

# **Slander of the True Dharma: An In-Depth Analysis of the Doctrine in the Lotus Sutra and Nichiren's Thought**

## **Executive Summary**

The doctrine of "slander of the True Dharma" (*hōbō*) is a cornerstone of Nichiren's teachings, and a thorough study of this concept reveals a complex and multifaceted framework that extends beyond a simple prohibition of criticism. An analysis of the provided research material indicates that the foundational understanding of slander as a rejection of the Lotus Sutra is accurate. However, a deeper, more nuanced perspective emerges when this concept is contextualized within the historical period of the Latter Day of the Law (*mappō*), Nichiren's specific polemical arguments, and the profound, paradoxical nature of its consequences and purpose. This report will detail how slander manifests in various forms—from outward rejections of the Dharma to subtle, internal failings of a practitioner—and will examine the karmic retribution associated with these acts. It will also explore how Nichiren reframed his own suffering as a redemptive process of expiating past slander and how the doctrine of compassionate condemnation, exemplified by the story of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, transforms this seemingly intolerant concept into a path of profound mercy. Finally, the report will address the evolution of this doctrine in modern contexts, where the focus has shifted from macro-level critiques of other schools to micro-level ethics of interpersonal relationships and personal faith.

## **Introduction: The Centrality of *Hōbō* in Nichiren's Lifelong Vocation**

The medieval Japanese Buddhist figure Nichiren (1222–1282) dedicated his life to the propagation of the Lotus Sutra, which he considered the ultimate teaching capable of leading all people to enlightenment in the degenerate Final Dharma age, also known as the Latter Day of the Law.<sup>1</sup> This period was characterized by a widespread belief

that people had an inferior capacity to understand and practice Buddhism, leading many to seek salvation through simpler, provisional teachings.<sup>3</sup> Based on his conviction that the Lotus Sutra was the only teaching that remained "soteriologically efficacious," Nichiren's mission was inextricably linked to the denunciation of what he termed

*hōbō* or "slander of the True Dharma".<sup>1</sup>

Nichiren's commitment to opposing slander was not merely a matter of academic or doctrinal dispute; it was a central, defining aspect of his personal and spiritual vow. He recognized that speaking out against the prevailing religious attitudes and popular schools would inevitably lead to intense persecution. However, he felt compelled to do so out of a deep sense of compassion, believing that to remain silent would be an act of profound mercy, a dereliction of his duty as a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra. He argued that if he did not speak out, he would "most certainly fall into the hell of incessant suffering" in his next life.<sup>3</sup> This uncompromising stance prompted his denunciations of prominent religious leaders and government officials who supported them, resulting in him being repeatedly attacked, twice arrested and exiled, and once very nearly executed.<sup>1</sup> Nichiren considered opposing slander of the Dharma to be a form of Buddhist practice in its own right, a debt owed to the Buddha that he was prepared to discharge even at the cost of his own life.<sup>1</sup> This conviction established

*hōbō* as the central polemical and doctrinal axis of his entire body of work, a theme that runs through his writings from his earliest essays to his final letters.

### **The Foundational Doctrine: Defining Slander of the Dharma**

The concept of "slander of the Dharma" did not originate with Nichiren but appears in Buddhist canonical sources, particularly within the Mahayana sutras, where it was often used to defend the teachings of the Great Vehicle from criticism by the Buddhist mainstream. In its broadest sense, it refers to disparaging any of the Three Jewels: the Buddha, his teaching, or his order.<sup>1</sup> Nichiren, however, took this concept and expanded it into a central, exclusive doctrine.

He argued that in the Latter Day of the Law, the Lotus Sutra was the single "correct teaching".<sup>3</sup> Therefore, to reject the Lotus Sutra in favor of what he considered "inferior" or "provisional" teachings, such as those of the Pure Land, Zen, or Shingon

schools, was an act of slander.<sup>1</sup> He viewed the prevailing religious attitude of the time—one of submissive dependence on the power of transcendent gods or Buddhas—as a significant problem that was hindering people from achieving Buddhahood.<sup>3</sup> A prime example of this was his harsh critique of Hōnen's exclusive *nenbutsu* doctrine, which he saw as a primary source of slander for urging people to abandon all other practices and sutras in favor of chanting the name of Amida Buddha.<sup>2</sup> This polemical position formed the basis of his followers' later summary of his criticisms in the "four admonitions," which condemned the popular schools of his day.<sup>2</sup>

A crucial innovation in Nichiren's thought was his expansion of the definition of slander beyond simple verbal attacks. He taught that slander could be a mental act of rejection or disbelief, even if done "in jest" or with no serious intent.<sup>6</sup> The sin of slander, therefore, could be as subtle as a lack of seeking spirit, an attachment to earthly desires, or the mere presence of doubt.<sup>7</sup> The fundamental offense was a lack of faith that, according to the sutra, "cuts off the seeds of Buddhahood" in all worlds.<sup>2</sup>

The transformation of *hōbō* from a canonical concept to a foundational doctrine was a crucial development in Nichiren's thought. By defining other popular schools as the primary sources of slander, he provided a hermeneutical framework that not only explained the calamities facing Japan, such as famine and civil unrest, but also gave purpose to his own mission.<sup>1</sup> The fact that he suffered persecutions for his denunciations was viewed not as a failure but as a direct fulfillment of predictions made in the Lotus Sutra.<sup>2</sup> This powerful reformulation of an existing concept established the legitimacy of his mission and gave his followers a clear sense of purpose in an age they perceived as spiritually degenerate.

## **A Taxonomy of Slander: From Outward Rejection to Internal Transgression**

The diverse forms of slander were meticulously categorized in Nichiren's teachings, creating a comprehensive taxonomy that addresses offenses ranging from overt acts of disparagement to subtle, internal psychological states.

### **Overt and Interpersonal Slander**

Slander can manifest in explicit, outward forms, such as speaking ill of the Lotus Sutra itself or disparaging those who practice it.<sup>1</sup> This can be as direct as an attack or as subtle as manifesting an "outward appearance of animosity".<sup>6</sup> The ultimate expression of this is the rejection of the Mystic Law inherent in one's own life, or in the lives of others, which leads to a "degradation of human life itself".<sup>9</sup> For Nichiren's followers, this is why it is considered a serious offense to bear ill feelings, contempt, or hatred toward fellow believers, as doing so is seen as slandering a Buddha.<sup>8</sup>

## The Fourteen Slanders

A more detailed classification of slander is provided by the list of fourteen evil causes, which Nichiren warns both the priesthood and laity to "be on guard against".<sup>7</sup> These are not just external acts but also internal dispositions that prevent a person from receiving and practicing the correct teaching.

#	Slander	Description
1	Arrogance	Placing excessive confidence in oneself and making light of Buddhism. <sup>7</sup>
2	Negligence	Neglecting Buddhist practice out of laziness. <sup>7</sup>
3	Arbitrary, egotistical judgment	Interpreting profound Buddhist teachings with distortion based on one's own viewpoint. <sup>7</sup>
4	Shallow, self-satisfied understanding	Making judgments about Buddhism with a superficial grasp of its principles. <sup>7</sup>
5	Attachment to earthly desires	Taking advantage of Buddhism for personal gain or having no yearning for it due

		to being caught up in worldly desires. <sup>7</sup>
6	Lack of seeking spirit	Not seeking to understand deep Buddhist doctrines. <sup>7</sup>
7	Not believing	Disbelieving in the correct Buddhism or not wishing to have faith in it. <sup>7</sup>
8	Aversion	Feeling repugnance towards Buddhism or insulting those who practice it. <sup>7</sup>
9	Deluded doubt	Having doubts and delusions about Buddhism. <sup>7</sup>
10	Vilification	Criticizing Buddhism and reviling its followers. <sup>7</sup>
11	Contempt/Despising	Having contempt for Buddhism or its practitioners. <sup>7</sup>
12	Hatred	Detesting and opposing Buddhism or having hatred for its followers. <sup>7</sup>
13	Jealousy/Envying	Being jealous of the prosperity achieved through correct Buddhism or its practitioners. <sup>7</sup>
14	Grudges/Resentment	Resenting Buddhism or bearing grudges against its followers. <sup>7</sup>

The importance of this list lies not just in its individual items but in the causal relationship Nichiren draws between them. He explains that the fourteen slanders fundamentally "represent the embodiment of a lack of faith," with all other forms arising from the central slander of "not believing".<sup>7</sup> This is a crucial point that moves the doctrine beyond a simple list of forbidden acts and into a psycho-spiritual framework. The root cause of slander is a fundamental disbelief in the Mystic Law and one's own inherent Buddha nature. This disbelief then manifests in a range of behaviors, from the self-centeredness of arrogance and negligence to the

interpersonal hostilities of hatred and jealousy.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the doctrine becomes a tool for understanding and addressing the internal state of a practitioner, not just their external conduct.

### **The Karmic Retribution: Consequences of Slander**

The consequences of slander are described in Nichiren's writings as being both spiritually and temporally severe. The ultimate consequence of a grave offense is rebirth in the "hell of incessant suffering" or Avīci Hell.<sup>1</sup> The retribution is described in vivid and detailed terms, where an offender "shall enter the Avīci Hell, where they shall fulfill one kalpa" and, once the kalpa is ended, "they shall be reborn there, in this way, spinning around, for kalpas without number".<sup>2</sup> The canonical descriptions also extend to physical and social degradation in future lives, where offenders, upon finally emerging from the Avīci Hell, may be born as "wild dogs, scabrous and emaciated, or as monstrous snakes".<sup>2</sup> Lesser offenses can result in retribution in the human realm, such as "poverty, low status, [and] white leprosy".<sup>2</sup>

A profound and unique aspect of Nichiren's thought is his personal interpretation of suffering. During his second exile on Sado, he began to question why he, a devoted practitioner of the Lotus Sutra, was enduring such intense hardships. His conclusion was that his own suffering was not an indictment of his faith but a manifestation of retribution for having committed the sin of slander in a previous lifetime.<sup>2</sup> He came to believe that by opposing slander in his current life, he was "calling forth retributions for the grave offenses of my past," allowing them to be expiated in a single lifetime instead of over countless eons.<sup>2</sup> This perspective reframed his persecutions from simple punishment into a complex, personal, and ultimately redemptive process. It also served as a powerful confirmation of the law of cause and effect that he was preaching, demonstrating that even a devoted practitioner must face the consequences of past actions. This unique interpretation transforms the concept of retribution from a simple threat into a testament of the profound and inescapable nature of karma.

### **The Paradox of Compassion: Opposing Slander as an Act of Mercy**

While Nichiren's denunciations and warnings of hell may appear intolerant from a modern perspective, his entire project was rooted in a profound sense of compassion. The historical context of his vow, as detailed in his writings, reveals an internal conflict: remain silent and be lacking in compassion, or speak out and face persecution for a doctrine that saves all people.<sup>3</sup> His choice to speak out, even with harsh denunciations of other schools and leaders, was framed as an act of mercy, a debt he felt he owed to the Buddha to save a nation from ruin and its people from the hell of incessant suffering.<sup>3</sup>

This perspective is powerfully illustrated by the story of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging from the Lotus Sutra, a figure whom Nichiren called "the heart of the Lotus Sutra".<sup>11</sup> This bodhisattva respectfully bowed to everyone, declaring their innate Buddha nature, even when they responded with abuse, curses, and physical attacks.<sup>11</sup> The sutra reveals that while his attackers spent a thousand kalpas in the hell of incessant suffering for their actions, they were

*eventually able to attain Buddhahood because the bodhisattva's actions had planted a "seed" of the Mystic Law in their lives, creating an unbreakable connection.*<sup>11</sup>

This ancient story resolves the apparent contradiction between Nichiren's stern warnings and his compassionate intent. His polemical criticisms and descriptions of hell are not an end in themselves but a means to a greater purpose. The goal is not to condemn people but to shock them into recognizing their error, thereby planting the seed of the Mystic Law in their lives. The temporary, if severe, suffering is an unfortunate but necessary consequence that ultimately leads to long-term salvation. This view reframes the entire doctrine of slander as a practice of profound, if stern, compassion, where even the act of denunciation is a form of mercy meant to create a connection to the Dharma and ultimately guide all people to enlightenment.<sup>11</sup>

## **Modern Interpretations and Practical Application**

The doctrine of slander of the True Dharma has been reinterpreted and applied to new contexts in the modern era, demonstrating its enduring relevance. In contemporary lay organizations, the focus has shifted from macro-level, denominational critiques to micro-level, interpersonal ethics.<sup>8</sup> The "Fourteen Slanders," especially the last four—contempt, hatred, jealousy, and grudges—are now used as a framework for building "a harmonious organization" and fostering positive

relationships among members.<sup>8</sup> The root cause of these interpersonal conflicts is identified as a lack of faith that causes an individual to view others from a "relative perspective" of worldly status and power, rather than respecting each person as an emissary of the Buddha.<sup>8</sup> This shift in focus repurposes a polemical doctrine into a tool for internal growth and communal harmony, demonstrating the flexibility and continued utility of Nichiren's teachings.

Furthermore, modern discussions acknowledge the need to distinguish between intentional slander and involuntary psychological states. The provided community dialogue, for example, highlights the difference between a conscious, hateful attack on the Dharma and intrusive, OCD-produced thoughts.<sup>13</sup> The advice offered in these contexts emphasizes that unintentional thoughts are not slander and that the true issue lies in one's conscious intent and fundamental lack of faith. This modern distinction adds a crucial layer of nuance, demonstrating how ancient doctrines can be adapted to address contemporary concerns about mental health while remaining true to the core principle that slander originates from a deliberate lack of faith and a rejection of the Mystic Law.<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion: Synthesizing the User's Research

The user's research into what constitutes slander of the Lotus Sutra is fundamentally accurate and forms a strong foundation for further study. The provided material confirms the core definition of slander as a rejection of the Lotus Sutra and its practitioners, details its various forms, including the explicit list of the Fourteen Slanders, and outlines the severe karmic consequences, such as rebirth in the hell of incessant suffering.

However, a truly expert-level understanding requires a more comprehensive and contextualized perspective. The doctrine of slander is best understood not in isolation but as the central, defining element of Nichiren's lifelong mission. His fierce denunciations were not acts of simple intolerance but were born of a profound compassion to save people in the Latter Day of the Law. The paradox of this approach is reconciled by the teachings of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, which reveal that even a harsh, seemingly intolerant act can be an act of mercy that plants the seed of enlightenment. Finally, the modern application of this doctrine demonstrates its enduring relevance, as it has been reinterpreted from a polemical tool for critiquing other Buddhist schools into a practical framework for fostering personal faith and

harmonious interpersonal relationships within a lay community. This expanded framework provides a robust and nuanced lens through which to continue the study of this central concept in Nichiren's thought.

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