

32. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, p. 564. See also Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, p. 51.

33. Beck, *Everyday Zen*, p. 69.

34. Thomas Cleary, "Bodaijattra Shishoho" ("The Four Integrative Methods of Bodhisattvas"), in *Skobogen*, p. 119. See also Nishiyama and Stevens, *A Complete English Translation*, vol. III, p. 117 (no. 11).

35. Nishiyama and Stevens, *A Complete English Translation*, vol. IV, "Hachida Ningaku" ("The Eight Means to Enlightenment"), p. 34.

36. Nishiyama and Stevens, *A Complete English Translation*, vol. III, "Bodaisattva shishoho," pp. 124–128. "Doji" is translated as "identification with the beings that are to be helped" by Nishiyama and Stevens, and as "cooperation" by Cleary. In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, the ideal of the Bodhisattva represents an enlightened being who chooses to stay and act in the world out of compassion, helping others to realize enlightenment.

37. Ibid., p. 124.

38. Ibid., p. 126.

39. Ibid., pp. 126–127.

40. Cleary, "Bodaisatta Shishoho," pp. 119–120.

41. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965), p. 91. Also see the *Tao te Ching*, Chapters 13 and 30.

42. Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, p. 325.

43. Ibid., p. 62. For similar remarks by Bankei, see Haskel, *Bankei Zen*, p. 40.

44. Cleary, "Shoji" ("Birth and Death"), p. 123.

3

NICHIREN'S ACTIVIST HEIRS

Sōka Gakkai, Risshō Kōseikai, Nipponzan Myōhōji

Jacqueline I. Stone

Three religious movements founded in the twentieth century – Sōka Gakkai, Risshō Kōseikai and Nipponzan Myōhōji – are often singled out as examples of contemporary Japanese socially engaged Buddhism. All three stand in the tradition of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the Buddhist teacher Nichiren (1222–1282); their members, as a primary practice, regularly recite the sūtra and chant its title or *daimoku* in the formula *Namu-myōhō-renge-kō*, as Nichiren advocated.¹ All three, on the basis of these explicitly religious practices, undertake additional efforts in society aimed at the achievement of "world peace." But it would be too simplistic to view these contemporary movements as emanating in a straight, unproblematic line from either Nichiren or the *Lotus Sūtra*, as introductory presentations often do. Despite their shared Buddhist heritage, their readings of the *Lotus Sūtra* and of Nichiren's teachings are not the same, nor does Nipponzan Myōhōji's style of social engagement resemble that of Sōka Gakkai or Risshō Kōseikai. In what sense does the commitment to peace shared by these three movements derive from Nichiren's teachings? How, and to what extent, have their specific forms of activism been shaped by other, more recent cultural and historical influences? And what is the role of the *Lotus Sūtra* in their social engagement?

These are the sorts of issues I have been invited to address in this chapter. Obviously these are huge questions, not amenable to resolution in a short article. My aim, therefore, will simply be to raise them for discussion and to suggest – in hopes of encouraging further study – how these three movements have variously reinterpreted a common heritage.

Society, the *Lotus Sūtra* and Nichiren

The *Saddharma-pundarīka-sūtra* (Chinese *Miaofa lianhua jing*; Japanese *Myōhō-renge-kyō*) or *Lotus Sūtra*, thought to have been compiled roughly around the beginning of the common era, numbers among the historically most influential Buddhist texts in East Asia. Rather than a discursive

presentation of doctrine, the *Lotus* is a mythic text, unfolding in parables and extravagant imagery its message of a Buddha, awakened since the remotest past, who in countless guises and by innumerable “skillful means” works tirelessly to lead all beings to the same enlightenment as himself. In China, the *Lotus Sūtra*’s teaching of the “one Buddha vehicle,” in which the disparate paths of the *śrāvaka* and the *bodhisattva* are ultimately resolved, was highly valued as a hermeneutical device for reconciling disparate doctrines. In the Tiantai (Japanese Tendai) school, the *Lotus* served as the foundation for a highly sophisticated system of doctrine and meditative practice. It was also revered across sectarian lines for its perceived magical powers to bring about healing and ensure good fortune and protection in this life and the next.

What the *Lotus Sūtra* does not contain is an explicit social ethic. This does not mean, of course, that it could not serve as a basis for constructing one. Indeed, the mythic quality of the *sūtra*, and the ambiguity surrounding its presentation of the “one vehicle” – extravagantly praised but ultimately never explained – have over the centuries enabled an astonishing range of interpretations, prompting one scholar to speak of the *Lotus* as an “empty” text into which generations of exegetes have poured their own meanings.² It is in this history of *Lotus Sūtra* interpretation, rather than in the *Lotus* itself, that we find clear associations drawn between the *sūtra* and the welfare of society. This interpretive move seems to have been particular to Japanese Buddhism and has remote roots in the writings of Saichō (767–822), founder of the Japanese Tendai sect, and in the copying, reciting, and explicating of the *Lotus* in court-sponsored rituals of the Heian period (794–1185) as a “nation - protecting *sūtra*,” believed able to ensure the country’s safety and well-being. This link between the *Lotus Sūtra* and the peace and prosperity of the land would become solidified in the thought of Nichiren.

A monk of humble origins, Nichiren first drew public attention when he remonstrated with authorities of the *bakufu* or military government in 1260, submitting a memorial to the shogunal regent titled *Risshō ankoku ron*, or “Treatise on establishing the true [Dharma] and bringing peace to the land.” For Nichiren, a follower of the Tendai sect, the “true Dharma” was none other than the *Lotus Sūtra*, revered in Tendai circles as the perfect and ultimate teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha, the one vehicle in which all other, partial truths are united. As indicated by the phrase “peace of the land” (*ankoku*) in his title, Nichiren was from the beginning concerned with the impact of Buddhist faith and practice on the larger society. He wrote his treatise in an attempt to make clear, in the light of Buddhist *sūtras*, the causes of recent disasters, including earthquakes, crop failure, famine and epidemics, as well as the means of their solution. While it remains an open question whether Japan in the mid-thirteenth century was really more plagued by calamities than in other eras, there is

no doubt that Nichiren, like many of his contemporaries, believed he was living in a uniquely troubled time, coinciding with Buddhist scriptural predictions of the degenerate Final Dharma age (*mappō*) when the Buddha’s teachings would become obscured, and enlightenment would be difficult to achieve.³ Throughout his life, he would assert that the troubles besetting the country – not only natural disasters but internecine political strife and the threat of Mongol conquest – were due to neglect of the *Lotus Sūtra* in favor of “lesser,” provisional Buddhist forms, such as Pure Land devotion, Zen meditation, and esoteric ritual practice. Thus he urged:

Now with all speed you must simply reform your faith and at once devote it to the single good of the true vehicle [i.e., the *Lotus Sūtra*]. Then the threefold world will all become the Buddha land, and could a Buddha land decline? The ten directions will all become a treasure realm, and how could a treasure realm be destroyed?⁴

In claiming that faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* would realize the Buddha land in the present world, Nichiren drew both on perceptions of the *Lotus*’s magical power as a “nation-protecting *sūtra*” and on traditional Tendai doctrine, which asserts the nonduality of subjective and objective realms (*eshō funi*) and the identity of the present, *sahā* world with the Buddha’s Land of Tranquil Light (*shaba soku jakkōdo*). Nichiren made clear that the nonduality of the self and its environment, or the immanence of the Buddha in the present world, was not a mere matter of metaphysical assertion or even of subjective, personal insight; where people embraced the *Lotus Sūtra*, the outer world would actually be transformed:

When all people throughout the land enter the one Buddha vehicle, and the Wonderful Dharma [of the *Lotus*] alone flourishes, because the people all chant Namu-Myōhō-renge-kyō, the wind will not thrash the branches, nor the rain fall hard enough to break clods. The age will become like the reigns of [the Chinese sage kings] Yao and Shun. In the present life, inauspicious calamities will be banished, and people will obtain the art of longevity. When the principle becomes manifest that both persons and dharmas “neither age nor die,” then each of you, behold! There can be no doubt of the *sūtra*’s promise of “peace and security in the present world.”⁵

Thus in Nichiren’s teaching, the possibility of realizing the Buddha land in the present world was welded to an exclusive truth claim. Only faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*, the one vehicle of the perfect teaching, could bring about the

peace of the land. In his estimation, however, his contemporaries had rejected the *Lotus Sūtra* and instead embraced incomplete, provisional teachings – an act of “slander of the Dharma” that would bring ruin to the country and drag individuals down into the painful realms of rebirth. Therefore he urged his followers not only to embrace undivided faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* themselves but to spread that faith to others, assertively rebuking adherence to other, “inferior” teachings. This is known as *shakubuku*, the stern method of teaching the Dharma by explicitly denouncing “wrong views.”⁶ Nichiren’s outspoken criticism of other Buddhist teachings provoked hostility and even persecution from the authorities; he was exiled twice and once nearly executed, while his followers were on occasion imprisoned or banished, had their lands seized, or in some cases were even killed. Since the *Lotus Sūtra* itself predicts that its devotees will meet persecution “in the evil age after the Buddha’s *nirvāṇa*,” such trials only served to affirm for Nichiren the validity of his course. Thus we find in his writings strong claims about the soteric value of meeting persecution for the sūtra’s sake, especially from the worldly authorities. Such hardships, he taught, affirm the correctness of one’s faith, serve to expiate one’s own past sins of “slanderizing the Dharma,” and guarantee one’s eventual achievement of Buddhahood. He also asserted that the truth of the *Lotus Sūtra* transcended worldly authority, and thus, should one’s devotion to the sūtra come into conflict with the demands of ordinary social loyalties – of children to parents or of subjects to sovereign – one should defy conventional loyalties and uphold the *Lotus*, even at the cost of one’s life. While it falls short of a critique of political power *per se*, Nichiren’s establishing of the *Lotus Sūtra* as a source of transcendent authority made possible, at times even mandated, resistance to worldly rule. This element in his teaching was occasionally invoked by monks of the medieval Hokkešū or Lotus sect, as Nichiren’s later followers were called, to assert the independence of their sangha from the ruler’s authority.⁷ With a few notable exceptions, however, it has rarely been been emphasized in the modern period and would seem to represent an untapped resource for the construction of a possible Nichiren Buddhist social ethic.

Was Nichiren himself a “socially engaged Buddhist”? Not, one would have to say, in the modern sense of the term. He did not argue that working for social betterment in and of itself constitutes an essential part of Buddhist practice. He displayed no interest in building bridges, digging wells or caring for the sick, the traditional charitable projects of medieval Buddhists. Rather, Nichiren deemed bodhisattva practice for others’ sake to be something more fundamental – the spread of exclusive faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* and the denouncing of false attachments to other teachings. And yet his teaching does have a distinctive “social” orientation, in his claim that individuals’ faith and practice were not merely a matter a

matter of personal liberation but carried profound consequences for the larger world. Now in the Final Dharma age, he wrote, it was no longer appropriate for practitioners to seclude themselves in the mountains to cultivate meditation or to recite the *Lotus Sūtra* in solitude; rather, the times demanded *shakubuku*, the refutation of provisional teachings. Nichiren’s linking of faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* to the realization of the Buddha land in this world, and his call to followers to commit themselves to active proselytizing, have been adapted by some modern Nichiren Buddhists as key elements on which to model their social engagement.

Two lay Buddhist movements: Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai

Observers of contemporary Japanese religion sometimes speak of the lay movements Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai as embodying a “revitalization” or “reformation” of modern Buddhism. Founded in the pre-war years, both have weathered numerous trials, undergone some major self-redefinitions, and have now become well established as the largest of Japan’s numerous “New Religions.” Sōka Gakkai claims more than seventeen million members, and Risshō Kōseikai, more than six million; both have followings outside Japan.⁸ Despite their vast size, the basic activities of both organizations are structured around small gatherings in which members share testimonials, introduce newcomers, and receive instruction and encouragement. The local discussion meeting (*zadankai*) has always been the primary forum for the Sōka Gakkai’s proselytizing efforts, while Risshō Kōseikai has emphasized the “Dharma circle” (*hōza*) or group counselling for problem-solving based on Kōseikai teachings. The importance of one-on-one guidance from leaders is also stressed. In addition, larger organizational units are formed at the ward, prefectural and national levels, and members have many opportunities to participate with peers in the activities of youth groups, women’s groups, professional divisions, and the like.

Sōka Gakkai

Sōka Gakkai dates its founding from 1930, when the educator Makiguchi Tsunesaburō⁹ (1871–1944) launched publication of his lifework, *Sōka kyōiku taikei* (System of Value Creating Education). In 1937, he inaugurated the Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai (Value Creation Educational Society), a group of about sixty teachers and educators committed to his progressive ideals. In 1928, Makiguchi had embraced the teachings of Nichiren Shōshā, a small sect in the Fuji lineage of Nichiren Buddhism, and with time, the society’s focus shifted gradually from education to religion. The society was nearly destroyed during the Pacific War, when Makiguchi and

other leaders were imprisoned under the Public Security Preservation Law for refusing to have their members enshrine the talismans of the imperial Ise Shrine, as mandated by government religious policy. Among those imprisoned was Makiguchi's disciple Toda Jōsai (1900–1958), who revived the society after the war and established it on a broader basis as a lay organization of Nichiren Shōshū, open to people in all walks of life. It was renamed Sōka Gakkai at that time, to reflect this new orientation. Toda organized and led an intensive proselytization campaign that raised membership to 750,000 households by 1957, the year before his death. Under its third president, Ikeda Daisaku (1928–), the organization continued its phenomenal growth but also expanded its emphasis on proselytizing to include a range of cultural, educational and social welfare activities. (Ikeda retired from the presidency in 1978 but, as honorary president of Sōka Gakkai and president of Sōka Gakkai International, is still the organization's *de facto* leader.) Conflict over who would define the sources of religious authority led in 1991 to a schism with Nichiren Shōshū, and Sōka Gakkai is now undergoing a process of self-redefinition independent of any Nichiren temple denomination.¹⁰

The broader range of activities inaugurated in the 1960s and 1970s included formal entry into the world of politics. The Sōka Gakkai had begun to sponsor candidates for local offices in the mid-1950s, and in 1964 took the controversial step of inaugurating its own party. The Kōmeitō or Clean Government Party espoused the broad ideals of "human socialism," combining the individual freedom of capitalism with the egalitarian concerns of socialism, and "Buddhist democracy," in which government structures would be informed by Buddhist compassion. Though the Sōka Gakkai and Kōmeitō have been officially separated since 1970, the party remains dependent on Gakkai membership for its electoral base and constitutes something of a lightning rod for periodic disputes over the proper relationship of religion and government.¹¹ The same period also saw the beginnings of active Gakkai participation in a movement to ban nuclear arms, when youth division members gathered more than ten million signatures on a petition against such weapons and presented them to the United Nations in 1975. Since its early post-war years, Sōka Gakkai has always equated the spread of Nichiren's teaching with peacemaking. As Ikeda writes:

The core of the message of [Nichiren's] *Rissho ankokuron* is this: On a national, international, or worldwide scale the only way to bring about lasting peace is to establish the reign of the true Buddhist Law War strips loftiness and respect from humanity and, through its wicked actions, covers man with filth. It is only natural that Buddhism, the aim of which is to guide all people to the highest, purest realms, is bound to oppose war directly. By a

like token, the Buddhist believer who is eager to practice his faith in the truest way regards it as his mission to pour his entire soul into the task of building peace.¹²

Risshō Kōseikai

Risshō Kōseikai was founded in 1938 by Niwano Nikkyō (1916–1999) and Naganuma Myōkō (1889–1957). The year before, both had left the Reiyūkai, another Nichiren-based new religion, to which they had belonged. Niwano wrote that they were dissatisfied with what they saw as Reiyūkai's excessive emphasis on organizational expansion and also wished to see more energy devoted to study of the *Lotus Sūtra*.¹³ Unlike the Sōka Gakkai, which followed the purism of Nichiren Shōshū in repudiating all religious elements apart from Nichiren's teaching as "slander of the Dharma," Risshō Kōseikai was at the outset deeply rooted in folk religious traditions. Myōkō Sensei, as Naganuma was often called, possessed considerable shamanistic powers. Oracles she received from the *kami* or local deities played a key role in directing the organization in its early days. After her death, under Niwano's leadership, the group gradually distanced itself from shamanistic and divinatory practices and has increasingly defined itself in Buddhist terms. This shift in orientation coincided with Kōseikai's increasing involvement in ecumenical activities for peace, beginning in 1963 when Niwano traveled to ten nations as part of an eighteen-member Japanese delegation of religious leaders committed to the banning of nuclear weapons.¹⁴ Since then, Risshō Kōseikai has constructed itself as a socially engaged Buddhism, based on Niwano's hermeneutical perspective that "the whole *Lotus Sūtra* embodies an ideology of peace."¹⁵ In his popular commentaries, Niwano read specific passages and parables of the sūtra as teaching how peace is to be achieved. For example, Śākyamuni Buddha's gratitude toward his vindictive cousin Devadatta for favors in a prior life teaches one to break the cycle of enmity by refusing to bear grudges. The parable of the medicinal herbs that receive the same rain but grow to different heights in accord with their capacity teaches that differences among nations must be respected; developing nations must not be arbitrarily expected to emulate the industrial model of developed nations. In the parable of the magically conjured city, the long steep path represents "the long history of mankind's suffering caused by war, starvation, poverty and the violation of human rights." The conjured city itself represents temporary peace – the physical cessation of war. The place of treasure, the real goal of the journey, is "the reformation of one's mind by religion" that must underlie lasting peace.¹⁶ Niwano discusses his idea of what this "reformation of the mind" will bring about in interpreting the Buddha's ten supernatural powers displayed in Chapter 21 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, where passage among the worlds in the ten directions becomes

unobstructed, "as though they were one Buddha land." This indicates, Niwano writes, that:

a world of great harmony will appear when all nations, all races, and all classes come to live in accordance with the one truth, so that discrimination among them vanishes, discord and fighting do not occur, and all the people work joyfully, enjoy their lives, and promote culture. In short, the whole world will become one buddha-land. Organizationally speaking, it can be said that the buddha-land means the formation of a world federation.¹⁷

Doctrinal approaches: a diametric opposition

In terms of how they understand both Nichiren and the *Lotus Sūtra*, Sōka Gakkai and Rishshō Kōseikai contrast sharply, so much so that one wonders whether their historical rivalry may not have helped to define them over and against one another.¹⁸ Sōka Gakkai, more than almost any other Nichiren Buddhist organization, has upheld Nichiren's stance of exclusive devotion to the *Lotus*, and it is Nichiren's writings, rather than the text of the *Lotus Sūtra* itself, that hold normative authority for members. During the "great march of *shakubuku*," the massive proselytization effort spearheaded by Toda in the 1950s, Sōka Gakkai rhetoric appropriated Nichiren's claim for the exclusive truth of the *Lotus Sūtra* to explain the recent horrors of the Pacific War and its aftermath. In Nichiren's view, it was "slander of the Dharma" – rejection of the *Lotus Sūtra* – that had brought Japan to the brink of destruction by the Mongols; now, the sufferings and devastation resulting from the war, including the atomic bombings, were construed in the same way as "collective punishment" for having ignored Nichiren's teaching.¹⁹ This mono-causal account of Japan's misery and defeat proved compelling, not only in its simplicity of explanation but in the empowerment it offered. If the sufferings of the war and Occupation stemmed from slander of the Dharma, then it was ordinary Gakkai members who, through their proselytizing efforts, were rectifying this fundamental evil once and for all:

You should realize that you were born into the Final Dharma age with this mission [to save all people through *shakubuku*]... If we really desire to rebuild a peaceful Japan and establish peace throughout the world, then, without begrudging our lives, we must advance *shakubuku* to convey the Wonderful Dharma [to all] as soon as possible, by even a single day or hour.²⁰

An exclusivistic stance, however, is extremely difficult to maintain in an atmosphere increasingly committed to pluralism. In the 1960s and 1970s,

Sōka Gakkai came under scathing media criticism for its aggressive proselytizing and is still battling to overcome the negative images created during that time. As the organization grew increasingly large and well established, religious debate and denunciation of other teachings gave way to the cultural and peace education activities promoted under Ikeda's leadership. This trend toward moderation seems to have progressed by a quantum leap since the break with Nichiren Shōshū, and the Gakkai at present even engages in ecumenical endeavors. Article 7 of the 1995 Sōka Gakkai International Charter announced a commitment to "the Buddhist spirit of tolerance," interfaith dialogue, and cooperation with other religions toward the resolution of humanity's problems.²¹ This shift in orientation, while providing entrée into global ecumenical networks of socially engaged religionists, would nevertheless seem (at least from an outsider's perspective) to involve Sōka Gakkai in a certain theological inconsistency. To my knowledge, the organization has yet to reconcile its new interfaith cooperation at a theoretical level with its espousal of Nichiren's claim that only faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* leads to enlightenment in the *mappō* era.

Rishshō Kōseikai, for its, part, has been inclusive all along. In his lectures on the *Lotus Sūtra*, Niwano Nikkyō writes:

When seeking the origin of this great universe and the various elements and living things that exist therein, we come to see the one and only energy... Buddhism calls this fundamental energy 'the void,' while some scientists call it "Planck's constant" ... Christianity calls it "God"; Judaism, "Yahweh"; Islam, "Allah."

The conviction that all the "great" religions share a single essence (Niwano excepts "low religions that deal with fetish or idol worship") leads him to conclude that the "*Lotus Sūtra*" and "*Sākyamuni Buddha*" are not proper nouns, but the one truth underlying all phenomena and to which all systems tend.²² Differently stated, all great religions teach the *Lotus Sūtra* and revere the eternal Buddha; religious pluralism is itself an instance of "all dharmas manifesting the true aspect" (*shohō jissō*). This conviction informed Niwano's lifelong commitment to interfaith cooperation. He served, for example, as chairman of the Japan Religions League and of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) and played a key role in organizing a number of international ecumenical peace conferences.

As might be expected, in a reading of the *Lotus Sūtra* as teaching the essential unity of all faiths, Nichiren's exclusive truth claim does not figure prominently. One of Niwano's *sūtra* commentaries makes a brief attempt to assimilate Nichiren to his inclusive position by suggesting that Nichiren's criticism of other sects was aimed at their mutual antagonism and attachment to their own teachings, at the expense of the Buddha's

unifying intent.²³ However, from the very beginning, it was the *Lotus Sūtra*, rather than Nichiren's teachings, that has served as the basis for Kōseikai teachings. It is also my impression, to be tested by further research, that Nichiren came to be de-emphasized in Risshō Kōseikai with the organization's growing commitment to interfaith endeavors.²⁴

Sōka Gakkai, as we have seen, incurred widespread hostility for what many perceived as dogmatic self-righteousness in its claim to exclusive possession of religious truth – something Risshō Kōseikai, with its thorough-going ecumenical stance, has avoided. However, Niwano's claim that "all religions are the same in their essence" would seem to risk obscuring very real differences in the doctrines and practices of individual religious traditions, differences which the members of those traditions might not deem superficial at all but constitutive of their religious identity.²⁵ The claim to religious unity also raises the question of how Kōseikai members understand the particular identity of Buddhism and their place within it. One cannot but wonder (again, speaking as an outsider) about the danger here of what Robert Bellah has termed "over-tolerance," a too ready acceptance of heterogenous elements that allows the distinctive message of one's own tradition to be overwhelmed.²⁶

Although it remains to be seen where Sōka Gakkai's recent ecumenical interests will lead, the social engagement of these two organizations was for a long time rooted in almost diametrically opposed readings of the *Lotus Sūtra* and Nichiren. For Sōka Gakkai, the *Lotus* has been the one true teaching whose propagation alone can bring peace to the world; for Risshō Kōseikai, it is the shared truth inherent in all things, an awakening to which, it is said, will give rise to a sense of universal brotherhood and mutual respect. These contrasting orientations also shaped the way that the two organizations sought in the post-war years to secure their position in a society often hostile to New Religions. Risshō Kōseikai joined forces with other such movements in establishing the Union of the New Religious Organizations in Japan (Shin Nihon Shūkyō Dantai Rengōkai), which claimed sixty member organizations by 1952.²⁷ Sōka Gakkai, as already noted, established its own political party. Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai may perhaps be seen as contemporary representatives of a very old controversy in *Lotus Sūtra* interpretation over whether all teachings and practices, correctly understood, should be seen as expressions of the one vehicle just as they are, or whether the one vehicle is a truth apart, transcending all other forms, which must then be discarded in its favor.²⁸

A shared ethos and style of engagement

Despite their radically different understandings of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai nonetheless exhibit some remarkable similarities in their forms of social engagement and in the ethos underlying that

engagement. Both groups support the United Nations as affiliate nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and also mobilize their members for grassroots volunteer work, including aid to refugees and famine and disaster relief. Only a few of their many projects can be enumerated here. Risshō Kōseikai was instrumental in the founding, in 1969, of the Brighter Society Movement, a civic movement designed to "widen the circle of interreligious cooperation and call forth citizens' goodwill (Buddha nature)."²⁹ Members promote greening campaigns, visit the elderly and bedridden, and perform other acts of service and citizenship. Kōseikai's Youth Division received the United Nations Peace Prize in 1988 for its work on behalf of UNICEF and its "Donate One Meal" campaign, in which participants skip one meal a month and donate the cost to the Kōseikai Fund for Peace. Risshō Kōseikai also aided Vietnamese refugees through its Boat People Project and, more recently, has done refugee work in Somalia and the former Yugoslavia. Sōka Gakkai, for its part, has launched a grassroots movement for "peace education," sponsoring numerous exhibitions on the destructive potential of nuclear weapons and gathering and publishing multi-volume collections of oral histories of individual experiences from the war. The object of these endeavors is one of consciousness-raising. Keeping alive the memory of war's horror and brutality may help engender a repugnance toward war in those younger generations who have never experienced it personally.³⁰ Sōka Gakkai has also founded the Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research to promote international collaboration among peace researchers, policy-makers, and activists, and to help coordinate the peace efforts of such individuals with those of research centers and NGOs.³¹ Rank and file members also initiate their own programs. Inspired by the slogan "think globally, act locally," barbers and hairdressers belonging to Sōka Gakkai have in recent years launched the "Charity Cut," offering free haircuts in exchange for a thousand-yen donation. Money collected has gone to UNICEF; for disaster relief following the 1995 Kobe earthquake; and to the International Organization for Migration, to help repatriate young Vietnamese women.³²

These very similar efforts of Risshō Kōseikai and Sōka Gakkai also are supported by a shared ethos, in which all social improvement must, ultimately, be grounded in an inner personal transformation – the "human revolution" (*ningen kakumei*), as Gakkai members call it, or "reformation of the mind" (*kokoro no kaizō*), in Kōseikai terms. Since war, strife, and injustice are seen as fundamentally rooted in the three poisons – greed, anger, and delusion – in the hearts of individuals, it is only by individual self-purification that a lasting foundation for peace can be established. Based on faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*, all ordinary activities, at home, at school or in the workplace, are themselves seen as Buddhist practice and as an opportunity to polish one's character. This ethos of "Buddhism is daily

life" promoted in both groups entails striving cheerfully and to one's utmost wherever one may be; cultivating gratitude for one's circumstances, even adverse ones, as opportunities for personal growth and self-challenge; and reflecting on oneself before criticizing others. Moreover, since all things are interconnected, such quotidian efforts in effect constitute a unique personal mission to spread the blessings of the *Lotus Sūtra*. To quote Ikeda Daisaku:

Within all the realms pertaining to you, whether in your family, workplace, or neighborhood, you are the one who holds full responsibility there for the spread of the Wonderful Dharma. Don't forget that true Buddhism and the spread of the *Lotus Sūtra* lie in the most immediate, even humble activities. You should have the self-awareness that you are here [in those circumstances] now as an envoy of the true Buddha, Nichiren Daishōnin.³³

Given their radically different, even opposed understandings of the the *Lotus Sūtra* and of Nichiren, why do Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai display such similar forms of social engagement and embrace so similar an ethos? The short answer is that their style of social engagement and its supporting rationale may owe less to Nichiren and the *Lotus Sūtra* than to the broader religious culture of modern Japan. Let us briefly consider some of the larger trends in which their common ethos is grounded.³⁴

Both Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai participate in what scholars have termed the "vitalistic theory of salvation" found in a number of Japanese New Religions of both Buddhist and Shinto derivation and having remote roots in agrarian religion.³⁵ According to this theory, all phenomena in the universe are expressions of a "great life" (*daiseimei*) or "life force" (*seimei-ryoku*) and are therefore all interrelated. Human ignorance of or disconnection from this fundamental life force is deemed responsible for discord, sickness and misfortune, while "salvation" entails bringing oneself into harmony with this life force, resulting in improved health, prosperity, harmonious family relations, and, on a broad scale, a brighter, happier world. Thus achievement of this-worldly benefits, individual salvation, and the realization of an ideal society are all grounded in the same principle and placed on the same plane. Sōka Gakkai's Toda Jōsei, while imprisoned during the war, is said to have undergone a mystical experience in which he realized that "Buddha is none other than life itself," an insight that underlaid his later explication of "life philosophy" (*seimei tetsugaku*).³⁶ In Sōka Gakkai literature, "life force" often replaces more classically Buddhist notions of emptiness or dependent origination as the ontological ground of reality. One sees this in Kōseikai publications as well. Interpreting the *Lotus Sūtra*'s phrase "true aspect of the dharmas" (*shobō jissō*), Niwano Nikkyō not only equates "emptiness"

with "life" but argues that realization of this "great life" is the source of world peace:

Voidness [i.e., *śūnyatā*] is the only one, real existence that makes everything and every phenomenon of the universe. Scientifically speaking, it is the fundamental energy that is manifested in all phenomena, and religiously speaking it is the great life force that permeates everything that exists in the universe, namely the Eternal, Original Buddha... [I]f the real embodiment of all things is a single entity, ... when one can fully realize this, then fraternal love, the feeling that all human beings are brothers and sisters, will spring up in one's heart. One will be filled with a sense of harmony and cooperation. This sentiment of fraternity is the benevolence or compassion taught in Buddhism.³⁷

The ethos of "Buddhism is daily life" taught by Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai also has roots in what Yasumaro Yoshio has called the "conventional morality" (*tsūzoku dōtoku*) promoted by popular movements of self-cultivation that emerged among farmers and merchants during the Edo period (1603–1868) and stressed individual moral development through diligent efforts in one's given circumstances.³⁸ Self-cultivation was rooted in what Yasumaro terms a "philosophy of the mind (or heart)" (*kokoro no tetsugaku*), "mind" here indicating the universal ground of self, society, and the cosmos. In the rigidly stratified society of early modern Japan, this emphasis on personal cultivation, in Yasumaro's analysis, encouraged subjective formation of self and positive engagement with one's tasks, invested occupations such agriculture and trade with a profound moral, even religious, significance, and thus contributed to the process of modernization. While society is no longer divided into fixed status groups, the values of harmony, sincerity, and industry central to Yasumaro's "conventional morality," along with its assumptions about the limitless potential to be tapped through cultivating the mind, are still very much alive in what Helen Hardacre has described as "the world view of the New Religions."³⁹ Hardacre notes in particular the notion that "other people are mirrors" – meaning that other people's behavior is said to reflect aspects of one's own inner state. Harsh or inconsiderate treatment at the hands of others, even if the believer is not obviously at fault, is to be taken as a sign of one's own shortcomings or karmic hindrances and as an occasion for repentance and further effort – a point stressed repeatedly in the practical guidance of both Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai.

Does this ethos effectively contribute to social betterment? On the one hand, there is much that may be said in its favor. First, it locates all agency in individuals, who are taught that – because they can tap the supreme life-force of the universe – there is no hardship that cannot be overcome. Such

an outlook instills courage and cheerfulness in the face of adversity and the will to challenge limitations. It is also personally empowering, in that one's own efforts, however humble, are infused with immense significance as bodhisattva practice linked directly to the accomplishment of world peace. More than the actions of politicians, diplomats and world leaders, it is the daily acts of practitioners that are seen as laying the foundation for this goal. It may well be here, in this sense of individual empowerment and personal mission, that Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai have exerted their greatest appeal.

By teaching that the individual is ultimately responsible for his or her circumstances, the ethos of these groups also works to undercut an egoistic sense of personal entitlement, litigiousness, and other unedifying tendencies to protect self at the expense of others. Jane Hurst, in her study of the Sōka Gakkai's movement in the United States, credits this ethos with the organization's remarkable level of racial harmony; belief that the individual is responsible for his or her own circumstances precludes racial or ethnic scapegoating as a way of blaming others for one's own problems.⁴⁰ At the same time, however, while personally empowering, the idea that external change is a function of inner cultivation tends to be politically conservative.⁴¹ In particular, the notion that others' harsh or unfair treatment reflects some unresolved shortcoming in oneself undercuts even the concept of a structural problem, reducing everything to an issue of individual self-development. As Hardacre notes, "Placing blame and responsibility on the individual also denies the idea that 'society' can be blamed for one's problems; hence concepts of exploitation and discrimination are ruled out of consideration."⁴² The continual injunction not to complain but to take even adversity and ill treatment as an occasion for spiritual growth may work to foster acquiescence to the status quo, rather than the critical spirit necessary to recognize social inequity and speak out against it. Some observers have also argued that excessive emphasis on personal cultivation is inadequate as a basis for achieving peace:

[I]t tends to lose sight of the fact that wars occur as the result of a political process that cannot always be reduced to individual, or collective, greed, envy, hate, or whatever... until the concentric waves of morality have perfected every human being, arguably more will be done to avoid war – if not to establish true and lasting peace – by seeking to influence political processes.⁴³

The conviction that social change, to be effective, must be accompanied by mental cultivation is probably shared by most forms of socially engaged Buddhism; this is, after all, what distinguishes it from purely secular programs of social melioration. One might ask, however, how far inner transformation can be emphasized before it

becomes in effect an endorsement of the existing system, rather than a force for improving it.

Like the ethos expressed in the terms "human revolution" or "Buddhism is daily life," Sōka Gakkai's and Risshō Kōseikai's particular styles of social engagement, mobilizing broad-based volunteer efforts among their members, find parallels among contemporary Japanese religious organizations more generally, whether Shinto or Buddhist, New Religions or established denominations. The highly successful "donate one meal" campaign, for example, is conducted not only by Kōseikai but by the Shinto-based movement Shōroku Shintō Yamatoyama and other groups.⁴⁴ Kōseikai's Brighter Society Movement also has parallels among the social welfare and relief efforts initiated by established Buddhist sects, such as the Tendai sect's Light up Your Corner Movement.⁴⁵ These efforts reflect both the same virtues and the same limitations as the world-view supporting them. They enable large-scale participation and contributions of time and resources, raising members' awareness of the threat of nuclear weapons, food shortages, the environmental crisis, and other social problems, and also foster a desire to aid others. At the same time, this is a style of social engagement that tends to "work within the system"; it does not issue a direct challenge to existing social structures or attempt fundamentally to transform them.

Nipponzan Myōhōji: civil protest and absolute non-violence

In contrast to the two large lay movements introduced above, Nipponzan Myōhōji is a small Nichiren Buddhist order of about 1,500 persons, including both monastics and lay supporters. Its monks and nuns lead a life of utmost simplicity, fasting on designated days of the month and chanting the *daimoku* many hours daily. They are also committed to non-violent social protest and can be seen at marches and rallies, dressed in their saffron robes and chanting the *daimoku* to the beat of hand-held, fan-shaped drums (*uchiwa daiko*). "Peace walks" – one of Nipponzan Myōhōji's major activities – unite the "march" as a form of non-violent political demonstration with the traditional Nichiren Buddhist ascetic practice of chanting the *daimoku* while walking to the beat of a hand-held drum. Nipponzan Myōhōji is especially active in the anti-nuclear cause and first began to participate in civil protest around 1954, during the popular anti-atomic weapons movement touched off when crew members of the Japanese tuna trawler *Lucky Dragon Five* (*Daigo Fukuryūmaru*) were exposed to fallout from United States H-bomb testing on Bikini Atoll. Nipponzan Myōhōji members joined demonstrations at American army bases, where their courage, even in the face of police brutality, won them respect within the Japanese peace movement. In Japan, they have consistently opposed expansion of the US military presence, conducted

peace walks to commemorate the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings and protest against nuclear weapons, and, during the Gulf War, staged a hunger strike in front of Shibuya Station in Tokyo. Nipponzan Myōhōji followers have also been active in Cambodia, Bosnia, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and elsewhere. In the United States, beginning with their participation in the 1976 Continental Walk for Disarmament and Social Justice sponsored by the War Resisters League, their marches have criss-crossed the country; in a recent "prison walk" in California, Nipponzan Myōhōji members joined in calling for prison reform and protested against the death penalty.⁴⁶ The order has shown particular sympathy for peoples who have suffered Western aggression and colonization, and its members in the United States have been active on behalf of Native American rights. Nipponzan Myōhōji is unusual, perhaps even unique among Japanese Buddhist groups, for its commitment to civil protest. Its founder, Fujii Nichidatsu (1885–1985) at one point wrote:

In the beginning I also thought that religion, as something concerned with the inner human spirit, should have no say about politics or concern itself with social problems, but should stick to giving spiritual guidance to each individual person. However, these days, the problems we need to be concerned with necessarily involve the large social structures of the state, or even further, the world. Until the world itself changes, even individual moral cultivation is impossible.⁴⁷

In a survey designed to examine the attitudes toward peace of members of six different Japanese new religious movements, including the three under discussion here, Robert Kisala found that Nipponzan Myōhōji members differed substantially from those of other religious groups in deeming local civic action, rather than support for global organizations such as the United Nations, to be the most effective method for achieving peace.⁴⁸

Fujii Nichidatsu began his religious career as a priest of Nichirenshū. From early on, he demonstrated an aptitude for the more ascetic side of the Nichiren tradition and undertook such austerities as fasting and self-mortification. From a young age, he adopted the life of an itinerant monk, and in 1916, inspired by Nichiren's example of "admonishing the state," took up a stand at Nijūbashi opposite the imperial palace, chanting the *daimoku* and beating the drum in an act of remonstration with the Taishō emperor to take faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*. Fujii was particularly struck by Nichiren's prophecy that Buddhism, which had spread eastward from western regions in the True and Semblance Dharma ages, would return from the east to the west in the Final Dharma age. Determined to do his part in realizing this prophecy, Fujii crossed in 1917 to Manchuria to

disseminate Nichiren's teachings there. He founded a temple at Liaoyang in 1918, an event later regarded as the founding of Nipponzan Myōhōji and a break with Nichirenshū, though the nature of Fujii's differences with the parent sect remain a subject for further investigation. News of the Great Kantō Earthquake in 1923 brought him home; in light of Nichiren's *Risshō ankoku ron*, he saw the earthquake as an omen of disaster facing Japan and believed it his duty to return and pray for the country's welfare. But in 1930 he again turned his attention west and sailed for India to propagate the *daimoku* there. In 1933, he spent a month at Gandhi's Wardha Ashram, where he had two brief interviews with Gandhi.⁴⁹ He was yet to embrace Gandhi's *ahimsa* doctrine; rather, evidence suggests that Fujii at this time sympathized with Japanese military advances into Asia, which he construed as the holy task of liberating Asian peoples from Western imperialism.⁵⁰ More than a decade later, however, he would undergo a transformative experience that led him to condemn violence absolutely:

What led me to assert non-resistance, disarmament and the abolition of war was not my encounter with Mr. Gandhi. When the atom bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and I saw hundred of thousands of innocent women and children die as though burned at the stake and poisoned, victims of a tragedy unprecedented in human history; when I saw Japan forced to accept unconditional surrender, then I understood the madness, folly, and barbarousness of modern war.⁵¹

Fujii's espousal of Gandhi may be said to have begun at this point, for the post-war Nipponzan Myōhōji sangha has embraced an uncompromisingly literal reading of the first precept and an absolute rejection of force, even to protect one's own life. The group is able to maintain this extreme stance by virtue of its monastic-centered orientation and its marginal position in Japanese society; as Robert Kisala has noted, members of large lay organizations such as Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai, who are involved in the social mainstream, tend to embrace a more qualified pacifism that allows, say, for the right of self-defense. Yet, impracticable though it may be as a majority position, a commitment to absolute non-violence such as that of Nipponzan Myōhōji can nonetheless "remind us that there are values worth the ultimate sacrifice" and "act as brake on the tendency to resort to the use of force too easily."⁵²

There seems little doubt that the primary influence shaping Nipponzan Myōhōji's post-war pacifism has been Gandhi's teaching of non-violence, rather than the *Lotus Sūtra* or the Nichiren Buddhist tradition. Nichiren himself, while sharing in the general Buddhist ethos that rejects killing as sinful, drew the major part of his following from among lower and

middle-ranking samurai and their dependants. By virtue of their hereditary profession, killing was sometimes inevitable for these men, and the thrust of Nichiren's teaching – as of much of medieval Japanese Buddhism – was that sincere devotion (in this case, to the *Lotus Sūtra*) could save one from painful retribution for those sins that one cannot avoid committing.⁵³ Thus it is extremely difficult to derive a stance of absolute pacifism from Nichiren's writings. Fujii, however, did succeed in deriving a model for absolute nonviolence from the *Lotus Sūtra*, in his particular reading of the conduct of Bodhisattva Never Despising (*Sadāparibhūtā, Jōfukyō*), described in the sūtra's twentieth chapter. Bodhisattva Never Despising “practiced only obeisance,” bowing to everyone he met in reverence for the someday-to-be realized Buddha potential within them. Though mocked by others, he never gave way to anger, even when abused and struck. Eventually, he was able to lead those who despised him to supreme Buddhahood.

In the context of the *Lotus*, Bodhisattva Never Despising illustrates forbearance, one of the six perfections or *pāramitās* that Mahāyāna bodhisattvas must cultivate. This refers especially (as in the case of Never Despising) to the forbearance of insult when mocked or criticized by adherents of the “lesser vehicle,” who at the time constituted the mainstream Buddhist establishment. Thus, in its original historical context, the story of Never Despising is part of a Mahāyāna polemic against the so-called “Hinayāna.” In Fujii’s reading, however, it becomes a model for absolute nonviolence.⁵⁴ The way of “practicing only obeisance,” Fujii maintained, represents correct practice now in the Final Dharma age and is the sole path to realizing the Buddha land in the present world. Fujii interpreted “practicing only obeisance” in terms of the three categories of action: to bow reverently to others with one’s body; to chant the *daimoku* with one’s mouth; and to revere with one’s mind the Buddha nature inherent in all. Such actions, he asserted, plant the seed of Buddhahood in the field of the *ālaya*-consciousness and will eventually sprout as the spiritual reconstruction of humanity.⁵⁵

Another link that Fujii forged between his post-war pacifism and the *Lotus Sūtra* was Nipponzan Myōhōji’s campaign of building “peace pagodas,” in keeping with the eternal Buddha’s words in the sūtra that he will appear wherever beings long to see him and “widely make offerings to my *sārira*.” In 1933, during a pilgrimage to Sri Lanka, Fujii is said to have received Buddha relics from some Theravāda monks, who urged that they be enshrined in a stūpa. It was Fujii’s abiding conviction that, wherever the stūpa cult had flourished after Śākyamuni Buddha’s death, that society had enjoyed peace – though his own ideas about how peace would be realized differed strikingly before and after the end of the war. In 1938, following the Japanese invasion of China, Fujii presented some of his Buddha relics to the Japanese army and navy, whose victories, he wrote, would bring

about the peace of Asia, the liberation of Asian peoples, and the reconstruction of Asian culture.⁵⁶ After Fujii’s post-war conversion to pacifism, however, Nipponzan Myōhōji’s Buddha relic veneration took the form of building peace pagodas. The first was erected in Kumamoto, Fujii’s birthplace, in 1954. To date, more than eighty pagodas have been built worldwide, in Asia, Europe, and the United States, through the volunteer labor of Nipponzan Myōhōji sangha members and supporters.

Intensive *daimoku* practice and the building of peace pagodas represent the explicitly religious dimension of Nipponzan Myōhōji’s contemporary social engagement, said to lead to the spiritual transformation of humanity. This dimension of spiritual transformation links Nipponzan Myōhōji to other forms of socially engaged Buddhism, including the lay movements Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai. Nipponzan Myōhōji’s outward forms of social engagement, however, are not primarily the efforts at building harmonious relations or the grassroots volunteerism seen in these Buddhist lay organizations, but nonviolent civil disobedience and a critical stance toward global structures of power and authority. This orientation can be traced to the influence of Gandhi; to Nipponzan Myōhōji’s heritage, through Fujii, of the ascetic side of the Nichiren monastic tradition; and to its marginal status as a small, monastic-centered order. One senses in its current activities of social protest something similar to Nichiren’s defiance of worldly authority, although such protest is framed – not in Nichiren’s own terms, as a defense of the sole truth of the *Lotus Sūtra* – but as a commitment to absolute nonviolence and to a literal reading of the first precept.

The wartime legacy and the goal of “world peace”

The goal espoused by the three religious movements under discussion here is “world peace.” Peacemaking, as Kenneth Kraft notes, is a characteristic concern of socially engaged Buddhists everywhere, a commitment to implementing the first precept on a global scale.⁵⁷ And yet “world peace” is a protean theme; like the “one vehicle” of the *Lotus Sūtra*, it has meant different things to different people. This contemporary goal of Sōka Gakkai, Risshō Kōseikai and Nipponzan Myōhōji, along with the modes of activism employed to achieve it, does not emerge fully formed from the *Lotus Sūtra* or from Nichiren’s teachings but has been shaped by more recent historical circumstances. “World peace” is currently promoted as the goal of a number of Japanese religious bodies, including established Buddhist denominations as well as new religious movements, and often entails at least in part an attempt to define, *vis-à-vis* the world community, a unique role, perhaps even a sacred mission, for Japan – “Japan” here being represented by the particular religious group doing the defining. In religious rhetoric of the post-war decades, as in that of the peace move-

ment more broadly, notions of a uniquely Japanese pacifist mission were formulated around three axes: (1) Japan must atone and make reparation for the sufferings inflicted on other Asian peoples during its period of militant imperialism; (2) only Japan has experienced the horrors of atomic warfare and is therefore both uniquely responsible and uniquely qualified to work for the abolition of nuclear weapons; and (3) only Japan has a Constitution expressly renouncing the right to wage war. The goal of "world peace," therefore, was not promoted solely as a global humanitarian concern – though it was undeniably that as well – but has also entailed a complex attempt to resolve guilt over wartime atrocities; to co-opt, in a manner restoring agency to Japan, the humiliation of national defeat and the imposition of the Occupation Constitution; and to define a particularistic Japanese identity within the context of global community.⁵⁸ For Nichiren Buddhists, the post-war project of defining Japan's special mission for world peace was complicated by two additional factors. First was a need to overcome lingering images, forged during the modern imperial period, of Nichiren Buddhism as a particularly nationalistic and militant religion, and the second, a need to reappropriate, in a manner suited to an international age, a Japan-centered element in Nichiren's own writings.

To take up these matters in reverse order: Nichiren, like other educated Buddhist monks of Japan's medieval period, participated in a discourse of what it meant, as a Buddhist, to be living in the degenerate Final Dharma age, long after the time of the historical Buddha. Temporal separation was mirrored by physical distance, for Japan was seen as a small country, far from the Buddha's birthplace, on the edge of the Buddhist cosmos. Buddhist thinkers labored to devise a positive Buddhist significance for the fact of having been born in the last age in this peripheral land. For example, some argued that Japan's local deities were the special "traces" or guises manifested by the Buddhas and bodhisattvas as a "skillful means" to lead the inhabitants to Buddhism; thus Japan, despite its remoteness from the land of Buddhism's origin, was nonetheless a place where particular signs of the Buddha's compassion had been displayed. Nichiren's own writings reflect a deep ambivalence about Japan.⁵⁹ On the one hand, he viewed it as an evil land, full of people who slandered the Dharma by placing other teachings above the *Lotus Sūtra* and who were therefore destined for great sufferings, such as attack by the Mongols. On the other hand, the Tendai tradition in which he was trained had long posited a particular karmic link between the *Lotus Sūtra* and Japan. Nichiren appropriated and reinterpreted the idea of this connection by defining Japan as the very place where – through his own efforts, as the Buddha's messenger – the Great Pure Dharma for the time of *mappō* had first appeared. Thus far, he wrote, the Buddha-Dharma of India had spread from west to east. But its light was feeble; it could never dispel the

darkness of the degenerate Final Dharma age. In the time of *mappō*, the Buddha-Dharma of Japan would rise like the sun, returning from east to west, and illuminate the world.⁶⁰

Nichiren's references to Japan do not, as some scholars have argued, constitute a form of proto-nationalism. Like much of medieval Buddhist discourse about Japan, his thinking on the subject was mythic, rather than geopolitical, and represents an attempt to construct a particularistic religious identity within the larger context of an imagined Buddhist world. Nor, in asserting that the Wonderful Dharma for the last age would "return to India," did Nichiren ever assert that the Japanese people as such were charged with a particular mission to spread it. This element in Nichiren's thought remained chiefly rhetorical and was not widely interpreted as a call to action until the late nineteenth century, when Japan, as a fledgling nation-state, had to negotiate a place in the world community.

Japan's leaders at that time were acutely aware of the need to gain economic and political parity with Western powers to avoid being exploited by them. Educators, opinion-makers and government spokesmen sought to rally citizens to the tasks of modernization and industrialization by instilling a strong sense of national identity. Growing nationalistic sentiment in turn placed a strain on Buddhist institutions. Ideologues with Shinto or Confucian leanings criticized Buddhism as institutionally corrupt, a superstitious relic of the past, a drain on public resources, and an alien import that had oppressed the indigenous Japanese spirit. The Meiji Restoration of 1868 also brought to an end the state patronage that Buddhist temples had enjoyed under the preceding Tokugawa regime (1603–1868). Buddhism was thus challenged to prove its relevance to an emerging modern nation. Throughout Japan's modern imperial period (1895–1945), virtually all Buddhist denominations – and other religions as well – supported nationalistic and militaristic aims, sending chaplains abroad to minister to Japanese troops, missionizing in subjugated territories, interpreting doctrine in light of national concerns and promoting patriotism among their followers.⁶¹

The various Nichiren Buddhist denominations were no more (and no less) committed to such endeavors than were other religious institutions. But Nichiren circles produced some extremely influential ideologues, able to construct nationalistic readings of their tradition that, at the time, proved powerfully compelling. A leading propagandist was Tanaka Chigaku (1861–1939), a former Nichirenshū priest who abandoned his robes to become a lay Buddhist leader, traveling throughout Japan on a lifelong career of writing and lecturing. Tanaka was the first to coin the term "Nichirenshugi" (Nichirenism), by which he meant, not the traditional Nichiren Buddhism of temples and priests, but a popular Nichiren doctrine reinterpreted in the light of modern national aspirations.⁶² Tanaka founded a number of lay organizations to promote Nichirenshugi,

most notably the Risshō Ankoku Kai, founded in 1885 and reorganized in 1914 as the Kokuchūkai (Pillar of the Nation Society).⁶³ Tanaka's hermeneutical innovation was to equate the truth of the *Lotus Sūtra* with the Japanese national essence or *kokutai*, the ideological foundation of the Japanese state, said by many nationalist thinkers to have been passed down in a direct line from the Sun Goddess to her divine grandson, Emperor Jinmu, the legendary founder of Japan. By identifying the Japanese national essence with the *Lotus Sūtra*, Tanaka raised the former to a position of universal significance and in effect equated the spread of faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* with the extension of Japanese imperial rule. Armed expansion into China and Manchuria was even described as "compassionate *shakubuku*." Where Nichiren himself had subordinated the ruler's authority to that of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Tanaka's Nichirenshugi placed Dharma and empire on the same plane. Militant Nichirenism did not remain confined to Tanaka's following but was adopted by other lay groups and by the more ardently nationalistic factions among Nichiren temple organizations. Another staunch advocate was Tanaka's colleague Honda Nisshō (1867–1931), leader of the Nichiren denomination Kenpon Hokkeshū, who founded a number of lay societies to combat socialism, discourage organized labor movements, rallied workers in support of government and promoted grassroots patriotism. While enjoying broad-based support among the urban working class, the lay movements of Nichirenshugi won approval from military officers, educators, scholars, writers, government bureaucrats and businessmen.

Repugnant as its rhetoric and goals may appear to many people today, one must nonetheless acknowledge that militant Nichirenshugi, like much of Japanese Buddhism during the modern imperial period, was socially engaged Buddhism. Its leaders were committed practitioners who called for action in society as an indispensable element of Buddhist practice. That action, as it happened, ultimately entailed brutal aggression against other Asian countries and exacted terrible sacrifices from ordinary Japanese citizens. Yet Nichirenshugi leaders appear genuinely to have believed that the worldwide extension of Japanese empire for which they strove – equated in their reading with the universal spread of the *Lotus Sūtra* – would liberate Asia from the tyranny of Western imperialism and usher in an era of peace and harmony for people everywhere. This is a disquieting example, indicating as it does that "social engagement" in and of itself is not necessarily beneficent, or even benign.

Full discussion of the wartime situation of the three movements treated in this chapter must await another opportunity and can only be touched upon here. In 1939, with the passing of the Religious Organizations Law, all religious bodies came under increasingly strict government surveillance, new religious movements in particular. Niwano Nikkyō was briefly imprisoned under the Public Security Preservation Law on charges that

Naganuma Myōkō's spirit revelations were "confusing the people" but was soon released. Prior to 1942, he had made a habit of donating small sums offered by Risshō Kōseikai members to the local police station in Nakano, Tokyo, for contribution to the armed forces – a circumstance that probably contributed to his lenient treatment. Moreover, as he wrote:

Because of the militarists' mistaken belief that the teachings of Nichiren ... and those of the *Lotus Sūtra*, could be put to the service of ultranationalism, less pressure was applied to organizations – like Risshō Kōseikai – that professed faith in that sutra.⁶⁴

The Sōka Gakkai (or Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai, as it was then known) did not escape so easily. Faithful to Nichiren's exclusive truth claim, and to Nichiren's example of defying worldly authority when it contravened devotion to the *Lotus Sūtra*, Makiguchi Tsunesaburō refused to allow his membership to enshrine the talismans of the Ise Shrine, as mandated by the wartime government. In 1943, he and twenty other leaders of the society were imprisoned on charges of *lèse-majesté*; Makiguchi died while still incarcerated the following year.⁶⁵ Nipponzan Myōhōji monks were active in occupied China and Manchuria, and while not present there in a official capacity, still seem to have supported the imperial enterprise and did not come under official scrutiny. Yet, whether as individuals they had enthusiastically or reluctantly supported militarism, publicly or privately opposed it, or simply tried to keep their heads down, for Nichiren Buddhists in the post-war era, militant Nichirenshugi, as a discredited ideology, would prove a burdensome legacy. The new movements in particular struggled simultaneously to reposition their teachings as embodying the mission of a new, pacifist Japan and to divest their own Nichiren Buddhist heritage of its ultranationalistic and militant associations forged during the modern imperial period.

Literature published by Sōka Gakkai, Risshō Kōseikai and Nipponzan Myōhōji in the post-war decades often addresses this challenge in terms that retain the conceptual theme of a unique Japanese mission – found so often in both Nichirenist and other wartime Buddhist rhetoric – but repudiate its militant content.⁶⁶ Sōka Gakkai's post-war publications, for example, frame Japan's special mission for peace in terms of the Gakkai's exclusivistic claim for sole validity of the *Lotus Sūtra* as explained by Nichiren. Japan was to lead the way to world peace as an act of repentance – not only for its role in World War II, but for "slander of the *Lotus Sūtra*," that fundamental evil on which Nichiren blamed the disasters of his own time. A Sōka Gakkai handbook maintains that:

even though the most secret and correct of all Dharmas had been established in Japan, for seven hundred years [since Nichiren

revealed this Dharma], the people did not see nor hear it, were not moved by it, nor did they try to understand it. Therefore they received general punishment and the country was destroyed.⁶⁷

This extremely deep evil karma, said to have been incurred by the Japanese for adhering to "heretical" forms of Buddhism, was, as noted earlier, blamed for all national sufferings, past and present:

The Japanese are reportedly the first nation to have been baptized by gunpowder, when it was attacked by the Mongols seven hundred years ago. It was Japan again that first suffered from atomic warfare. Looking back on this unhappy history, it is hoped that the Japanese people will realize that they are destined to work more strenuously than any other country of the world for the achievement of world peace.⁶⁸

Yet this burden of repentance was at the same time construed as a lofty mission. In Ikeda's words:

Japan is the only nation in the world which has experienced the dread of nuclear weapons. Japan is also the first country in the world that has adopted a Constitution of absolute pacifism ... We want to stress, therefore, that Japan is entirely qualified to be in the vanguard, to mobilize all the peace forces of the world, to assume their leadership, and to rouse world opinion through the United Nations.⁶⁹

Risshō Kōseikai also invested Japan with a unique mission and responsibility in creating world peace. One reason often cited was the need to redress evils committed during the war, an issue that has been explored in study seminars by the Japanese Committee of the WCRP. Kōseikai's youth division has been especially active in developing ties with the Philippines, Singapore, Korea, and other places in East and South-east Asia where bitter memories of Japanese aggression still linger. Niwano Nikkyō stressed Japan's experience of the atomic bombings, and thus, unique knowledge, of the true horrors of modern warfare. He also placed great significance on the Peace Constitution, explicitly renouncing war, which he even credited with Japan's post-war economic success: "To the world's people, I say again that Japan is proof that any country at all can achieve prosperity if it renounces war and refuses to spend money on armaments."⁷⁰

Assertion of Japan's sacred mission to bring peace to the world took a more confrontational form in the writings of Nipponzan Myōhōji's Fujii Nichidatsu. Fujii implacably opposed "Western civilization," which he saw

not as civilization at all but as its opposite – rampant materialism, reliance on the rule of force, and science run amok. Humanity's hope lay in its displacement by the "civilization of the East," whose essence Fujii claimed was embodied in the precept "not to take life" and in the words of the *daimoku*.⁷¹

The civilization of the East, which is to deliver the world from suffering, is to chant Nam-Mu-Myo-Ho-Ren-Ge-Kyo to the world... Their [adherents'] strength will become the strength to reverse the entire civilization of the West.⁷²

Japan's specific role in this confrontation, as Fujii saw it, was to act as a moral exemplar of absolute non-violence. For him, the atomic bombings had in one sense been a case, in the *Lotus Sūtra*'s words, of "curses returning to their originators," but from another perspective represented a noble sacrifice offered by the Japanese people in order to demonstrate the tragedy of atomic weapons and thus prevent the extermination of humanity.⁷³ This role should be actively maintained in the future as well:

What would we do if Japan were suddenly attacked from outside while we were unarmed and defenseless, having renounced war? In such an event, our leaders would stand in a line before the awesome weapons of the invaders, bow to them with their palms joined and undertake peaceful negotiations with them. We, men and women of Japan, would follow our leaders and do the same. Should Japan meet the invaders in this way, no soldiers, of whatever nationality, would shoot at our people and bomb our land, however great their hostility toward us might be... However, it is conceivable that the invaders would mercilessly attack the men and women of Japan as well as all our leaders, all of whom would be bowing with their hands joined, seeking peace. Should this happen, we would all lie side by side and meet our death. This holy sacrifice would bring about perpetual world peace. It would be the bodhisattva-practice of bodhisattvas who would deliver all humankind from its danger and suffering.⁷⁴

In this way, all three organizations, in a manner consistent with their distinctive readings of the *Lotus Sūtra* and Nichiren, were able to refigure earlier, militaristic notions of Japan's sacred mission to unite the world, replacing their aggressive content with that of a unique mission for world peace. At the same time, they could reclaim Nichiren's prophecy that the Dharma for the last age would return to the West from Japan in a way that freed it from earlier imperialistic associations.

As noted above, however, "world peace" is a malleable concept, and its

Japanocentric orientation in the post-war teachings of Sōka Gakkai, Risshō Kōseikai and even Nipponzan Myōhōji has for some time been subject to erosion as the result of growing international ties. Risshō Kōseikai's and, more recently, Sōka Gakkai's involvement in interreligious dialogue and international peace efforts has drawn them increasingly into a web of multinational connections and global structures. Sōka Gakkai also has a substantial worldwide membership, estimated at one million outside Japan. As these groups expand their transnational ties, more globally oriented discourses of "world peace" seem to be emerging.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to identify some of the historical and social factors that have shaped the modes of social engagement seen in Sōka Gakkai, Risshō Kōseikai, and Nipponzan Myōhōji. It has suggested that, while inspired and legitimized by creative readings of passages from both the *Lotus Sūtra* and Nichiren's writings, their modes of social activism have heavily incorporated, and been influenced by, elements that have no particular connection to the *Lotus Sūtra*, Nichiren, or even Buddhism itself. In the cases of Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai, such elements include the "vitalistic theory of salvation" of the New Religions and the "common morality" of modern Japanese religious culture more broadly, or, in the case of Nipponzan Myōhōji, the nonviolent resistance to colonial power advocated by Gandhi. All three have been additionally been shaped by the legacy of war, by struggles against the negative heritage of militant Nichirenism, and by the need to redefine Japanese identity in ways that have become increasingly linked to global community. To note that the followers of these groups have drawn selectively from the *Lotus Sūtra* and Nichiren's writings, highlighting or creatively re-reading some elements while passing over or muting others, is in no way to challenge their legitimacy as "Nichiren's heirs." Classic analogies of Dharma transmission, such as a flame passed from lamp to lamp or water poured from one vessel to another, suggest a pure, unchanging heritage and thus serve a self-legitimizing purpose. But what actually occurs is an ongoing exercise on the part of each era's practitioners in hermeneutical triangulation, as they work to reconcile their personal religious needs and aspirations; the external demands of their particular social context and historical moment; and the content of their received tradition. Nichiren drew selectively on his Tendai background in *Lotus Sūtra* studies as well as elements in the broader medieval Japanese religious culture to formulate an interpretation that he saw as answering the needs of his time. And his successors in later ages have done likewise. Exponents of the nationalistic Nichirenism of Japan's modern imperial period reinterpreted his teachings to legitimize their participation in nation-building, imperialism and war, while

Nichiren- and *Lotus Sūtra*-based engaged Buddhists in the contemporary period have similarly re-read these teachings in light of their own commitment to non-violence and world peace.

That religious communities reinterpret their received traditions is hardly an original observation, yet it has particular relevance to the study of socially engaged Buddhism, in underscoring the "constructed" nature of that enterprise. Received tradition, especially as expressed in scripture and doctrine, does not in and of itself determine contemporary forms of social activism. This point is forcefully illustrated by modern Buddhist movements devoted to the *Lotus Sūtra*, which in the twentieth century alone has been read both as a mandate for Japanese imperial conquest and as a blueprint for global peace. Specific programs of activism may be inspired by elements within a given tradition, which are read through the lens of contemporary needs, or such programs may be influenced by completely extraneous factors and then legitimized by reference to the tradition's history and sacred texts. What criteria determine the forms that "Buddhist social engagement" takes? What aspects of received tradition are retained as normative, which downplayed or set aside, and on what grounds are such choices made? These are questions that, although perhaps for different reasons, demand the attention of both the historian of religion and the socially engaged practitioner.

Notes

- 1 "Namu-Myōhō-renge-kyō" represents proper scholarly transliteration of the *daimoku*, but slight variations in pronunciation may occur according to the particular Nichiren Buddhist lineage. Sōka Gakkai, for example, following the practice of the Nichiren Shōshū sect with which it was formerly affiliated, elides the "u" of "Namu" in actual recitation.
- 2 "Introduction," George J. Tanabe, Jr. and Willa Jane Tanabe (eds.), *The Lotus Sūtra in Japanese Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), pp. 2-3.
- 3 Traditional East Asian Buddhist eschatology divides the process of Buddhism's decline into three successive periods following the Buddha's final *nirvāna*: the True Dharma age (*shōbō*), the Semblance Dharma age (*zōhō*), and the Final Dharma age (*mappō*). According to the chronology most widely accepted in Japan, the True and Semblance Dharmas ages last for a thousand years each, and the Final Dharma age, for ten thousand years and more (Jan Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline* [Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1991], pp. 65-118).
- 4 *Risshō ankoku ron, Shōwa teihon Nichiren Shōnin ibun* (hereafter STN), ed. Risshō Daigaku Nichiren Kyōgaku Kenkyūjo (Minobu-chō, Yamanashi Prefecture: Minobu-san Kuonji, 1952-1959; revised 1988) vol. 1, p. 226.
- 5 "Nyōsetsu shugyō shō," STN 1:733.
- 6 Canonical sources contrast *shakubuku* (literally, "to break and subdue") with *shōju* ("to embrace and accept"), a milder method of leading others gradually without criticizing their position. Zhiyi (\$38-597), the great Chinese Tiantai master, explicitly connected *shakubuku* with the *Lotus Sūtra*.