

The Votary and the Vow: An Analysis of Nichiren's Treatise on the True Aspect of All Phenomena

I. Introduction: The Enigma of Identity and Mission

The passage from Nichiren's 1273 treatise, *Shohō Jissō-Shō* (The True Aspect of All Phenomena), sent to the monk Sairen-Bō, represents a pivotal moment in the development of his unique theology. The query provided, which presents this passage, is not a simple request for information but a profound theological assertion. It positions Nichiren as the "lone forerunner of the bodhisattvas who emerged from the earth," and explicitly extends this identity to his disciples and followers. This audacious claim is substantiated by a reference to the "Teacher of the Dharma" chapter of the Lotus Sūtra, which describes the followers who "expound even a phrase of the Lotus Sūtra" as messengers of Śākyamuni Buddha, dispatched to carry out his work.¹

This report aims to provide a multi-layered examination of Nichiren's claims by analyzing the historical and philosophical context of the passage, deconstructing the core concepts of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth and the Buddha's messengers, and exploring the legacy of these interpretations in modern Nichiren Buddhism. The central argument is that the passage is more than a doctrinal statement; it is an act of profound encouragement and empowerment, crafted by an exiled and persecuted leader for a fellow practitioner facing intense adversity. This context of shared struggle is foundational to understanding the passage's significance and its enduring impact.

II. The Crucible of Sado: Historical and Philosophical Genesis of a Vow

The Exiled Votary

The passage was composed during a period of immense hardship in Nichiren's life. He wrote *Shohō Jissō-Shō* in May 1273 from Ichinosawa, Sado Island, a little over a year and a half into his exile there.² This was a time of life-threatening persecution, yet Nichiren himself stated that he felt "immeasurable delight" despite his circumstances.² This remarkable composure in the face of suffering is a defining characteristic of his life and teachings.

Born in 1222 in a fishing village in eastern Japan, Nichiren's background was one of humble origins, though some scholars debate whether his self-descriptions as a "fisherman's son" should be taken literally or allegorically to underscore his belief in the Lotus Sūtra's power to save even the lowliest.⁴ At age twelve, he began his studies at Kiyosumidera, a temple that housed a substantial library and traditions from various schools, including Tendai, esoteric Buddhism, and Pure Land teachings.⁴ During this time, he prayed before an image of the bodhisattva Kōkūzō to become "the wisest person in Japan" and later claimed that this led to him being bestowed with a "jewel of wisdom" that allowed him to grasp the essential doctrines of each Buddhist sect.⁴ By the age of twenty-one, Nichiren was already engaged in the polemics that would define his life's work, arguing passionately against the exclusive

nenbutsu doctrine of Hōnen, the founder of the Japanese Pure Land sect.⁴ These biographical details establish Nichiren's foundation not merely as a mystic but as a deeply rooted scholar and a passionate reformer.

A Dialogue with a Scholar-Monk

The addressee of the treatise, Sairen-bō Nichijō, was a former Tendai priest who was also exiled to Sado, where he became Nichiren's disciple in early 1272.¹ Sairen-bō's scholarly background is critically important for understanding the treatise. He was already familiar with the Tendai concept of

shohō jissō (the true aspect of all phenomena), a fundamental principle in that school.¹ Nichiren's letter was a direct response to Sairen-bō's query about this very doctrine, revealing a high-level philosophical exchange between two profound thinkers.¹

The Law of Causality: From Tendai Theory to Nichiren's Embodied Reality

The Tendai school, founded by Saichō, used the Lotus Sūtra as the foundation for a sophisticated system of doctrine and meditation.⁷ The concept of

shohō jissō, derived from the "Expedient Means" chapter (Chapter Two) of the Lotus Sūtra, states that the ultimate truth, or reality, is inseparable from all phenomena.⁸ This principle, which finds its expression in the ten factors of life, posits a theoretical basis for the universal attainment of Buddhahood by arguing that there is no fundamental distinction between a Buddha and an ordinary person.⁸

Nichiren's approach to this doctrine was a radical reinterpretation. While Tendai philosophy treated *shohō jissō* as an abstract, theoretical concept, Nichiren redefined it by equating the "true aspect" with the Law of Myoho-renge-kyo and the "phenomena" with all living beings and their environments.⁸ This move transformed an abstract principle into a concrete, living reality embodied by those who practice it.⁸ By addressing this reinterpretation to a former Tendai priest, Nichiren was not merely teaching a new doctrine; he was demonstrating its practical efficacy and superiority in the context of the Latter Day of the Law. The philosophical shift transforms the abstract idea of a theoretical potential for enlightenment into a tangible, observable process of human transformation in the here and now. This is a critical departure from earlier Mahayana traditions, which often presented Buddhahood as an attainment that required countless eons of practice.⁹

III. The Vow and Emergence: The Bodhisattvas from the Earth

The Grand Ceremony in the Air

The concept of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth is central to the Lotus Sūtra, appearing dramatically in the "Emerging from the Earth" chapter (Chapter Fifteen).¹² The sutra describes a pivotal moment during the "Ceremony in the Air," where countless bodhisattvas from other realms volunteer to propagate the sutra after Śākyamuni Buddha's passing.¹¹ Śākyamuni

rejects their offer, stating that there is no need, as his own disciples, who have been with him since the remote past, will carry out the task.¹³ With this pronouncement, the earth trembles and splits open, and an innumerable multitude of golden-hued bodhisattvas emerges, led by four guiding masters: Superior Practices, Boundless Practices, Pure Practices, and Firmly Established Practices.¹⁰ The Buddha's rejection of the well-known bodhisattvas from other worlds in favor of this unknown multitude from within the saha world is a profoundly significant event.¹¹

Nichiren's Singular Claim

Nichiren's self-identification as the leader of this multitude, Bodhisattva Superior Practices, is a theological claim of immense consequence.¹⁰ He based this on his conviction that he was fulfilling the sutra's prophecy. This was not an arbitrary assertion but was rooted in his experience of propagating the Lotus Sūtra in the defiled age of the Latter Day of the Law, enduring persecutions, exile, and attacks, all of which he saw as directly foretold in the sutra.¹ This practice, which he called

shikidoku, or "reading the sutra with one's body," gave his life a meaning that transcended personal hardship.¹⁹

The Allegorical and the Literal

The interpretation of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth has evolved over time. Early commentators, such as Tao Sheng, saw the emergence as an allegory for the inherent potential for enlightenment within all living beings, a potential that "cannot remain concealed".¹⁰ Nichiren, however, took this concept and gave it a literal, historical context. He collapsed the allegorical into a tangible reality, arguing that the "earth" from which they emerge is not just the "ultimate depth of life" but the physical saha world of human suffering, specifically Japan in the Latter Day of the Law.¹⁷

This reinterpretation transforms a symbolic, timeless event into a concrete, time-specific one. This act of "temporalizing" the sutra provided Nichiren and his followers with an immediate and urgent sense of purpose. The emergence was no longer a distant prophecy but an ongoing, observable event in their contemporary lives. Furthermore, the descriptions of the bodhisattvas' "golden hue" and "immeasurable brightness" are reinterpreted as the inherent dignity and wisdom of ordinary people taking action to transform their lives and their

society.¹⁰ This framework provides a mission that is not for a select few but for all who "practice and spread" the law.¹⁷

IV. The Mission and Conduct: The Messenger of the Buddha

The Compassionate Envoy

The "Teacher of the Dharma" chapter (Chapter Ten) of the Lotus Sūtra provides a close description of the attributes and mission of the Buddha's messenger. The passage explicitly states that anyone who "expounds even a phrase of the Lotus Sūtra even to one person in secret, then you should know that such a person is my messenger, dispatched by Me and carries out My work".¹ The Buddha further promises to praise and assure the future Buddhahood of such a person, even shouldering them and making offerings to them.²³

Empowering the Masses

Nichiren extends this identity of "messenger" to his followers in the passage from *Shohō Jissō-Shō*.¹ His rhetorical question, "Who else but us can this possibly refer to?"¹, is a powerful act of empowerment. It elevates the seemingly small act of sharing the teaching to the level of carrying out the Buddha's most vital work.¹⁰ This grants Nichiren's followers an identity that is both deeply personal and globally significant.

The Act of Propagation: From Secret Phrase to Public Vow

The act of propagation is a central theme in Nichiren's thought. He famously states, "At first only Nichiren chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, but then two, three, and a hundred followed, chanting and teaching others".¹ This links the act of propagation directly to the fulfillment of

the "Emerging from the Earth" prophecy. This transformation from a secret phrase shared with one person to a public movement is a direct consequence of Nichiren's teaching. The act of speaking about the teaching, often referred to as

shakubuku, becomes a spiritual practice in itself.⁶ It is not just about internal reflection but about external action that aims to bring about the widespread propagation of the Law, a goal he called

kosen-rufu.²⁵ This active, engaged practice is intended to transform both the individual and society, making it a foundational element of Nichiren Buddhism.²⁰ The identity of "messenger" provides a concrete, actionable purpose for his followers, shifting the focus from a passive belief in the sutra's efficacy to an active engagement with the world.

V. The Collective Identity: Followers as Bodhisattvas

The core of Nichiren's argument in the passage is the shared identity of a vow. He claims, "If Nichiren is to be counted among the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, then so must his disciples and lay supporters".¹ The unifying factors are the shared purpose and the shared experience of chanting the

daimoku (Nam-myoho-renge-kyo) and propagating the Law.¹⁰ Nichiren further asserts that "Were they not Bodhisattvas of the Earth, they could not chant the

daimoku".¹ The shared experience of facing persecution and hardship serves as tangible proof of their identity, a point he emphasizes by noting that "the votaries born in the Latter Day of the Law who propagate the Lotus Sūtra will encounter the three types of enemies".¹

This shared identity forms the basis for the Nichiren Buddhist movement as a cohesive community. Nichiren's teaching is not for an individual's private enlightenment, but for the creation of a community dedicated to realizing an ideal society.²⁰ By positioning his followers as Bodhisattvas of the Earth, Nichiren establishes a new social and spiritual contract. It is an identity of empowerment and responsibility, where the individual's happiness is "inextricably linked with the peace and happiness of our fellow humans and of society as a whole".²⁶ This stands in contrast to the more secluded, inwardly-focused practices of other Buddhist schools.⁷ The act of "emerging from the earth" is therefore a process of both personal transformation and social engagement.²² It signifies a bold declaration that the lives of ordinary people, engaged in the world and its problems, are the very crucible in which Buddhahood is forged and demonstrated.¹⁷

VI. Comparative Theological Perspectives: Legacy and Divergence

Nichiren's foundational claims have been the subject of diverse interpretations by his successor schools, leading to significant doctrinal differences. These divergences are particularly pronounced in how they view the status of Nichiren himself and, consequently, the identity of his followers.

Comparative Interpretations of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth and the Founder

Category of Belief	Soka Gakkai International (SGI)	Nichiren Shoshu	Nichiren Shu
Status of Nichiren	Regarded as the "True Buddha" of the Latter Day of the Law, fulfilling the role of Bodhisattva Superior Practices. ¹⁷	Regarded as the "True Buddha" of the Latter Day of the Law. ²⁷	Regarded as the "Jōgyō Bodhisattva" or a "votary messenger" who upheld the true Dharma. Shakyamuni Buddha remains the Eternal Buddha. ²⁷
Identity of Followers	"Undisputed Bodhisattvas of the Earth" who have emerged to spread the Mystic Law. ¹⁷ Members are seen as true disciples of the Buddha of the	Members are referred to as "associates," "followers," or as "sharing karmic bonds with the Bodhisattvas of the Earth". ¹⁰	Members "aspire to the status of Bodhisattvas of the Earth" through their practice. ¹⁰

	Latter Day. ¹⁷		
Focus of Practice and Study	Emphasizes chanting the <i>daimoku</i> to the Gohonzon and the study of Nichiren's writings, with particular focus on Chapters 2 and 16 of the Lotus Sūtra. ²⁷	Focuses on chanting the <i>daimoku</i> and the study of Nichiren's writings, with specific emphasis on Chapters 2 and 16. ²⁷	Upholds the study and recitation of all chapters of the Lotus Sūtra. Chanting <i>daimoku</i> is the primary practice, while sutra recitation is a secondary one. ²⁷

The differing interpretations of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth are not isolated beliefs but are intrinsically linked to a more fundamental theological question: the status of Nichiren himself. Nichiren's radical claims of identity as the Votary¹ led directly to different interpretations of that identity after his death—either as a votary or as the True Buddha.²⁷ This, in turn, led to divergent interpretations of the followers' identities¹⁰, which then manifested in different practices and sectarian divisions.²⁷ The interpretation of the founder's status determines the follower's status, which in turn defines the nature of their practice.

This theological and practical evolution demonstrates how a single, foundational point in a sacred text can give rise to a complex web of ideological development and schism. The Soka Gakkai, for example, views its members as embodying the vow of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth and sees the organization itself as the embodiment of *kosen-rufu*.¹⁶ Nichiren Shu, in contrast, views Nichiren as a messenger of the Eternal Buddha, and its members as aspirants to that noble status.²⁸ These nuanced distinctions, though subtle on the surface, represent fundamental differences in how each school conceives of the relationship between the founder, the practitioner, and the original Buddha.

VII. Synthesis and Conclusion

The passage from Nichiren's *Shōhō Jissō-Shō* is a document of immense historical, philosophical, and spiritual weight. It is a testament to the power of a leader who, facing persecution, took a seemingly abstract Buddhist doctrine and gave it a vibrant, contemporary, and deeply personal meaning. By declaring that he and his followers were the prophesied Bodhisattvas of the Earth and the very messengers of Śākyamuni Buddha, Nichiren accomplished a profound act of empowerment. He provided his exiled community with a heroic identity and a mission that transcended their suffering, transforming their hardships

into proof of their fidelity to the Buddha's teachings.

The central thesis of the passage is the inseparability of faith, practice, and identity. For Nichiren, a person's faith in the Lotus Sūtra and their active propagation of its teachings are not merely spiritual exercises; they are the tangible proof of their identity as Bodhisattvas of the Earth. This theology shifted the focus of Buddhist practice from a path of secluded, inward contemplation to one of active, compassionate engagement with a troubled society. The ripple effect of one person's commitment to this mission, as described by Nichiren, is seen as the very engine of worldwide peace and happiness, or *kosen-rufu*.

The ongoing debate among Nichiren Buddhist schools over the exact nature of this identity—whether it is a shared status, an aspiration, or a karmic bond—demonstrates the passage's enduring power and complexity. These discussions are not purely academic; they define the very nature of each school's practice and its members' sense of purpose. Ultimately, the passage remains a potent call to action, encouraging practitioners to find their purpose not in a distant spiritual realm, but by actively engaging with and transforming the defiled world in which they live. It is a declaration that the most profound spiritual truths are realized not in retreat, but in the midst of human suffering and in the noble effort to alleviate it.

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