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The Meaning of the Practice of Chanting in Nichiren Buddhism

Introduction

Shōdai 唱題 signifies the chanting of the title of the Lotus Sūtra. It is widely practiced by those Buddhist communities that believe in the Lotus Sūtra. To be accurate, you chant ‘*Namu myōhō renge-kyō*’ 南無妙法蓮華經¹ which consists of ‘*Namu*’ 南無 (‘devotion’), and ‘*myōhō renge-kyō*’ 妙法蓮華經 (Lotus Sūtra). Newly arisen religions in Japan² that believe in the teaching of the Lotus Sūtra often insist that this *Shōdai* benefits their believers in their lives. Now, let us see what Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1282) thought and said about it, along with how *Shōdai* is understood in the modern age. Therefore, in this paper I consider the following three issues.

1. What kind of significance did Nichiren mention about *Shōdai*?
2. What are the common understandings of it by the modern scholars of the Nichiren doctrine?
3. How do the current believers of the Nichiren sect think about *Shōdai*?

¹ Japanese pronunciation of 南無妙法蓮華經, which is the Chinese translation of the title of the Lotus Sūtra.

² There are two movements in which new religions have emerged in Japan. One occurred in the Kamakura period of the 13th century (*Kamakura shin bukkō* 鎌倉新仏教), and the other after the Second World War.

The Historical Background and Outline of Nichiren's Buddhism

Nichiren began his Buddhist studies at the Seichō-ji temple 清澄寺 in Chiba prefecture at the age of 12 and chose to enter priesthood at the age of 16. Dōzenbō 道善房 (mid-13th century) was his mentor. Afterward, Nichiren studied at several temples in the Kamakura area. Then he moved to the Enryakuji temple 延暦寺 to study the Tendai 天台 doctrine. He moved back to the Seichō-ji temple at the age of 32. In that year, he founded his original style of Buddhism, which was based on the Lotus Sūtra and 'Daimoku' which refers to the title of the sūtra 'Namu myōhō renga-kyō' (the terms from Chinese translation by Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什).

He started to acrimoniously criticise other Buddhist sects, whereby he suffered persecutions. Below is an outline of Nichiren Buddhism.

The Outline of Nichiren Buddhism

Nichiren Buddhism is one of the 'Buddhism renovation movements'. It is also considered to be one of the Buddhism sects that arose during in the Kamakura era³(1192–1333).

1) Even though he studied the Tendai doctrine at the Enryakuji temple, where priests learn esoteric Buddhism and Jōdo 淨土 Buddhism along with the Lotus Sūtra, he deemed that the Lotus Sūtra is the one and only supreme Buddhist Sūtra, and thus, he formed his original new doctrine based on the Lotus Sūtra.

2) From 1257 to 1260, the Kanto region where he lived suffered from massive earthquakes, droughts, and floods. In addition to that, the Japanese political world was confused due to the conflict between the imperial court and the Kamakura shogunate 鎌倉幕府. From the Buddhist point of view, that time was considered to be in the middle of Mappō 末法, where the teaching of Buddha degenerates. Based on this viewpoint, Nichiren attributed all of the confused situations to a lack of the prevalence of the Lotus Sūtra in society. Therefore, Nichiren criticised existing common Buddhist sects, including the Nenbushu 念仏宗 and Zen 禪宗 sects. He went so far as to write *Risshō ankokuron* 立正安国論, which he submitted to the shogunate in order to make the Shikken 執權 regent at that time believe in the Lotus Sūtra in order to settle the situation.

³ During the Kamakura period, monks who studied Buddhism at Hiei Mountain independently set up sects. For example the Jōdo sect, Jōdo Shinshū, the Sōtō sect, the Rinzaï sect, and the Jishū sect were established.

3) He later criticised other sects, including the Risshū 律宗 and Shingon 真言宗 sects. His actions elicited antipathy among Nembutsu believers, and they sued Nichiren for the sin of vilification. The shogunate arrested him and several times sent him to islands. He also fell victim of torrential attacks by Nembutsu believers.

4) The more he suffered persecutions, the more solid his faith in the Lotus Sūtra became. This series of sufferings motivated him to believe in the Lotus Sūtra and Daimoku, which is the very essence of the Buddha's Dharma more profoundly.

The Significance of Upholding *Daimoku* and *Shōdai*

In this chapter, I would like to dig into Nichiren's understandings of the five-lettered-title of '*Namu myōhō renge-kyō*' 南無妙法蓮華經, which means 'devotion to the Lotus Sūtra'. According to the *Kanjin honzon-shō* 觀心本尊抄, which he wrote while he was isolated by the Kamakura shogunate on Sado 佐渡 island. Nichiren says as follows.

「積尊因行果德二法。妙法蓮華經五字具足。我等受持此五字自然讓与彼因果功德。」⁴

The gist of these passages is that Śākyamuni Buddha's merit of practicing the bodhisattva way leading to Buddhahood, as well as that of preaching and saving all living beings since His attainment of Buddhahood are altogether contained in the five words of *myō*, *hō*, *ren*, *ge*, and *kyō* (*Lotus Sūtra of the Wonderful Dharma*) and that consequently, when we uphold the five words, the merits which He accumulated before and after His attainment of Buddhahood are naturally transferred to us.⁵

These sentences highlight his thought that

– *Daimoku* is, for Nichiren, not just a title of the Lotus Sūtra but also an inclusive expression that contains all of the Buddha's merit, such as practice as a cause and enlightenment as a result and that.

– Those who uphold *Daimoku* are all provided with the Buddha's merit. Nichiren also says as follows.

「不識一念三千者。仏起大慈悲。五字内裏此珠。令懸末代幼稚類。」⁶

⁴ Risshō Daigaku Nichiren Kyōgaku Kenkyūjo 1965: 711.

⁵ Translation from Hori – Tanabe 2002: 146.

⁶ Risshō Daigaku Nichiren Kyōgaku Kenkyūjo 1965: 720.

For those who are incapable of understanding the truth of the ‘3,000 existences contained in one thought,’ Lord Śākyamuni Buddha, with His great compassion, wraps this jewel with the five characters of *myō*, *hō*, *ren*, *ge*, and *kyō* and hangs it around the neck of the ignorant in the Latter Age of Degeneration.⁷

Nichiren insisted that *Daimoku* of the Lotus Sūtra, which Śākyamuni Buddha provides us with the great compassion, enables the ignorant people who are not capable of understanding the very essence of the Lotus Sūtra, a notion called *ichinen sanzen* 一念三千 (‘3,000 existences contained in one thought’), to obtain Buddhahood.

Similar remarks are to be found in the *Hokke shosin jōbutsu-shō* 法華初心成仏鈔 written in 1277.

「されば三世の諸仏も妙法蓮華經の五字を以て仏に成給し也。三世の諸仏の出世の本懐、一切衆生皆成仏道の妙法と云は是也。是等の趣を能々心得て仏になる道には、我慢偏執の心なく南無妙法蓮華經と唱へ奉るべき者也。」⁸

Buddhas in the past, present, and future attained their Buddhahood thanks to the five letters of *myō*, *hō*, *ren*, *ge*, and *kyō*. The purpose of the advents of these Buddhas is to help all sentient beings attain Buddhahood which can only be achieved by the power of the Lotus Sūtra. Therefore, you should well understand this and keep chanting ‘*Namu myōhō renge kyō*’ without the sense of self-conceit or attachment.

When it comes to the aspect of actual practice, Nichiren placed *Shōdai* as a genuine practice. Nichiren wrote in *Jūhachi enmanshō* 十八円満鈔 in 1280 as follows:

「所詮入末法。天真独朗之法門無益也。助行可用也。正行唯南無妙法蓮華經也」⁹

In the *Mappo* era, where people’s abilities degenerated, lofty laws of truth do not work. These laws must be supplementary practices to the genuine practice which is ‘*Namu myōhō renge kyō*’.

This excerpt made it clear that *Daimoku* is the genuine practice that fits the present time *Mappō* 末法. This is also a criticism of the Jōdo sect, which places *Nembutsu* as the genuine practice. Nichiren clearly expressed what he thinks about *Daimoku* and what he deemed as the genuine practice.

⁷ Translation from Hori – Tanabe 2002: 164.

⁸ Risshō Daigaku Nichiren Kyōgaku Kenkyūjo 1965: 1432.

⁹ Risshō Daigaku Nichiren Kyōgaku Kenkyūjo 1965: 2143.

The Current Significance of *Shōdai*

For Priests of the Nichirenshū Sect

In the contemporary Nichiren sect, how is chanting practice located in doctrine and practice inside? Here is a list of points that address the question.

1) According to the doctrine of the current Nichiren sect, *Shōdai*, which is a practice whereby practitioners chant 'Namu myōhō rege kyō' is placed at the center of all the practices.

The *Shūgi taikō tokuhon* 宗義大綱読本, which is a commentary to the *Nichirenshū shūgi taikō* 日蓮宗宗義大綱, says that 'belief' 信 and 'practice' 行 are indivisible.¹⁰ In addition, it also notes that 'upholding the Daimoku' is the genuine practice, while it places 'Reading', 'Reciting', and 'Transcribing' as supplementary practices, 'Upholding the Daimoku' means to hold the Daimoku of 'Namu myōhō rege kyō' tightly in your mind so that it takes the form of *Shōdai* as an actual practice.¹¹

The *Shūgi taikō tokuhon* stipulates what you should actually do as a Nichiren sect practitioner to fulfill the 'upholding Daimoku' practice as follows.

「本門の本尊に向かって礼拝合掌し、本門の題目を至心に唱えていくことが「受持」することの意味であって、その場がそのまま本門の階段として開顕してくることになるというのである。」¹²

Pray and chant *Daimoku* sincerely to the fundamental object of worship and whereby the place of the practice transforms to a fundamental ordination platform.

As seen in the above sentences, the current Nichiren sect designates 'upholding *Daimoku*' as a genuine practice and its actual contents as *Shōdai*.

2) *Shōdai* is an outcome of one's 'upholding *Daimoku*' practice that was done bodily, vocally, and mentally. *Shūgi Taikō Tokuhon* also says:

「口に題目を唱える時は、必然的に意に本門の本尊を念じ、また唱題の姿はそのまま本門の戒壇を身に備え、法華経の行者として、仏と「同体」の果報・境界を得ることになるのである。」¹³

¹⁰ Nichirenshū Shūmuin Kyōmubu 1989: 112. 「信と行を別態とせず、あくまで信行一致の歸命であった。」

¹¹ Ibid. 122.

¹² Nichirenshū Shūmuin Kyōmubu 1989: 115.

¹³ Nichirenshū Shūmuin Kyōmubu 1989: 124–125.

When you chant *Daimoku*, you inevitably imagine the fundamental object of worship in your mind. And the posture of you chanting *Daimoku* embodies the fundamental ordination platform whereby you are able to attain the Buddhahood.

Thus, *Shōdai* is fundamentally equal to ‘upholding *Daimoku*’ and, as a result, it is ultimately equivalent to the three great esoteric rituals that help you directly to attain the Buddhahood.

3) *Shōdai* is used as one of the measures of meditation (深心行).

Zazen 坐禪 is the most common way to deepen meditation, but in the Nichiren sect, the following method is practiced. As the first step, a practitioner, by chanting ‘*Namu myōhō renge kyō*’, calms the mind and concentrates on the chanting itself, because it is difficult for him to completely banish idle thoughts. If he can concentrate their mind on one point, as the next step, he stops chanting and puts his hands on his knees, to form the cosmic mudrā, and further deepen meditation. This method of meditation is called *Jinshingyō* (深心行).

For Lay Followers

Then, what is the meaning of the chanting practice *Shōdai* for the lay followers of the Nichiren religious community? Several points are outlined below.

- 1) *Shōdai* is performed by lay followers for many purposes, such as,
 - to obtain benefits in their lives;¹⁴
 - to heal diseases;¹⁵
 - to be used as *dhāraṇī* to get out of difficult situations;
 - to pray for daily happiness and safety.

2) *Shōdai* is used at a memorial service for ancestor’s spirits.

When lay followers hold memorial services for spirits such as ancestors, in the memorial ceremony they pray for the souls of the deceased to enter Nirvāṇa by chanting the *Daimoku* ‘*Namu myō hō ren ge kyō*’. Accord-

¹⁴ Among the religions of Japan, except for certain cults, they are preaching the benefits of the world in general, and the believers are also asking for it. It can be said that this is the characteristic of Japanese religion.

¹⁵ Disease healing is a major factor with which most religions attract people. The original purpose of Buddhism is a complete mental liberation of a person, but it is one of the pragmatic objectives in real life.

ing to the doctrine of the Nichiren sect, one can transfer their merit of *Shōdai* to the dead souls.¹⁶

3) *Shōdai* is used as a deathbed ritual.

On their deathbed, one who is dying still has consciousness, and he/she is advised to chant *Daimoku* together with his/her family by the priest. If not, one's family will pray for his/her Nirvāṇa by chanting *Daimoku*. At a funeral ceremony, the bereaved of the dead also chant *Daimoku* for the dead with the priest.

Conclusion

From the description above, I may point out the following facts as a conclusion. First, *Daimoku* is, for Nichiren, not just a title of the Lotus Sūtra but also an inclusive expression that contains all the Buddha's merit, such as the practice as a cause and the enlightenment as a result.

Secondly, anyone who upholds the *Daimoku* is naturally rewarded with the merit.

Thirdly, Nichiren insisted that the *Daimoku* of the Lotus Sūtra, which Śākyamuni Buddha provides us with great compassion, enables the attainment of Buddhahood of the ignorant people who are not capable of understanding the very essence of the Lotus Sūtra, which is the notion called *ichinen sanzen*.

Fourthly, Nichiren placed *Daimoku* and *Shōdai* as genuine practices.

Fifthly, contemporary scholars of Nichiren doctrine have further developed Nichiren's understandings. They consider that *Shōdai* is fundamentally equal to 'upholding *Daimoku*' and, as a result, it is ultimately equivalent to the three great esoteric rituals, which help you to attain the Buddhahood directly.

Sixthly, *Shōdai* is used as one of the measures of meditation.

Seventhly, *Shōdai* is performed by lay followers to obtain the benefits in their lives.

Eighthly, *Shōdai* is used at memorial service to pray for ancestors.

Lastly, *Shōdai* is used as a deathbed ritual to send off the dying.

¹⁶ Nichirenshū Shūmuin Kyōmubu 1989: 141–142.

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