

SIGNIFICANT DATE: APRIL 28, 1253
THE FOUNDING OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN'S BUDDHISM
BY GEOFF ROHDE
SACRAMENTO, CALIF.

On April 28, 1253, Nichiren Daishonin declared the founding of his Buddhism at Seicho-ji temple by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo for the first time.”

That’s about all we read in our reference books. The Dai-shonin’s letters provide few details regarding his many years of determined research, travel, prayer and effort that made this history-changing event possible.

Rest assured that Rencho did not wake up one morning and abruptly decide that chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo was a great idea. Yet the simplicity and “transparency” (what you see is what you get) of our practice leads many to underestimate its profundity and power. When I reflect on the “story behind the story,” I am even more inspired by, and grateful for, the Daishonin’s efforts.

Nichiren Daishonin began his education at Seicho-ji temple with motives not typical of 12-year-olds in any culture: “Since childhood, I, Nichiren have never prayed for the secular things of this life but have single-mindedly sought to become a Buddha” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 839). In response to his prayers to become the wisest person in Japan, he experienced a significant transformation sometime before his 16th birthday. He wrote that Bodhisattva Kokuzo bestowed upon him a “jewel of wisdom as bright as the morning star.” His profound insight into the very essence of life allowed him to discern the relative worth of the established Buddhist sects, as well as the new Zen and Pure Land schools.

It’s one thing to be enlightened to the very essence of life. It is quite another to bring out that rarified condition in others successfully. To discover both literal and theoretical proof of his enlightenment, to discover the most effective way to explain it to others, and most importantly, to devise a practice that would enable any and all persons to discover the Buddha nature within, the Daishonin began the next phase of his education, one that would last another 15 years.

I was struck by the “normality” of the ages at which significant changes occurred in his early life. They’re not much different than mine. Specifically, he left Seicho-ji “high school” at 18. So did I. He spent four “college” years in Kamakura. Mine were in Wisconsin. He began his “graduate” training when he was 21. I was 21. He spent the next 11 years studying at the many temples around Kyoto and Osaka. Eleven years is a long time...and a short, seven-syllable mantra is all he came up with? Think differently, please! Think how terribly difficult, frustrating and exasperating it must have been to pore over so many mutually contradictory sutras only to find that none of them described the truth of his enlightenment. Perhaps worse, none of them spelled out a practice powerful enough to transform the most vile heart, yet “user friendly” enough for any person to carry out. I feel tremendous awe when I picture the Daishonin pushing himself day and night for 11 long years, taxing every cell in his brain, and constantly refreshing his spirits by reminding himself of his pledge to enable all people to attain enlightenment.

A few months ago I read, “If lay believers and their teacher pray with differing minds, their prayers will be as futile as trying to kindle fire on water” (WND, 795).

Since then, I’ve been frequently asking myself, “How would Nichiren be chanting if he were in my situation?” What a sobering, change-inducing question! Anger and frustration

melt away. Forbearance and enthusiasm take their place. Maybe this is what it means to “have faith” in the power of prayer and practice, to have total confidence that when the Buddha nature manifests itself from within, it will obtain protection from without. Maybe this is the happy frame of mind Nichiren wanted each of us to discover when he chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo for the first time and when he wrote years later, “Regard both suffering and joy as facts of life and continue chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, no matter what happens. How could this be anything other than the boundless joy of the Law?” (WND, 681).