was regarded, among the three mysteries of Mikkyo practice, as the "mystery of the mind," by which the Buddha's mind and the practitioners' mind were identified. In particular, Nichiren's mandala shows structural similarities to the Lotus mandala (*Hokke mandara*), employed in a Taimitsu ritual known as the "Lotus rite" (*Hokke ho*). This mandala, which depicts Sakyamuni and Many Jewels together on a lotus in its central court, reflects a synthesis of *Lotus* and Mikkyo thought.

Nichiren's mandala also shows connections with more contemporaneous Tendai developments in Buddhist ritual iconography. By the late thirteenth century, the practice hall of the cloister Ryozen-in at Yokawa is said to have been adorned with a group of large paintings depicting the assembly of the *Lotus Sutra*. Centering on a lifesize image of Sakyamuni Buddha, the configuration included to one side, a jeweled stupa flanked right and left by paintings of the four leaders of the bodhisattvas of the earth and the bodhisattvas of the provisional teaching, and to the other side, by paintings of other bodhisattvas and great sravaka disciples. The two adjoining walls were hung with silk paintings of further bodhisattvas, deities, King Ajatasatru of the human world, the kings of the dragons and of other nonhuman beings, and other figures present in the assembly of the *Lotus Sutra*. The effect would have been to make those entering the hall feel as though they were actually there in the assembly. Or, to give another example, the *kuden* text *Shuzenji-*

ketsu, discussed in the preceding chapter [in the book], contains the following passage:

The transmission concerning the Master [Tao-sui]'s profound and secret practice states: "You should make pictures of images representing the ten realms [of beings] and enshrine them in ten places. Facing each image, you should, one hundred times, bow [with your body], chant *Namu-myoho-enge-kyo* with your mouth, and contemplate with your mind. When you face the image of hell, contemplate that its fierce flames are themselves precisely emptiness, precisely conventional existence, and precisely the middle, and so on for all the images. When you face the image of Buddha, contemplate its essence being precisely the threefold truth.

While Nichiren did not recommend the threefold contemplation, the use of iconographic representations of the ten realms as an aid to meditation as described in this passages is similar to his mandala. Since the chronology of such icons is not definite, it is impossible to say whether they came before or after Nichiren's mandala or whether one may have influenced the other; it is more useful to see Nichiren's *honzon* and these Tendai configurations as stemming from shared conceptions of *Lotus*-related thought and imagery of the early medieval period.

The most obvious difference between Nichiren's mandala and these Tendai iconographic groupings is that the former contains no pictures but is written entirely in characters. Each figure is indicated by the Chinese character for its name, except for Fudo and Aizen, who are represented by their "seed characters" in Siddham, the Japanese Sanskrit orthography. Nichiren does not say why he decided on a calligraphic mandala, though it is probably related to the tradition of esoteric mandalas drawn consisting partly or entirely in Siddham characters, as well as his personal reverence for the characters of the *Lotus Sutra*, which he regarded as not mere written words but the Buddha's mind. However, as other scholars have pointed out, this mandala links Nichiren to other near-contemporaneous instances of the use of calligraphic *honzon* in both "old" and "new" Buddhist traditions. In his *Sanji raishaku* (Thrice-daily worship), written in 1215, Myoe (1173-1232) of the Kegon school described a calligraphic mandala he devised consisting of a central vertical inscription of a phrase expressing devotion to the three treasures, flanked by four expressions for the *bodhicitta* or mind aspiring to enlightenment taken from the *Hua-yen ching*. Across the top, the three treasures were written horizontally in Siddham. This mandala formed the focus of a simplified practice consisting in three times reciting the phrases inscribed upon it and performing three prostrations, three times each day. Shinran also made use of calligraphic scrolls with either the *nenbutsu* or a variant expression of devotion to Amida inscribed in the center. It is not known whether or not Nichiren had knowledge of the earlier precedents, but clearly his mandala was one instance of a new form of *honzon* emerging in the Kamakura period. As Takagi Yutaka points out, these calligraphic objects of worship were not tied to the aesthetic concerns commonly associated with the production of Buddhist statues or paintings. Requiring for their production only

paper, a brush, and ink, they could also be made available to persons lacking the means to commission a painter or sculptor or pay for expensive materials and thus represent a popularization of mandalas and Buddhist imagery previously available only to a few.

Nichiren's writings say very little about the place of his mandala (or of Buddha images) in actual practice. There is one personal letter, the "Nichinyo gozen gohenji" cited above, which does touch on this issue, and though some modern scholars dispute its authenticity, it has historically been highly valued in the Nichiren tradition for its easily accessible description of the mandala and its relation to the practitioner's faith:

Never seek this *gohonzon* elsewhere, [for] it abides only in the fleshly heart within the breast of persons like ourselves who embrace the *Lotus Sutra* and chant *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*. This is called the capital city of suchness, the ninth consciousness that is the mind-rule (*kushiki shinno shinnyo no miyaku*). Being endowed with the ten realms means that [all] ten realms, not excepting a single one, are contained within a single realm, [that of Buddhahood]. That is the reason why this is called a mandala. "Mandala" is a word from India. Here [in Japan] it is called "perfect endowment" (*rinnen gusoku*) or "cluster of merits" (*kudokuju*). This *gohonzon* is contained solely with the word "faith." That is the meaning of "gaining entrance by faith." By believing undividedly in [the *Lotus Sutra*, in accordance with its words,] "honestly discarding skillful means" and "not accept[ing] even a single verse from other sutras," Nichiren's disciples and lay followers shall enter the jeweled stupa of the *gohonzon*. How reassuring, how reassuring!

If one judges by this passage, it appears that the logic of Nichiren's mandala is quite similar to that of esoteric practice, wherein the practitioner visualizes the union of self and Buddha, known as "the buddha entering the self and the self entering the Buddha" (*nyuga ganyu*). For Nichiren, however, the nonduality of the practitioner and the Buddha is realized neither by esoteric visualization techniques nor by introspective contemplation involving the application of mental categories, such as the threefold contemplation. Rather, it is by faith in the *Lotus Sutra* that one enters the realm of the Buddha's enlightenment--the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment as actuality--and manifests its identity with oneself.

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