

The Otanjo-e Ceremony

Nichiren Daishonin was born on February 16, 1222, at the beginning of the Latter Day of the Law to fulfill Shakyamuni's prophesy that the True Buddha would appear and teach the Great Pure Law to save people for the eternal future. The date of the Daishonin's birth has a mystic connection with Shakyamuni's Buddhism because Shakyamuni died on February 15. This indicates that the Daishonin's Buddhism began at the point where the power of Shakyamuni's Buddhism ceased.

THREE PERIODS IN BUDDHISM

In Buddhism, the time following the death of Shakyamuni Buddha is divided into three periods that relate to the effectiveness of his teaching. The first thousand years after his death are called the Former Day of the Law (Shobo). During this period, Shakyamuni's Buddhism prevailed and people could attain enlightenment through its practice.

The second thousand years are called the Middle Day of the Law (Zobo). The efficacy of Shakyamuni's Buddhism began to decline and, although Buddhism was firmly established within society, it gradually lapsed into formality.

The third period, called the Latter Day of the Law (Mappo), extends for 10,000 years and into the future. At the time of Mappo, Shakyamuni's teachings lose the power to lead people to enlightenment. In Mappo, the lives of the people are defiled by the three poisons of greed, anger, and stupidity, causing the world to be filled with conflict and corruption.

PREDICTIONS OF THE BUDDHA OF THE LATTER DAY OF THE LAW

The end of the Heian era and the beginning of the Kamakura era (12th and 13th centuries) were a dark age for the whole world. In Japan, the entire country displayed the human suffering prophesied for the Latter Day of the Law.

Quarrels arose among the adherents of Shakyamuni's teachings, and the Pure Law became obscured. Countless battles and civil wars were fought to satisfy human greed. Morality was lost in the midst of great social upheaval.

Unseasonable weather, crop failures, and natural calamities showed that even nature was affected by the corruption of human life. Due to the Mongol conquests, immeasurable blood was shed throughout Asia. Simultaneously, in the West, religious crusades brought tremendous suffering to countless people. Virtually every kind of misery afflicted the people of the world during this period of history proving Shakyamuni's predictions concerning the Latter Day of the Law.

The advent of the True Buddha was predicted by Shakyamuni Buddha in the Jinriki (twenty-first) chapter of the Lotus Sutra, which states: Just as the light of the sun and moon illuminates all obscurity, this person will practice among

the people and dispel the darkness of all mankind.

OMENS SURROUND THE BIRTH OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN

The Daishonin was born to a fisherman named Mikuni no Tayu and his wife, Umegiku-nyo, in the small fishing village of Kominato in Tojo in Awa Province, which is now Chiba Prefecture in Japan. His childhood name was Zennichimaro. The Daishonin referred to his birth in several of his Goshos, saying, "I am a fisherman's son," (Shinpen, p. 1279) and "I, Nichiren, am the son of an 'untouchable' family." (Shinpen, p. 482; M.W., Vol. 5, p. 124).

In spite of such humble circumstances surrounding the birth of Nichiren Daishonin, there were many auspicious omens that are recorded in the Goshos, "Transfer Document on the Birth of Nichiren Daishonin" (Ubuyu Sojo no Koto).

One of them concerns a dream that the Daishonin's mother had before his birth, in which she saw herself seated on Mount Hiei, where the head temple of the Tendai sect was located. She was washing her hands in the waters of Lake Biwa. As the sun rose out of the east from behind Mount Fuji, she cradled the sun (in Japanese: Nichi) in her arms. Startled by this dream, she awoke and told it to her husband.

He, too, had an unusual dream in which Bodhisattva Kokuzo, who represents the wisdom of the universe, appeared before him. On his shoulder, the bodhisattva carried a handsome boy. He told the Daishonin's father that this child was Bodhisattva Jogyo, who was destined to be a great leader to save all people.

Kokuzo said, "I will grant this lovely boy to you," and disappeared. Shortly afterward Umegiku-nyo realized that she was pregnant. Umegiku-nyo had another dream the night before the Daishonin's birth in which a blue lotus (Japanese: ren) flower blossomed with pure water springing forth from it. A baby was inside the lotus flower, taking his first bath in the water. The water which sparkled with a golden color, spilled out onto the ground. The grasses shone as trees blossomed and bore fruit. These symbolic dreams presaged the advent of the True Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law.

CELEBRATIONS OF THE ADVENT OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN

The Otanjo-e Ceremony (or simply Tanjo-e) celebrates the advent of Nichiren Daishonin, the True Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law. The ceremony at the Head Temple Taisekiji is held on the 16th of February at both the Mieido Temple and the Five-Story Pagoda. The ceremony at the Five-Story Pagoda is derived from the Hoto (eleventh) chapter of the Lotus Sutra, in which Shakyamuni revealed his most profound teaching. In it, an immense Treasure Tower suddenly emerges from the ground and remains suspended in the air. Taho Buddha, seated inside the Treasure Tower, announces in a huge voice:

Excellent, excellent. You, Shakyamuni, have expounded the Lotus Sutra, the teaching of equality and great wisdom, to this great multitude. Thus it is, what you, Shakyamuni, have expounded is true.

The words of Taho Buddha affirmed the truth of Myoho-Renge-Kyo, the eternal Law of time without beginning or end. (Kuon ganjo).

Nichiren Daishonin states: In the Latter Day of the Law, there is no Treasure Tower other than the figures of the men and women who embrace the Lotus Sutra. It follows, therefore, that those who chant Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo, irrespective of social status, are themselves the Treasure Tower; that is to say, the Treasure Tower is Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo.

...Now the entire body of Abutsu Shonin is composed of the five universal elements of earth, water, fire, wind and ku. These five elements are also the five characters of the Daimoku. Therefore, Abutsu-bo is the Treasure Tower itself, and the Treasure Tower is Abutsu-bo himself. (Shinpen, p. 792; M.W., Vol. 1, p. 30)

The Five-Story Pagoda indicates the five characters of Myoho-Renge-Kyo and the five elements, which are the substance of life and the universe itself. The Gohonzon is enshrined in the center of the pagoda, indicating that the core of one's life and the universal Law are the same as Nichiren Daishonin's life, or the true entity of the Law, Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo.

For this reason, Nichiren Shoshu regards the Daishonin's birthday as the date of the appearance in this world of the Gohonzon or Treasure Tower, and this is the reason the ceremony is conducted at the Five-Story Pagoda. The main door of this pagoda faces west, in contrast to all other Japanese five-story pagodas, which face south, showing that the Daishonin's Buddhism will spread to the west, like the sun, which moves from east to west and illuminates the entire world.

NICHIREN DAISHONIN - SOVEREIGN, TEACHER, AND PARENT

The Gosho states, "I, Nichiren, am sovereign, father and mother, and teacher of all people in Japan." (Shinpen, p. 577; M.W., Vol. 2, p. 212) The Daishonin is the teacher and master who embraces the Mystic Law of time without beginning or end. He possesses the three virtues of sovereign, teacher, and parent for all mankind. The virtue of a sovereign is to use his power to protect all living beings and help them prosper. The virtue of a teacher is to instruct people and help them gain wisdom. The virtue of a parent is, even at the cost of one's own life, to compassionately nurture and protect a dear child.

Nichiren Daishonin took on his task at great personal sacrifice. He suffered severe hardships, yet, he single-mindedly struggled to lead the people to the true teachings. In a passage from the Gosho, "The True Entity of Life" (Shoho Jisso Sho), Nichiren Daishonin wrote, "Birds and insects may cry, but they do not shed tears. I, Nichiren, do not cry, but my tears never cease to flow." (Shinpen, p. 667; M.W., Vol. 1, p. 94) The Daishonin wrote the "True Entity of Life" when he himself was undergoing severe hardships during his exile on Sado Island. We can truly feel his boundless compassion in this Gosho. The Daishonin saw that the people were suffering from the effects of their bad karma, and could not cease to shed tears for them. Day and night he prayed for them to lead happy, productive lives.

We recite the following words from the Juryo chapter of the Lotus Sutra every morning and evening during Gongyo: "mai ji sa ze nen, i ga ryo shujo, toku nyu mujodo do, soku joju busshin." This passage means that the Buddha is always trying to open the perfect way for the people to attain enlightenment without delay. Interpreting this from the

standpoint of the essence (not the superficial reading) of the Lotus Sutra, it means that from the infinite past to the eternal future, it is the Daishonin's unceasing desire to lead all people - those who embrace True Buddhism as well as those who do not - to the correct path and to enable them to attain enlightenment, the life condition of absolute happiness. We, who already practice this True Buddhism are indeed truly fortunate!

In summary, the Otanjo-e Ceremony commemorates the birth of the Daishonin and celebrates the True Buddha and the appearance of the Great Treasure Tower of the Mystic Law in this world. In order to offer our deepest respect and profound gratitude for this, we the members of Nichiren Shoshu, as a unified body of priests and believers, should sincerely pledge to deepen our faith and propagate the Mystic Law.