

An In-Depth Analysis of *Hōbō*: The Doctrine of Slander of the Law in the Thought of Nichiren Daishonin

I. Introduction: The Concept of *Hōbō* as the Central Imperative of Nichiren's Doctrine

Preamble: The Historical and Doctrinal Context

Nichiren Daishonin (1222–1282) stands as a monumental and profoundly controversial figure in the history of Japanese Buddhism.¹ His emergence during the turbulent Kamakura period (1185–1333) was a direct response to a society grappling with immense social, political, and spiritual upheaval.³ This era witnessed the rise of the samurai class and the establishment of a new feudal military government, which relegated the imperial court to a ceremonial role.⁴ Concurrently, Japan was plagued by a succession of natural disasters, epidemics, and internal strife, culminating in the grave threat of Mongol invasions.⁵ This environment fostered a widespread sense of pessimism and apocalyptic foreboding, a sentiment rooted in the Buddhist concept of the Latter Day of the Law (

mappō).⁷

In this climate of anxiety and spiritual confusion, Nichiren embarked on a lifelong quest to identify the single, authentic teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha that could lead all people to salvation.¹ His exhaustive study of the major Buddhist schools of his day, including Tendai, Amidism (Pure Land), and Zen, led him to a singular conviction.¹ He concluded that all teachings preached before the Lotus Sutra were merely "accommodated to the audience's understanding" (

zuita'i), while the Lotus Sutra alone represented a "direct expression of the Buddha's own intent" (*zuiji'i*) and possessed the power to effect liberation in the degenerate age of *mappō*.⁹

The central tenet that defined Nichiren's mission and drove his confrontations with both religious and secular authorities was the doctrine of "slander of the Law," or *hōbō* (謗法).² This was not a peripheral belief but a foundational imperative that he saw himself as fulfilling at the cost of his own life.² For Nichiren, a direct link existed between the calamities afflicting the nation and the widespread prevalence of

hōbō.⁸ His uncompromising stance was that to bring about peace in the land, it was essential to "restrain those who slander the Law and respect the followers of the correct way".¹⁴

Defining *Hōbō*: A Multi-Faceted Offense

The term *hōbō* is formally defined as the act of denying, opposing, disparaging, or vilifying the correct Buddhist teaching.¹⁶ Literally, it combines the character

hō (法), meaning the Dharma or the Law, with *bō* (謗), meaning to slander or defame.¹⁶ The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai Chih-che provided a simple yet profound interpretation, stating that "to slander" means to turn against" the Law.¹⁸

However, for Nichiren, this was not merely an external or verbal offense. He asserted that the act of slandering the Lotus Sutra was, at its deepest level, a slander of the Mystic Law inherent within one's own life.¹⁵ Such an act, whether through thought, word, or deed, leads to the "degradation of human life itself" and the denial of its inherent dignity.¹⁵ This profound spiritual betrayal results in the immediate destruction of the "seeds for becoming a Buddha in this world".¹⁶ The Lotus Sutra warns that a person who fails to have faith in it "immediately will destroy all the seeds for becoming a Buddha in this world" and will fall into the hell of incessant suffering after death.¹⁵

This dual definition of *hōbō*—as both an external act of turning against the teaching and an internal state of denying one's own inherent dignity—is central to Nichiren's thought. It emphasizes a key Mahayana Buddhist principle that Nichiren brought to the forefront: that evil is not merely an external force to be exorcized, as was often the practice in medieval Japanese demonology.¹⁹ Rather, evil is fundamentally rooted in the human mind and the denial of one's own innate Buddha nature.¹⁵ The act of slander is thus a profound act of self-harm, a psychological and spiritual perversion that cuts off the practitioner from their own latent potential for enlightenment. Nichiren's fierce polemics against what he saw as "external" slander were therefore a direct attempt to awaken people to the interior dignity they were

unknowingly betraying. His struggle was an unyielding effort to prevent a person from committing the ultimate act of self-betrayal.

II. The Doctrinal and Psychological Dimensions of Slander

The Fourteen Slanders (*Jūshi-hōbō*): The Spectrum of Perverse Views

To provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the nuances of *hōbō*, Nichiren articulated a canonical list known as the "Fourteen Slanders" (*Jūshi-hōbō* or *Jūshi-hibō*). This list, enumerated by the Chinese scholar Miao-lo (711–782) and based on the "Simile and Parable" (third) chapter of the Lotus Sutra, details fourteen offenses against the Law and its practitioners.²¹ The list reveals that

hōbō is not a singular, dramatic transgression but a spectrum of attitudes and actions, ranging from subtle internal states to overt expressions of animosity.²⁴

The fourteen slanders can be broadly categorized as follows:

- **Internal Attitudes:** This group represents the subtle, often unexamined, states of mind that do not require an outward act of condemnation to constitute slander. They are the seeds of delusion and suffering. Examples include arrogance (*when one makes light of Buddhism*)²², negligence (*when one neglects to do the Buddhist practice out of laziness*)²², egotistical judgment (*when one interprets Buddhism through one's own distorted viewpoint*)²², shallow understanding, and a lack of seeking spirit.²¹
- **External Actions:** These are the manifest expressions of the internal attitudes. They include not believing, aversion, deluded doubt, vilification, contempt, hatred, jealousy, and bearing grudges.²¹

A closer look at this framework reveals a clear causal progression. As Nichiren stated, "The fourteen slanders will arise from the slander of not believing".²² This suggests a psychological chain of corruption that begins with an internal failing and then manifests externally. A person who lacks a seeking spirit or possesses a shallow understanding may, in turn, harbor doubts, which can then give rise to public vilification, hatred, and contempt for fellow practitioners.

This highlights the insidious nature of

hōbō as a gradual corruption of the mind, rather than a single, sudden act.²² For Nichiren, this was a grave danger, as a practitioner may be unknowingly committing a serious offense through a distortion of their own perspective.

Category	Slander Name	Description	Source
Internal Attitudes	1. Arrogance	Making light of Buddhism, placing excessive confidence in oneself.	21
	2. Negligence	Neglecting Buddhist practice out of laziness.	21
	3. Wrong Views of the Self	Interpreting Buddhism through an egotistical or distorted viewpoint.	21
	4. Shallow Understanding	Making judgments about Buddhism with a superficial grasp of its teachings.	21
	5. Attachment to Earthly Desires	Taking advantage of Buddhism or lacking yearning for it due to worldly desires.	21
	6. Lack of Seeking Spirit	Not seeking to understand the deep Buddhist doctrines.	21

External Expressions	7. Not Believing	Disbelief in the correct teaching.	21
	8. Aversion	Feeling repugnance toward Buddhism or insulting believers.	21
	9. Harboring Doubts	Having delusions or doubts about Buddhism.	21
	10. Slandering/Vilifying	Criticizing or reviling the correct teachings or its practitioners.	21
	11. Despising	Having contempt for the teachings or those who practice them.	21
	12. Hating	Detesting and opposing the teachings or practitioners.	21
	13. Envy	Being jealous of the prosperity of practitioners.	21
	14. Bearing Grudges	Harboring resentment or enmity.	21

Table 1: The Fourteen Slanders and Their Corresponding Attitudes

The Psychological Depth of the Offense

Nichiren's analysis of *hōbō* delves into its profound psychological and spiritual consequences. He repeatedly warned, "If you doubt or slander even in the slightest, you will fall into the hell of incessant suffering".¹⁵ This warning is supported by powerful analogies that illustrate the fragility of one's spiritual foundation when compromised by slander.¹⁵ For instance, he compared slander to "bilge water" in the "ship of your life" or an "ant hole" in the "embankments of your faith".¹⁵ Just as a small opening can compromise an entire structure, a minor act of doubt or criticism can lead to a complete spiritual shipwreck, where all accumulated benefits disappear instantly.²⁷

This perspective highlights that the most significant spiritual battle is not against external demons but against the internal forces of delusion.²⁸ The subtle, internal slanders are a gradual corruption of the self rather than a sudden, overt transgression. This is why Nichiren emphasized that the most effective way to prevent grave external offenses is to address the "minor" slanders of the mind first.¹⁵ By examining one's own internal attitudes—such as arrogance, jealousy, and doubt—a practitioner can identify the origins of unhappiness and the root causes of spiritual stagnation.²⁵ This focus on the inner life makes the doctrine of

hōbō not merely a tool for criticizing others but a precise psychological and ethical framework for self-reflection and personal transformation.

III. The Historical Crucible: Slander in Kamakura Period Japan

The Turbulent Age of *Mappō* and the Rise of New Buddhism

The Kamakura period was an era of profound transformation in Japan.⁴ The rise of the warrior class and the establishment of the shogunate led to a fundamental shift in political power, from the imperial court in Kyoto to the military government in Kamakura.⁴ This political upheaval, coupled with the devastation of natural disasters and the threat of foreign invasion, created a palpable sense of anxiety and foreboding among the populace.⁵ Many people, including Nichiren, interpreted these events as clear signs of the "degenerate age of the Latter Day of the Law" (

mappō), a time when the Buddha's teachings were believed to be losing their efficacy.⁷

This climate of despair fueled the emergence of new Buddhist schools that sought to make the path to salvation more accessible to the common person.³ Pure Land Buddhism (Jōdo), founded by Hōnen, and its offshoot, True Pure Land (Jōdo Shinshū) by Shinran, gained widespread popularity by emphasizing simple devotion to Amida Buddha and recitation of the

nenbutsu.⁴ Similarly, Zen Buddhism, introduced by figures like Eisai and Dōgen, flourished, particularly among the samurai class, by focusing on meditation and self-reliance.⁴

These new schools, with their tailored and simplified approaches, gained immense traction by addressing the concerns of the masses.³ However, to Nichiren, they represented a grave spiritual danger.¹⁰ He viewed these teachings, while once valid "expedient means," as having lost their power in the current age and thus acting as a detriment to the nation.⁷

Nichiren's Polemical Refutation (*Shika Kakugen*)

Nichiren's response to this religious landscape was a fierce and uncompromising polemic. He systematically criticized what he saw as the four major types of slander committed by the established Buddhist schools of his day, a refutation known as the "Four Criticisms" (*Shika Kakugen*).³⁴ He argued that in the degenerate age, only the Lotus Sutra remained "profound and powerful enough to lead all men and women to liberation".¹¹

The following table outlines Nichiren's specific criticisms:

Target Sect	Core Doctrine	Nichiren's Criticism	Theological Justification
Pure Land (Nenbutsu)	Reliance on "Other-Power" (<i>tariki</i>) of Amida Buddha for rebirth in the Pure Land. Chanting the <i>nenbutsu</i> . ³³	Devalues the dignity of life and discourages people from embracing the Lotus Sutra. ¹⁰	The Lotus Sutra teaches that all beings possess the potential for Buddhahood in their present form, a concept of "self-power" (<i>jiriki</i>) that Pure Land

			rejects in favor of an external, other-worldly salvation. ³²
Zen	The attainment of enlightenment through meditation and direct insight, without reliance on scriptures. ⁷	A provisional teaching "unsuited to the age" that leads to arrogance and a rejection of the Buddha's own words. ³⁴	He asserted that dismissing the sutras in favor of "spontaneous insights" was a form of slander, as it undervalued the very teachings that contain the ultimate truth of the Buddha's enlightenment. ³⁴
Esoteric (Shingon/Tendai)	Secret, mystical teachings passed from teacher to student, using rituals and symbolic gestures. ²⁹	The esoteric schools had come to adopt an eclectic mix of practices, thereby corrupting the purity of the Lotus Sutra's teaching. ³²	While Nichiren was originally trained in the Tendai school, he argued it had become "corrupted by the introduction and acceptance of other doctrines". ¹ He saw the government's sponsorship of esoteric rites as a misguided attempt to secure peace that was, in reality, a betrayal of the true Dharma. ³²
Ritsu	The strict observance of monastic precepts as the primary path to spiritual progress. ³⁴	This focus on rules and forms was criticized as a superficial and ultimately futile effort in an age	Nichiren believed that the strict adherence to precepts was a distraction from the fundamental

		when the efficacy of such practices had diminished. ³⁴	practice of upholding the Lotus Sutra, the single teaching that could lead to enlightenment in the current age. ³⁷
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Table 2: Nichiren's Four Criticisms and Doctrinal Justifications

The Justification for a Radical Stance

Nichiren's condemnation of other Buddhist teachings was not born of simple intolerance. He considered his actions a profound expression of compassion.¹⁵ He believed that to see someone slandering the Law and to "disregard him, failing to reproach him... then that priest is betraying Buddhism".¹⁵ Citing the Nirvana Sutra, he argued that a priest who takes a slanderer to task is a true disciple of the Buddha.¹⁵ For Nichiren, refuting slander was a debt owed to the Buddha himself and a form of Buddhist practice in its own right, one he was willing to discharge even at the cost of his life.²

This perspective extended beyond a mere spiritual debate. In his seminal treatise, *Risshō Ankoku Ron* ("On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land"), Nichiren directly linked the nation's calamities—earthquakes, epidemics, and the threat of invasion—to the widespread practice of what he deemed "false Buddhist teachings".⁸ He argued that Japan's social and political turmoil was a direct reflection of the degenerate state of the people's minds, which had turned away from the true Dharma.⁷

By framing *hōbō* as the root cause of the nation's suffering, Nichiren transformed a theological doctrine into a radical socio-political ideology.³⁸ He was not merely a spiritual leader but a social critic who challenged the entire feudal power structure by asserting that true societal stability could only be achieved through a fundamental change in people's hearts and minds.⁸ His unyielding stance on this matter led directly to his exile and persecution, as it was a direct challenge to the government's patronage of other religious schools.¹ This shows how Nichiren's ideal of actualizing the Buddha land in this world was inextricably linked to social and political activism, a concept that continues to inspire modern forms of Buddhist practice.¹⁰

IV. Karmic Retribution and Soteriological Transformation

The Gravity of Karmic Consequences

The doctrine of *hōbō* is inseparable from the concept of karmic retribution. Nichiren's writings, drawing on the Lotus Sutra, detail the severe consequences for those who commit this offense. He warned that those who slander the Law "immediately destroy the seeds for becoming a Buddha" and "fall into the hell of incessant suffering" after death.² The Lotus Sutra even goes so far as to describe the horrific torment that awaits these individuals, noting that "they will fulfill one kalpa" in the Avīchi Hell, with no respite.²

In the human realm, the consequences are no less severe. Nichiren stated that those reborn in the human world after committing slander will suffer from poverty, low status, and afflictions such as "white leprosy".¹³ He drew a powerful distinction between the retribution for slander and that of the five cardinal sins (killing one's parents, an arhat, etc.).¹³ The five cardinal sins are like "sunstroke," with effects that appear suddenly.¹³ Slander, on the other hand, is like "white leprosy," which "seems minor at first but bit by bit becomes very serious indeed".¹³ This analogy underscores the insidious and cumulative nature of slander, highlighting how a seemingly small act of animosity or doubt can fester over time and lead to profound suffering. Nichiren himself, upon reflecting on this karmic principle, concluded that he must have been guilty of slander in his previous existences to have been born in a country that so widely committed the offense.¹³

The Antidote: Changing Poison into Medicine

Despite the severity of the karmic retribution for *hōbō*, Nichiren's teachings are not a philosophy of fatalism. The core of his doctrine is the revolutionary principle of "changing karma into mission" and "changing poison into medicine".⁴¹ He taught that a practitioner is not bound by the causes of the past, but can create a powerful new cause in the present that will transform their future.⁴¹ This perspective reframes hardships and suffering, even those resulting from past slander, not as inevitable punishments but as a profound opportunity for personal growth and human revolution.²⁰ For a practitioner of Nichiren Buddhism, a defeat lies

not in encountering difficulties but in failing to challenge them.⁴²

The primary means for this transformation is the chanting of *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*, which Nichiren designated as the "Buddhism of true cause".³⁶ By embracing this fundamental law, a practitioner can activate their innate Buddhahood, the "true aspect of reality" that exists within them.²⁰ The Lotus Sutra teaches that "all people contain within themselves innate buddha-ness" and are capable of attaining enlightenment in this very lifetime.³⁶ Chanting is presented as the direct path to this awakening, allowing a person to polish their life "like a tarnished mirror" so that it may reflect the true nature of reality.³⁶

This view of karma provides a philosophy of absolute hope.⁴³ The paradox is that the very act of "rebuking slander" ²⁷—a direct confrontation with external and internal negativity—becomes the primary means of purifying one's own karma from past offenses.⁴⁰ This creates a self-reinforcing process where the practice of refutation and internal self-reflection is the direct path to personal enlightenment. Nichiren's teachings reveal that the suffering one endures due to past negative causes can be transformed into the very impetus for one's human revolution and the fulfillment of one's unique mission.²⁰

V. The Legacy of *Hōbō* in Contemporary Nichiren Buddhism

Sectarian Interpretations and Fragmentation

Nichiren's doctrine of *hōbō*, once a unifying force in his polemical mission, has contributed to the fragmentation of his legacy into various schools, each with its own interpretation.³² The two largest branches, along with the more traditional Nichiren Shu, demonstrate how a single, foundational teaching can be understood and applied in distinct ways.

School/Organization	Definition of <i>Hōbō</i>	Stance on Other Religions/Interfaith Dialogue	Role of Leadership/Community

Nichiren Shoshu	Strict, exclusivist interpretation of slander, including any support for other religions or deviation from its own dogma. ²⁵	Vehemently rejects all other religions as "evil and heretical". ⁴⁶ Religious interfaith practices are seen as a form of slander. ⁴⁶	The lineage of the priesthood, particularly the High Priest, is considered the sole repository of the "True Law." The priesthood is seen as perpetuating and upholding the Dharma. ⁴⁶
Soka Gakkai International (SGI)	Adheres to Nichiren's core teachings but also interprets slander to include actions that cause disunity within the Buddhist Order, betray the spirit of <i>kosen-rufu</i> (worldwide propagation of the Law), or otherwise denigrate the inherent dignity of life. ³⁹	Promotes "peace, culture, and education" and engages in interfaith dialogue. The focus is on universal human dignity. ³⁹	Emphasizes the "oneness of mentor and disciple" and the importance of lay leadership in achieving <i>kosen-rufu</i> . ³⁹ This model led to its schism with the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood. ⁴⁷
Nichiren Shu	The term is used to refer to any action that works against the "correct teachings of the Buddha" or denies the discovery of truth, but it warns against using it to "dominate others based on ego, arrogance, and a strong sense of self-righteousness"	Generally more traditional and accommodating. Views Nichiren as a Bodhisattva rather than the True Buddha. ³²	Priesthood plays a more central role, and the school maintains a more traditional view of monastic discipline and practice. ³⁷

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Table 3: Modern Interpretations of Hōbō by Prominent Schools

Scholarly and Critical Perspectives

Nichiren's uncompromising stance and his exclusive claims regarding the Lotus Sutra have subjected him to modern academic criticism, with some scholars labeling him as "intolerant".² However, a nuanced academic analysis suggests that his polemics must be understood within their historical and rhetorical context.³⁴ Scholars argue that Nichiren was not advocating for a complete break from traditional Buddhism or rejecting its fundamental principles.³⁷ Instead, his criticisms were aimed at what he saw as the misapplication of these teachings in an age when their efficacy had waned.³⁷

A deeper examination reveals that Nichiren was not criticizing the sutras themselves, but rather the commentaries and interpretations that he viewed as fallacious.³⁸ The debate over the authenticity of some of his writings further complicates a full scholarly understanding of his views.⁴⁸ The existence of writings with disputed authorship has led to questions about whether certain exclusivist ideas, such as the unification of politics and religion, are genuinely from Nichiren or were attributed to him posthumously.⁴⁸

The Internalization of Slander in Modern Practice

A significant evolution of the *hōbō* doctrine can be observed in contemporary Nichiren Buddhism. While Nichiren's original polemics were directed at institutional and political structures, modern applications have largely shifted to an inward-focused, psychological principle for personal development.²⁴ In this context, *hōbō* is understood to include internal conflicts and "ill feelings" among practitioners, such as hatred, jealousy, and bearing grudges.²⁴

This reinterpretation is a crucial adaptation of Nichiren's teaching. The primary struggle is no longer against a monolithic state religion but against the subtle corruptions of the ego that can arise within a lay-based community.²⁴ The modern application of the doctrine provides concrete guidance for overcoming these feelings through a process of self-reflection, a focus

on compassion, and the vigorous chanting of

Daimoku to elevate one's life condition.²⁴ This process allows the practitioner to "change poison into medicine," transforming negative emotions into a source of personal growth and fulfillment.²⁴

VI. Conclusion: The Enduring and Evolving Significance of Nichiren's Warning

The doctrine of *hōbō*, or slander of the Law, is a complex and central tenet of Nichiren Buddhism. It is simultaneously a theological, historical, karmic, and psychological concept. The evidence suggests that Nichiren's uncompromising stance was born of a profound conviction that a nation's well-being was directly linked to the spiritual health of its people. He saw the proliferation of what he considered provisional teachings as a grave betrayal of the Buddha's true intent and a direct path to national suffering.⁸ His polemics, while harsh, were rooted in a deep sense of responsibility and were viewed by him as an act of ultimate compassion to awaken others to their own inherent dignity.¹⁵

The report's analysis of the Fourteen Slanders, the historical context of Kamakura Japan, and the soteriological principle of changing karma reveals a dynamic and revolutionary philosophy. The paradox is that the very act of standing firm against slander—whether external or internal—is the primary means of purifying one's own life. The seemingly negative act of refutation becomes the path to personal enlightenment and the creation of absolute happiness.⁴²

While Nichiren's original doctrine was a polemical tool aimed at the institutional and political landscape of his time, its enduring significance lies in its capacity for evolution. The fact that modern schools apply this same doctrine to the internal conflicts of the ego and the fostering of disunity among believers demonstrates a profound adaptation to a new era of global, lay-based Buddhism. The enduring value of the concept is not its original polemical application but its ability to serve as a framework for personal accountability, ethical conduct, and the relentless pursuit of humanistic values. Ultimately, Nichiren's warning about the spiritual danger of slander can be reinterpreted in a modern context as a timeless call to protect the inherent dignity of life and to work for both individual and societal transformation, thus fulfilling his original vision of establishing "the correct teaching for the peace of the land".⁸

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