

CHAPTER NINE

THE LOTUS OF THE TRUE LAW: NICHIREN AND HIS FOLLOWERS

We have seen how Buddhism adopted different forms as it has come into contact with different religions and cultures. Buddhism underwent a further transformation in Japan, as a result of the teachings of Nichiren, a thirteenth century Buddhist prophet. Today Nichiren Buddhism is the most popular version of Buddhism in Japan, and we shall explore some of its forms in this chapter.

Although Nichiren Buddhism is so popular, it is often seriously neglected. This is no doubt because it is such a controversial movement, and many Buddhists from other traditions questions its credentials to be Buddhism at all. Yet the Nichiren Shoshu sect has about as large a UK membership as the Buddhist Society of Great Britain, which spans every Buddhist tradition.

Nichiren Buddhism took its rise in the twelfth century CE, and has undergone a major revival in the last century. It is best known in the form of the Soka Gakkai, its lay wing. Nichiren Buddhism has now spread to the West, and it is one of the most popular forms of Buddhism taken up by westerners. Nichiren Buddhists base their teachings on an ancient Mahayana Buddhist scripture called the Lotus Sutra.

First encounters.

I first encountered a Nichiren Buddhist on a train journey. A young woman sitting opposite me was deeply engrossed in a small red booklet entitled 'The Liturgy of Nichiren Shoshu', obviously vocalising the words she was reading under her breath. When she had finished I asked her about her faith. She had been chanting part of the Lotus Sutra the required number of times for the day, which she had now finished doing. In addition to reciting the scripture, she and her fellow-Buddhists regularly chanted the mantra, 'Nam myoho renge kyo', a very powerful form of words which is believed to sum up the whole of that scripture, and indeed all of Buddhism. The mantra is used to bring about solutions even to everyday problems which one encounters. A sick person can use the mantra to effect a cure; someone who is impoverished may chant to procure wealth; someone who lacks a partner of the opposite sex may chant in order to find one. In the case of the young woman opposite me, she often felt uneasy about making long journeys and had hoped that someone would speak to her as she travelled. She had chanted about this and regarded my approach as a favourable outcome of her chanting.

I subsequently attended a small local Nichiren Shoshu ceremony called a gongyo. ('Nichiren Shoshu' means 'Orthodox Nichiren Sect'.) The average meeting has around a dozen members, constituting a 'chapter'. A stranger might have been forgiven for wondering what the ceremony had to do with Buddhism. It was a lay group: there were no priests and no monks in saffron robes. There was no image of the Buddha, no 'taking refuge' in the Triple Gem, and no reference was made to the Precepts, the Noble Truths or the Eightfold Path. For the most part, the congregation chanted the words of the small red book in Japanese several times over, following this with the famous mantra, 'Nam myoho renge kyo'. Like most other Buddhist ceremonies, however, incense was used, and we were seated on meditation cushions.

In place of a buddha-image, the focus of attention was a small black cabinet in a corner (called a butsudon) containing a gohonzon. A gohonzon is a scroll which is inscribed by the High Priest and, in order to receive one, a follower must have been a member for approximately a year. It is difficult to obtain; it cannot be made by oneself and it is not permissible even to reproduce a picture of one. If the owner leaves the order or dies, the gohonzon must be returned to the Japanese headquarters. The owner of this gohonzon therefore felt very privileged to have been granted her own one.

The life of Nichiren.

The distinctive practices of the Nichiren sects can be traced to their founder, Nichiren, who was probably the most controversial figure in the history of Buddhism. His followers claim that he discovered the one true form of Buddhism amidst all the other erroneous forms, while his critics brand him as a fanatic and a demagogue: comparison has even been made between Nichiren and Adolf Hitler! Followers of Nichiren Shoshu call their founder 'Nichiren Daishonin' (dai means 'great' and shonin means 'sage'), and never refer to him baldly as 'Nichiren'.

Nichiren, the son of poor fisher-folk, was born in Japan in 1222. The name 'Nichiren' was an assumed name (nichi means 'sun', and ren lotus), his given name being Zennichimaro. At the age of 11, the young Zennichimaro was sent for his education to the temple called Seicho-ji, high on Mount Kiyosumi. This temple belonged to the Tendai sect, a form of Buddhism which has similarities to Zen, but which also emphasises the Lotus Sutra. Later, the Seicho-ji absorbed some of the ideas and practices of Pure Land Buddhism. There were so many different ideas going around in the name of Buddhism that Nichiren Daishonin found his study of religion very confusing. However, he adopted the practices of the Jodo school, a form of Pure Land Buddhism, and chanted the name of the Buddha Amitabha -- a practice which he bitterly regretted later in life.

When he was 16 he entered the priesthood and two years later he left the Seicho-ji. He resolved that he would study all the forms of Buddhism which existed and decide for himself which was correct. He spent 13 years travelling and studying under the most prestigious teachers in Japan. Having studied all the major schools of Buddhism, Nichiren Daishonin concluded that the Lotus Sutra was the only true doctrine for the age and that all other teachings were unsuitable for the era in which he lived. Not only did Nichiren Daishonin claim that the Lotus Sutra enshrined the truly authentic teachings of Buddhism; the preaching of the Lotus Sutra, he taught, was the real and only reason why Gautama the Buddha had appeared on earth.

Early one morning in 1253, Nichiren Daishonin, now 31 years old, climbed to the top of a hill at Kasagamori, overlooking the Pacific Ocean, and, as the sun rose, chanted in a loud voice, 'Nam myoho renge kyo'. Nichiren Daishonin had proclaimed that this was the correct way to practise Buddhism in the present age.

'Myoho renge kyo' is the Chinese title of the Lotus Sutra, which Nichiren Daishonin accepted, and 'nam' is a Sanskrit word meaning 'homage to'. The mantra is not only the title of the Lotus Sutra but, Nichiren Daishonin taught, encapsulates the entire essence of this scripture. As Nichiren Daishonin taught:

..included within the title, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, is the entire sutra consisting of all eight volumes, twenty-eight chapters and 69 384 characters without exception.¹

Nichiren Daishonin's conclusion that the Lotus Sutra enshrined the true essence of Buddhism met with a very unfavourable reception. The Zen Buddhists could not accept the Lotus Sutra, since they claimed that enlightenment was gained through a special transmission outside the scriptures. The Pure Land Buddhists said that the Lotus Sutra was too difficult to be taught and objected to the fact that it focussed on Gautama, the historical Buddha, rather than the Buddha Amitabha, who was their focus of devotion.

The Burning Building, The Magic City and the Treasure Tower

To find out why Nichiren Daishonin held that Lotus Sutra was of such paramount importance we must say something about what the Lotus Sutra teaches.

Many Buddhist scriptures have a 'story line' and the Lotus Sutra is no exception. It tells how the Buddha, during his life-time, preached to a large audience consisting of lay devotees, monks, nuns, arhats and bodhisattvas. There is even a tradition amongst some Nichiren Buddhists that, Nichiren Daishonin himself was one of the principal bodhisattvas who listened to the Buddha: although he was not born as a human until the twelfth century, he attended in a celestial form. (The Nichiren schools view the story as historically true, while modern Buddhist scholars hold that the Lotus Sutra is a fairly late text, written possibly around 250 C.E.) Asked to preach the Dharma, the Buddha requested his hearers to regard all his previous teachings as provisional only, for he had not given them the full and final truth: they should not be content to achieve nirvana but should go beyond it, to become full celestial buddhas. The sutra records that, on hearing this, five thousand of his audience walked out, disgusted with the teaching. We are to understand that they represented the 'Hinayana' Buddhists who believed that their teachings were already complete.

The Buddha stated that, contrary to popular belief, he did not gain enlightenment under the pipal tree during his earthly life: he had been enlightened many ages previously and only seemed to escape from samsara to nirvana as a skilful device for teaching humankind. In the past, said the Buddha, he only gave provisional teachings, since he taught at the level at which people were situated. Although on the surface this may seem deceptive, the Buddha uses two parables to suggest that this is not so.

The first parable is about a burning building. A wealthy housekeeper had a house with a thatched roof and only one door. This house suddenly became ablaze. The householder made for the door, but was unable to persuade his children to come since they were too absorbed in their games. In order to induce them to come, he employed a skilful device and offered them expensive animal-drawn carts to play with if they came. They followed him, and, once outside, demanded their presents. Being wealthy, the householder bought them the most expensive cart he could afford, far exceeding their expectations. The point of the parable is that the Buddha now offers the best 'vehicle', which (we are to understand) is the Mahayana form of Buddhism, claiming it to be far superior to the paths offered by the 'Hinayana'.

Another parable of the Lotus Sutra, although not stressed so much by Nichiren Buddhists, tells of a party of monks in a vast forest, looking for the great Isle of

Jewels. They had a guide who was well acquainted with the difficult forest and who was well able to escort them. However, the journey was long, and the monks began to tire and complain; they wanted to turn back because the journey seemed too difficult. Not wishing the monks to return, the guide conjured up a magic city in which they could spend the night, and then go on once they were rested. However, faced with the delights of the magic city, the monks thought that they have reached the end of their destination and did not want to proceed any further. Once they were suitably refreshed, however, the guide miraculously caused the magic city to disappear, so that the monks would resume their quest for the Isle of Jewels, which was more desirable by far.

The magic city represents the Lesser Vehicle ('Hinayana') and the Isle of Jewels the Greater (Mahayana). Just as it was not dishonest of the guide to offer the travellers the magic city before they arrived at the Isle of Jewels, so it was not wrong for the Buddha to offer the 'provisional' teachings which the 'Hinayana' enshrined. Yet it is important to recognise that there are greater treasures in store, just as the characters in the parables should have recognised that safety was more important than their games and that the Isle of Jewels was more desirable than the magic city.

As the Buddha continued his preaching a large stupa (monument) arose from the earth and became suspended in the sky. It was made of precious materials and decorated with flowers, arches, banners and garlands of jewels. From this treasure tower a loud voice was heard, saying, 'Excellent, excellent! You, Sakyamuni, the World-Honoured One, have expounded the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law... Thus is it, thus is it! What you, Sakyamuni, the World-Honoured One, have expounded is all true.'² Shakyamuni (Gautama) opened the middle door of the tower, where a second buddha, called Taho, was seen seated cross-legged on his throne. ('Taho' is the Japanese name; in Sanskrit he is called Prabhutaratna.) Taho asked Gautama to join him and Gautama entered and sat down at Taho's right hand.

The point of the vision is that it is possible for more than one buddha to exist in each age -- a distinctive Mahayana view. A buddha after death is not 'beyond recall' but continues to reveal himself to give teachings which are suitable for the level which humankind has reached.

Exile and Execution.

These are the highlights of the scripture which Nichiren Daishonin regarded as supreme. Nichiren Daishonin believed not only that the Lotus Sutra was true but that it had power to cope with all calamities and disasters. At the time of Nichiren Daishonin's preaching, Japan had been plagued by all kinds of misfortunes. There had been earthquakes, typhoons, floods, droughts, famines and epidemics. The Mongols, who had conquered Korea under Kublai Khan (himself a Vajrayana Buddhist), now threatened Japan. Nichiren Daishonin went to the cross-roads at Kamakura (the year was 1260) and preached that the condition of the country could only be improved by accepting the Lotus Sutra as the one true teaching for the age and that all other forms of Buddhism should be banished from Japan.

Because of his forthrightness, Nichiren Daishonin received much persecution during his life-time. He was exiled on two occasions, once to the Izu Peninsula and once to Sado Island off the north coast of Japan. He was once sentenced to execution,

and, it is said, only managed to escape by a remarkable miracle. Nichiren Daishonin, seated on the execution mat, uttered the mantra 'Nam myoho renge kyo', and tilted his head forward in anticipation. Suddenly a brilliant flash of light burst across the sky, blinding the executioner and causing total confusion. Some of the execution party fled, some prayed and others hid in terror. 'Here, why do you shrink from this miserable prisoner?' cried Nichiren Daishonin to the executioner, 'Come nearer! Come closer!' But the execution could not proceed.

Nichiren Daishonin's Transformation

Different Nichiren sects give different accounts of the status of Nichiren within their tradition. According to the Nichiren Shoshu, the remainder of Nichiren Daishonin's story runs as follows. The escape from execution (September 12, 1271) was a rebirth of Nichiren Daishonin, who became markedly transformed after this experience. According to his followers, his change was not to be explained by an adverse reaction to the trauma, or as a mere change of policy: Nichiren Daishonin was now ready to proclaim who he really was. He was the primal eternal Buddha, who had been in the universe for as long as it had existed and long before Gautama the Buddha lived on earth. He was as eternal as the sacred law of 'Nam myoho renge kyo'. Nichiren Daishonin's teaching until now had been a mere shadow of the complete truth.

As a buddha, Nichiren Daishonin himself was worthy of veneration. Nichiren Daishonin therefore devised an object of worship which would incorporate the mantra 'Nam myoho renge kyo', together with his own name, since both he and the law had existed from all eternity. This was the gohonzon, which is used today in the gongyo ceremony. As Nichiren Daishonin said:

I, Nichiren, have inscribed my life in ink, so believe in the gohonzon with your whole heart.³

These first gohonzon were personally inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin, and some still exist today. 'Gohonzon' means 'worthy object of devotion' and it represents the treasure tower which the Lotus Sutra describes. As well as the characters 'Nam myoho renge kyo' and Nichiren Daishonin's name, the gohonzon contains the names of Shakyamuni (Gautama), Taho and other figures mentioned in the Lotus Sutra, written in large ink characters. As the worshipper faces the gohonzon, he or she is looking at the treasure tower of Nam myoho renge kyo.

Three Secret Laws

The gohonzon was connected with 'Three Great Secret Laws' revealed by Nichiren Daishonin. The first is the invocation, 'Nam myoho renge kyo'; the second, the 'Dai-Gohonzon', and the third the place of worship, the construction of which Nichiren Daishonin entrusted to his followers.

We have already explained 'Nam myoho renge kyo'. We must now say something about the Dai-Gohonzon. 'Dai gohonzon' means 'supreme object of worship' and refers to the gohonzon personally inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin in gold characters upon black lacquer and carved by his disciple and successor, Nikko. It is made for all humankind, and on the right it reads, 'ichiembudai soyo', meaning

'bestowed upon the entire world'. Its function is to enable people to find peace and prosperity. The Dai-Gohonzon is now to be found at the Nichiren Shoshu Head Temple at Taiseki-ji, at the foot of Mount Fuji. Around two million pilgrims find their way there each year from Japan and elsewhere. Nichiren Daishonin also inscribed other gohonzon, which he gave to individual followers.

When Nichiren Daishonin died in 1282, his leadership passed to six main disciples, one of whom was Nikko. According to the Nichiren Shoshu, the other five misunderstood Nichiren Daishonin's teaching and, fearing persecution after his death, reverted to Tendai Buddhism. Whatever happened, there was a dispute which Nikko lost, and he felt that he had no option except to leave. He departed, taking with him the Dai-Gohonzon, Nichiren Daishonin's writings, and the ashes of his cremated body. In Taiseki-ji, he constructed the Dai-bo, which became the head Nichiren Temple. The Nichiren Shoshu school claims to be in direct lineage to Nikko and that it is the only sect to preach the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin, the only true teaching of the eternal law of Nam myoho renge kyo. Other Nichiren schools concede that Nikko took away a gohonzon inscribed by Nichiren, but claim that this was only one of several.

Enlightenment through Desire

Nichiren Shoshu holds that there is a principle by which earthly desires can be changed into enlightenment through chanting 'Nam myoho renge kyo'. As Nichiren said, 'Those who believe in the Lotus Sutra will gather fortune from ten thousand miles afar.'⁴

There are two sides to one's nature: bonno (evil desires) and enlightenment. But the two cannot be separated. Desire is not totally evil: it is inherent in human nature to have desires (for example, for food, sleep and sex). Nichiren Shoshu believes the Pure Land schools to be mistaken in supposing that there is a celestial paradise which is totally good, contrasting with the physical world which is unsatisfactory. Bonno and enlightenment are inseparable:

..if the minds of the people are impure, their land is also impure, but if their minds are pure, so is their land. There are not two lands, pure and impure in themselves. The difference lies solely in the good or evil of our minds.⁵

It is rather like the lotus flower and the muddy swamp. The swamp needs the lotus flowers if it is to have any semblance of beauty; but, equally, the lotus needs the swamp if it is to grow at all. The buddha, whom we should strive to become, must come out of the swamp of desire, yet be the beautiful bloom of the lotus. This is why the Nichiren Shoshu justifies chanting in order to acquire health, money, or friends. As their present international leader explained:

New members start chanting because they want to solve their problems or to fulfill their desires. However, if you read the Daishonin's writings more deeply, you will understand that this is not the ultimate reason for our faith.⁶

If men and women turned to the Lotus Sutra, it is said, they would see that the source of their suffering is their earthly desires and that this world is potentially a paradise. The practical values of worldly gain and material satisfaction are to be pursued just as much as goodness and beauty. This teaching implies that one should not renounce the physical world in the quest for a state of nirvana which is different;

nor should one seek a Pure Land which contrasts with an impure one. Nichiren Shoshu is world-affirming, and Buddhists of this school have great concern for preserving human life, for protecting the environment, and for furthering the cause of peace. Nirvana must not be found anywhere else but in this world.

The Eternal Cycle

All this seems very different from the teachings of Gautama the Buddha. Where, one might ask, are the Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path and the precepts? Did not the Buddha teach the elimination of unsatisfactoriness, whereas the Nichiren Shoshu teaches enlightenment through earthly desires and the sufferings which go with them?

Buddhists of the Nichiren Shoshu sect claim that the cycle of birth, old age, sickness and death (the last three being three of the Buddha's four 'encounters' which made him leave the palace) is enlightenment. It is to be remembered that, according to the Lotus Sutra, Gautama was already enlightened before his birth on earth. Even a buddha is not free from this cycle, and can expect to be reborn: chanting 'Nam myoho renge kyo' is a means of coming to terms with eternal rebirth, and not a means of escape from it. Members can chant about their next rebirth, and often do: interestingly enough, many often express a desire to have similar sufferings in their next existence, and not a rebirth in some earthly paradise.

For the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist, life simply goes on indefinitely, without any final goal. It is not expected that all will attain a nirvana from which there is no return, or that all living beings will inhabit a Pure Land from which there will be no 'falling away'. Even the goal of universal world peace, at which Nichiren Shoshu aims, is seen as a fragile state of affairs. Once universal peace is attained, humankind's basic vices will still be there -- ignorance, greed and hatred (the traditional Buddhist trio). However, humans can expand their capacity to deal with these, and this comes through chanting. One's behaviour is controlled by chanting the mantra, not by observing any set of monastic or lay precepts. Nichiren Buddhists explain that there are no precepts as such, for all the precepts that are needed are already contained in the mantra 'Nam myoho renge kyo'.

The Soka Gakkai

Nichiren Buddhism had a revival from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, and emerged afresh in various forms. During the period 1930-1945, some Nichiren sects were fervently nationalistic and some even wanted all the countries of the East to unite under the control of Japan. Nichiren Shoshu resisted the pressures of militaristic government, with the result that the lay society (Soka Gakkai) was banned and its leaders imprisoned. However, the experiences of Hiroshima and Nagasaki caused extreme nationalism to give place to an emphasis on peace and brotherhood.

Of all the various forms of Nichiren Buddhism the most prominent and fastest growing is the Soka Gakkai. It is vigorous -- some have said aggressive -- and is now a world-wide organisation. Members of the Soka Gakkai often draw attention to its growth between 1955 and 1968, when membership mushroomed from 348,160 to 15,729,63— an expansion by a multiple of 45! The Komeito ('clean politics') Party is the political organisation which is comprised of Nichiren Shoshu members. It has heavily influenced trade unions and has gained many political victories.

The Soka Gakkai was founded in 1930 and was dedicated to educational research and the extension of the Nichiren Shoshu. Its leaders have great evangelical zeal and advocate the practice of shakubuku. This means, literally, 'break and subdue': the resistance of a non-adherent is to be broken down, not by physical force, but by forceful debate. Buddhists of this sect insist that shakubuku is to be understood more in the sense of encouraging or inviting rather than relentless browbeating. In non-Buddhist countries their methods of spreading the message is called shoju, which means 'planting' or 'instilling'. By these means, Nichiren Shoshu has spread abroad, including Great Britain and the USA.

Other Nichiren Sects

A number of smaller groups have derived their teachings and practices from Nichiren. Members of the Nichiren Shoshu view the other Nichiren groups as having fallen away from the true teachings of Nichiren Daishonin and, specifically, as having downgraded Nichiren Daishonin's true status. For the Nichiren Shoshu, Nichiren Daishonin is the eternally existent Buddha (the 'adi-Buddha'), while the other schools, they say, view him as no more than a bodhisattva.

This accusation is partly true: other Nichiren schools do speak of the 'bodhisattva Nichiren'. However, the question of whether Nichiren Daishonin is the eternal Buddha or a bodhisattva does not seem as important to them as it does to the Nichiren Shoshu, and they are not so inclined to regard their different characteristics as the result of any dispute about doctrines. When I recently spoke to a monk of the Nipponzon Myohoji sect (a Nichiren order), he swiftly dismissed my questions about Nichiren as unimportant and refused to give an answer; what was important to him was the goal of world peace which the order was promoting.

Reiyukai

It is appropriate to say something about these other Nichiren sects. The Reiyukai emerged from within the Nichiren tradition in 1919, and, like Nichiren Shoshu, followers lay great emphasis on the Lotus Sutra. They use their own particular abridged version, called the 'Blue Sutra': this was compiled by their founder, Kakutaro Kubo (1892-1944), and consists of short passages from the Lotus Sutra together with a few other Buddhist scriptures.

Reiyukai's western literature invites the seeker to a spiritual journey called 'inward self-development', a quest to find one's true self. To discover the inner self, we must realise that we are the products of our past, and in particular the attitudes, beliefs and actions of our ancestors. This is why it is considered important to establish links with our ancestors: establishing such links is reckoned to help us see their effects on our everyday lives and on humankind as a whole. Ancestor remembrance also serves to establish links with the rest of humanity: since each child has two parents, a link with eight generations of ancestors is effectively a link with at least 64 individuals and no doubt a lot more; a link with 20 generations creates a link with over 1 480 000 other individuals.

To remember someone we normally need some token of remembrance, such as a photograph, some keepsake, or even some piece of information about that person. Since it is not always possible to have such reminders, Reiyukai members focus their

devotion on a paper scroll on a wooden stand: this is called a sokaimyo, which is inscribed with ink characters representing the names of their ancestors.

Ancestor remembrance is not merely an attempt to look back into the past. It enables followers of Reiyukai to understand more fully how they fit into the 'flow' of the rest of humanity, and how they are to 'open their destiny', via their ancestors, to the future. The name 'Reiyukai' means 'Spiritual Friendship Society', and members stress the oneness of humankind through ancestor remembrance.

Others are to be encouraged in the right direction too, and, like the Nichiren Shoshu, Reiyukai Buddhists seek to increase their numbers. They prefer to call their winning of converts *michibiki* ('encouragement') rather than the more aggressive-sounding *shakubuku*. Membership, they explain, does not demand giving up one's current religion, and they have no objection to a member claiming also to be a mainstream Christian. (Mainstream Christians, on the other hand, may not be so willing for Christianity to be combined with Reiyukai practices.) Membership involves paying a modest monthly subscription (Reiyukai do not accept donations) and reciting the Blue Sutra daily.

Rissho-Kosei-kai

In 1938, a break-away group emerged from the Reiyukai, led by two of its members, Niwano Nikkyo (b 1906), a Tokyo businessman, and Naganuma Myoko (1899-1957), a housewife. Niwano's daughter and Naganuma were both believed to have been cured of illnesses as a result of spiritual healing performed by the Reiyukai and this prompted them to become actively involved in the movement. However, a Reiyukai leader publicly denounced Niwano for practising divination, and Niwano promptly left, accompanied by Naganuma and around thirty others. They formed a separate group which became known as the *Rissho-Kosei-kai* (meaning 'Society for Establishing Righteousness and Friendly Relations').

At their headquarters in Tokyo the *Rissho-Kosei-kai* hold a daily morning service which regularly attracts some 10 000 men and women. This is followed by a *hoza*, a group counselling session, at which the leader teaches and answers questions. Usually discussion focusses on practical issues such as health, bringing up children, improving one's personal relationships or how to find happiness. The headquarters also receives around 25 000 daily visitors, with the result that *Rissho-Kosei-kai* members have had to organise their own 'traffic police' at the entrance, equipped with arm-bands, flags and whistles to ensure that visitors are able to move around the premises in an orderly fashion.

The Reiyukai and the *Rissho-Kosei-kai* have few differences in their teachings, but differ in their emphases. The *Rissho-Kosei-kai* places more emphasis on the *sokaimyo* (inscription bearing ancestors' names) than on Gautama the Buddha. They perhaps incorporate more Shinto ancestor veneration than the Reiyukai, seeking to provide spiritual benefits for ancestors, rather than (as the Reiyukai do) allow ancestor remembrance to benefit those who live in the present.

From 1959 onwards the *Rissho-Kosei-kai* became actively involved politically and have emphasised social welfare and overseas aid, achieving much by way of famine relief in Africa, particularly. There are currently some two million members in Japan, and the high esteem with which this religious movement is held is reflected

in the fact that their president was invited to attend the Second Vatican Council in 1965 as a non-Christian observer.

Nipponzan Myohoji

One further group which is worthy of comment is the Nipponzan Myohoji (sometimes called Nichihonzon Myohoji), founded by Nichidatsu Fujii (died 1985). A follower of Nichiren, Nichidatsu Fujii received ordination in 1903, at the age of 19, and began to preach publicly after the First World War. In 1924 he established his own school of Nichiren, called Nipponzon Myohoji and travelled widely, becoming a close acquaintance of Mahatma Gandhi when in India. During the Second World War he prayed and fasted for peace.

The holocaust of Hiroshima and Nagasaki intensified Nichidatsu Fujii's desire for peace, and he made a world-wide pilgrimage, establishing some eighty peace pagodas (or stupas). The aim was to create lasting peace through Buddhism, and thus the fundamental Buddhist principle of respect for life was sent out from the land of the first victims of nuclear warfare.

Some pagodas have been constructed for purely ornamental purposes, such as the famous one in Kew Gardens, London (which was not in fact constructed by Buddhists at all). However, when stupas were constructed for religious reasons they were originally containers of sacred relics, usually the remains of the dead. More recently, many have come to symbolise peace, harmony and compassion. Devotees will walk around the pagoda, symbolising the journey of spiritual advancement which they are attempting to make.

Some of the Nipponzan Myohoji pagodas are particularly worthy of mention. The year 1969 saw the completion of a peace pagoda at Rajgir, on the top of Mount Ratnagiri, the very spot on which Taho in his treasure tower is believed to have descended upon Gautama and his large assembly of hearers. Mount Ratnagiri stands high, overlooking Vulture's Peak, a favourite platform used by the Buddha to proclaim the Dharma. Until recently, the site was almost inaccessible, but the Nipponzan Myohoji Order ensured that a road was built, and it is now possible to reach the site by means of a 'tonga' -- a horse and trap -- which is the usual means of transport in this part of India. Visitors who do not wish to undertake a two-kilometer climb in the intense heat can avail themselves of a cable-car to make an effortless ascent.

Nichidatsu Fujii was responsible for the construction of two pagodas in Great Britain, one at Milton Keynes (completed in 1980) and another in Battersea Park, London. From 1951 the area of park-land had been used as a pleasure garden and fun-fair. The latter closed in 1974, following a serious roller-coaster accident, and a new purpose for the grounds had to be decided. Since the Greater London Council had designated 1983 as 'Peace Year', the Council welcomed the suggestion that the pagoda be constructed.

The Battersea pagoda is the most elaborate one ever erected by the Nipponzan Myohoji. The construction is of reinforced concrete, but Japanese craftsmen used their skills at sculpture, employing many oriental tools which were unfamiliar to British builders. Sacred relics of the Buddha were sent from Buddhists in Kathmandu, Burma, Sri Lanka and Japan, and were reverently placed inside the foundations.

At the official opening ceremony on 14 May 1985, Buddhists from all traditions were present, as well as representatives for most of the world's major traditions. Cardinal Hume spoke, representing the Roman Catholic Church and Bishop Trevor Huddleston read a message from the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Nichidatsu Fujii had expected that the London pagoda would be the last major work in his life for the cause of Buddhism and world peace. He did not live to see the inaugural ceremony, having died in Atami, Japan, on January 9 of that year. He was then 100 years old.

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