

The Integrated Authority: Nichiren's Doctrine of the Sovereign, Teacher, and Parent in the *Kitō-shō*

I. Introduction: The Integrated Ideal of Buddhahood

The study of Nichiren Daishonin's (1222–1282) theological framework reveals a rigorous effort to define absolute, singular authority in a fragmented religious landscape. Central to this definition is the doctrine of the Three Virtues—Sovereign, Teacher, and Parent (*Shu-Shi-Shin*)—which Nichiren used to delineate the complete and singular saving power of the Eternal Shakyamuni Buddha of the Lotus Sūtra. This concept finds a poignant and polemical articulation in the *Kitō-shō* (Treatise on Prayers), where Nichiren establishes the fundamental inadequacy of all human authority figures.¹

The treatise frames a core spiritual challenge: while human guidance is necessary, it is inherently incomplete. Human parents are motivated by compassion (*Shin*) but often "lack the skill and knowledge necessary to benefit them" in a transformative sense.¹ Conversely, a masterful guide (

Shi) may possess profound wisdom and skill "about how to live in this world of conflict," but without a true, selfless concern for the follower's welfare, this wisdom can quickly "degenerate into cruelty and selfishness," rendering the master "frightening".¹ These human limitations—compassion without skill, or skill without compassion—demonstrate that traditional authoritative roles are insufficient to lead beings to ultimate enlightenment.

This critique, written during a period of immense political and natural turmoil in Kamakura Japan (1255) ², possesses profound theological and political weight. The widespread instability and failure of secular and conventional religious leaders to alleviate societal suffering provided the backdrop for asserting the necessity of absolute spiritual authority. The critique that human masters and parents are flawed is therefore not merely an abstract

philosophical point, but a powerful assertion that the Buddhist Dharma must fill the leadership vacuum, providing a stable and reliable locus of ultimate guidance. Nichiren's synthesis presents the Buddha as the only figure who perfectly integrates the protective power of the Sovereign (

Shu), the guiding wisdom of the Teacher (*Shi*), and the unconditional compassion of the Parent (*Shin*).² The doctrine of the Three Virtues is thus central to Nichiren's identification of the Original Buddha as the singular, necessary savior in the turbulent Latter Day of the Law (

Mappō), simultaneously serving as a polemical tool against rival Buddhist schools and an ethical mandate for Bodhisattva practice.

II. The Textual Origin and Historical Context of the *Kitō-shō*

A. Placement and Primary Theme of the Treatise

The *Kitō-shō*, written in 1255 when Nichiren was residing in Kamakura, addressed the foundational question of which form of Buddhist prayer is truly efficacious.² The treatise concludes unequivocally that only prayer rooted in the essence of the Lotus Sūtra is "certain to be fulfilled".³ The efficacy of this practice is underscored by the fact that practitioners of the two vehicles (Arhats and Pratyekabuddhas), who had practiced austerities for countless

kalpas without success in provisional teachings, attained Buddhahood merely by hearing the Lotus Sūtra.³ This establishment of the Lotus Sūtra as the source of all salvific power forms the prerequisite for understanding the Buddha's unique integrated virtues.

B. Tracing the Antecedents of the Three Virtues

The conceptual triad of Sovereign, Teacher, and Parent is not entirely Nichiren's invention, but rather his strategic elevation of an existing, though secondary, classification within the

T'ien-t'ai tradition. Nichiren explicitly grounds the three virtues in a key passage from the "Simile and Parable" (third) chapter of the Lotus Sūtra, which speaks of the nature of the Buddha's relationship to the sentient world.⁵ The relevant passage reads: "Now this threefold world is all my domain [the virtue of sovereign], and the living beings in it are all my children [the virtue of parent]. Now this place is beset by many pains and trials. I am the only person who can rescue and protect others".⁵

While Nichiren interpreted this passage as definitive proof, the classification was mentioned briefly by Guanding (561–632), a disciple of the Great Teacher Zhiyi, in a commentary on the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*.⁸ Nichiren's deliberate focus on this aspect of T'ien-t'ai intellectual tradition demonstrates a strategic utilization of established lineage to anchor his revolutionary claims regarding the Original Buddha. By linking the integrated triad to the authoritative lineage of the Lotus Sutra, he solidifies his doctrinal position.

C. Soteriological Necessity in the Sahā World

The use of the triad possesses a deep soteriological significance, particularly Nichiren's emphasis that the Buddha is Sovereign and Parent specifically of "this threefold world" (the *Sahā* world, meaning "world of endurance," which is rife with suffering).⁵ The assertion that the Buddha's authority is inherently tied to the

Sahā world validates the immediacy and activism of his practice. The Buddha must possess the Sovereign virtue to directly protect beings *in* their suffering world and the Parent virtue to nurture them *here*, contrasting sharply with the doctrines of other Buddhist schools.⁸

For Nichiren, this provided a powerful justification for rejecting the prevailing Pure Land focus on Amida Buddha. Nichiren argued that Buddhas like Amida (Amitābha) are detached and have "no such connection to this world-sphere," explicitly stating that Amida is "not our sovereign, not our parent, and not our teacher".⁷ Consequently, devotion to Amida was doctrinally recast as an act of spiritual unfilial piety—honoring a distant stranger over one's own true spiritual parent and sovereign.⁸ The emphasis on the

Shu-Shi-Shin triad thus establishes the Original Buddha as the necessary, immediate, and comprehensive savior of all beings in the present age.

III. Detailed Exegesis of the Incomplete Human

Authorities

The core philosophical brilliance of the *Kitō-shō* passage lies in its nuanced identification of the fatal flaws inherent in human authoritative roles, demonstrating why only a fully integrated Buddha can serve as the ultimate guide.

A. The Flaw of the Parent: Compassion Without Skill

The virtue of the Parent (*Shin*) is defined by profound compassion—the desire to nurture and support life.² This parental kindness provides foundational support and emotional security. However, Nichiren's text notes that "Lowly parents lack the virtue of a master".¹ This criticism is directed at compassion (

karuṇā) that is limited by ignorance (*mūdhya*) or temporal concerns.

While human parents care deeply, their knowledge is focused on worldly success or temporary safety. They "lack the skill and knowledge necessary to benefit them" in the ultimate, transformative sense of attaining Buddhahood.¹ The kindness they offer is temporal, bounded by the confines of the present existence and often swayed by personal biases or limited understanding of cosmic law. To liberate a child from the cycle of birth and death requires a wisdom that transcends merely meeting immediate, temporal needs.

This critique functions as a crucial redirection in Buddhist ethics regarding the debt of gratitude (*Hōon*). Nichiren frequently stressed the need to repay debts owed to parents, teachers, and the sovereign.⁹ By demonstrating that human parents are fundamentally limited in their capacity to bestow

ultimate benefit, the text shifts the focus of ultimate gratitude away from temporal figures and onto the Buddha of the Lotus Sūtra, who alone provides the means for genuine, eternal filial piety—the attainment of enlightenment.

B. The Flaw of the Master: Wisdom Without Foundational Compassion

The virtue of the Master or Teacher (*Shi*) is defined by wisdom (*prajñā*), instruction, and the specialized skill needed to guide beings toward enlightenment.² This role represents technical

knowledge and rigorous doctrinal guidance. Yet, the text warns that a master who possesses skill and knowledge but lacks the Parent's concern is "frightening".¹

This "frightening master" may be "wise about how to live in this world of conflict," possessing great knowledge, but without genuine concern, they can easily become "cruel and selfish".¹ This philosophical tension directly parallels the challenge inherent in the Mahayana concept of Skillful Means (

Upāya). True skillful means requires the dual application of **Wisdom** and **Compassion**.¹⁰ When skill (wisdom) is deployed without an underlying, fundamental compassion (parental nurture), it risks becoming dogmatic, utilitarian, or detached, thereby failing to achieve the ultimate aim of liberation.¹¹ The resulting cruelty is born from an intellectual arrogance that prioritizes doctrine or personal gain over the well-being of the student.

C. The Synthesis of Ultimate Authority

The Buddha resolves this critical dichotomy by achieving a perfect integration. The Buddha, as the ultimate teacher, guides humanity not out of detachment, but because "He has also found himself within all of us, and knows what it takes to lead us to his wisdom" [User Query]. The Buddha's wisdom is inextricably bound to universal compassion, ensuring that instruction is always skillful and directed toward genuine, ultimate benefit—a capacity impossible for human figures to sustain.¹¹

IV. The Full Triad: Sovereign, Teacher, and Parent (*Shu-Shi-Shin*)

The complete doctrine asserts that the Buddha—the Original Teacher of the Latter Day of the Law—is simultaneously endowed with three indispensable virtues, which Nichiren and his followers are called to manifest.

A. Defining the Integrated Virtues of the Buddha

The three virtues operate synergistically, defining the Buddha's active role in the *Sahā* world.²

Nichiren's Interpretation of the Three Virtues of the Buddha

Virtue (Japanese)	Function in Salvation	Corresponding Buddhist Attribute (Doctrinal)	Consequence of Lacking the Other Two (The Critique)
Parent (<i>Shin</i>)	Compassion to nurture, support, and relieve suffering.	Great Compassion (<i>Maha-Karuna</i>)	Lacks the wisdom and skill (Teacher) to provide ultimate, permanent benefit; is "lowly."
Teacher (<i>Shi</i>)	Wisdom to instruct, guide, and lead all beings to enlightenment.	Wisdom (<i>Prajna</i>) and Skillful Means (<i>Upāya</i>)	Lacks concern (Parent); can degenerate into cruelty or selfishness; is "frightening."
Sovereign (<i>Shu</i>)	Protective power, authority, and ability to ensure the Dharma is upheld in the <i>Sahā</i> world.	Protective Vow (<i>Praṇidhāna</i>) and Authority (<i>Riki</i>)	Lacks both Teacher (wisdom) and Parent (compassion); results in arbitrary rule and failure to guide the people to salvation.

B. The Declaration of the Votary and Political Dissent

Nichiren transformed this doctrinal concept into a revolutionary historical mission by explicitly declaring himself to embody these three virtues for the people of Japan.¹³ In one of his most important treatises,

The Opening of the Eyes, he states: "I, Nichiren, am sovereign, teacher, and father and mother

to all the people of Japan".⁶ This bold self-declaration reveals Nichiren's identity as the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law and provided the doctrinal foundation for his activism.¹⁵

The Sovereign virtue (*Shu*) is inherently political. By claiming this authority for the Buddha and for himself as the Votary of the Lotus Sūtra, Nichiren effectively asserts the supremacy of the religious law (Dharma) over temporal rule.¹⁶ This stance justifies his unceasing critique of the government and the established Buddhist sects (such as the Tendai sect and Pure Land movements) that received state patronage, viewing them as obstacles to the people's salvation.¹⁷ The Sovereign virtue mandates an active defense of the true Dharma, which translates into the practice of refutation (

shakubuku)—"blocking the path to the hell of incessant suffering" by denouncing false teachings.¹⁵

C. The Triad as a Criterion for Latter Day Practice

The successful manifestation of the Three Virtues in *Mappō* is directly linked to the practice of chanting Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō. The efficacy of this practice is explained in terms of the integrated triad.¹⁵ The benefit of vast compassion indicates the Parent virtue; the power to "open the blind eyes of all the people" indicates the Teacher virtue (wisdom); and the capacity to "blocks the path to the hell of incessant suffering" indicates the Sovereign virtue (protection).¹⁵

This connection elevates the *Shu-Shi-Shin* doctrine from a descriptive quality of the Buddha to an active methodology for salvation in the final age of the Dharma. The Original Buddha's enlightenment, which possesses these integrated virtues, is instantiated in the Gohonzon—the object of devotion inscribed by Nichiren.¹⁵

V. Philosophical Foundations and Correlation with the *Trikāya*

The integrated Three Virtues provide an accessible, relational framework for the ultimate reality of Buddhahood, mirroring and clarifying the more abstract Mahayana concept of the *Trikāya* (Three Bodies of the Buddha).

A. Mapping to the *Trikāya*

The *Trikāya* traditionally refers to the Dharma body (*Dharmakāya*), the Reward body (*Sambhogakāya*), and the Manifestation body (*Nirmāṇakāya*).¹⁸ While these concepts relate to the fundamental law, the resulting wisdom, and the physical appearance of the Buddha, the

Shu-Shi-Shin doctrine provides a practical explanation of how these bodies interact with the sentient world.

The analysis suggests a strong conceptual alignment:

Table: *Trikāya* Correlation with the Three Virtues

Buddhist Triad	Virtue (Nichiren)	Function in Salvation
Dharma Body (<i>Dharmakāya</i>)	Teacher (Wisdom/Prajna)	The ultimate truth realized by the Buddha, instructing all beings (internal truth).
Reward Body (<i>Sambhogakāya</i>)	Sovereign (Protection/Riki)	The power arising from accumulated merit and vow, protecting the realm (active power).
Manifestation Body (<i>Nirmāṇakāya</i>)	Parent (Compassion/Karuna)	The physical manifestation (e.g., Shakyamuni) that nurtures and leads beings in the <i>Sahā</i> world (phenomenal action).

The Parent virtue aligns with the compassionate action of the Manifestation Body, appearing in the world to save beings.¹⁹ The Teacher virtue correlates with the Wisdom inherent in both the Dharma Body (the realized truth) and the Reward Body (the resulting enlightenment).⁶ The Sovereign virtue represents the absolute power derived from the Buddha’s vow, assuring protection, which aligns with the majestic authority of the Reward Body.

B. Non-Duality and *Sokushin Jōbutsu*

Drawing on T'ien-t'ai thought, the doctrine also reflects the ultimate non-duality of the phenomenal world and enlightenment. T'ien-t'ai states that the three paths—earthly desires, karma, and suffering—are none other than the three virtues (Dharma body, wisdom, and emancipation).²⁰ The integrated nature of

Shu-Shi-Shin means that the Buddha's authority is not transcendently removed from human affliction, but rather active within it, transforming suffering into enlightenment.

The highest philosophical implication of this integrated triad is its accessibility, providing the template for the realization of Buddhahood in one's present form (*sokushin jōbutsu*). When a common mortal, driven by greed, anger, and stupidity, aligns their life with the Gohonzon—the object of worship which embodies the integrated life of Nichiren Daishonin¹⁵—they can "fuse with the life of the Original Buddha, and manifest the great benefit of attaining enlightenment in our present form".¹⁵ The perfect, integrated authority of the Buddha becomes the achievable, integrated life state of the devotee.

Furthermore, by linking the three virtues exclusively to the Original Buddha of the essential teaching (*honmon*)²¹, Nichiren reinforces the concept of the Buddha's constancy. The Buddha is "ever-present" [User Query]. This constancy stands in sharp relief to Buddhas who may possess only provisional virtues, assuring the practitioner that the source of their practice (the Lotus Sutra and the Gohonzon) provides an eternal, unwavering source of complete protection, wisdom, and compassion.⁷

VI. The Three Virtues as a Model for Bodhisattva Practice

The *Shu-Shi-Shin* doctrine serves not only as a theological definition of Buddhahood but as a comprehensive blueprint for the Bodhisattva path, defining how the practitioner must strive to repay the ultimate debt of gratitude.

A. Repaying the Debt of Gratitude (*Hōon*)

The profound, comprehensive benefits derived from the Buddha's integrated virtues impose a monumental spiritual debt of gratitude upon the practitioner.²² Nichiren employs powerful analogies, noting that even "lowly creatures," such as the filial wild goose and the fox who remembers its old hillock, know how to repay a debt of gratitude.⁹ If animals exhibit such piety, human beings who have received the ultimate gift of the Dharma must dedicate themselves to repayment.

The highest expression of filial duty is achieved by mastering the truth of Buddhism and dedicating oneself to the correct practice.⁹ The path to repaying the kindness owed to the Teacher (Buddha/Mentor) is through actualizing the compassionate vow of the Buddha—the practice for the happiness of others.

B. Embodying the Triad in Practice

The Bodhisattva aims to overcome the human limitations articulated in the *Kitō-shō* by embodying the integration of the three virtues in their spiritual efforts, uniting practice for oneself (*Jigyō*) and practice for others (*Keta*).²⁴

1. **Teacher Virtue (Wisdom):** Corresponds to **Practice for Self**. This involves cultivating one's own wisdom, deepening understanding of the Dharma, and persevering in faith.²⁴ By strengthening one's own enlightened state, the practitioner gains the "skill and knowledge" necessary to guide others effectively.
2. **Parent Virtue (Compassion):** Corresponds to **Practice for Others (Nurturing)**. This involves teaching others, providing support, and dedicating oneself to the happiness of humanity.²⁴ This ensures that the wisdom cultivated (Teacher virtue) is always applied with warmth and empathetic concern, preventing the degeneracy of the "frightening master."
3. **Sovereign Virtue (Protection):** Corresponds to **Practice for Others (Defense of the Dharma)**. For the ordinary practitioner, the Sovereign virtue manifests as **courage and resolve**.²⁶ The practice of chanting Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō is the means by which the practitioner "challenges" the negative force of life and external obstructions (the three obstacles and four devils).²⁷ The Sovereign power, therefore, translates internally into absolute confidence and resilience, protecting one's own life state and upholding the Buddhist community.

C. Prayer, Transformation, and the Mentor-Disciple Relationship

The *Kitō-shō* context emphasizes that effective prayer stems from aligning one's internal resolve with the Buddha's integrated virtues.⁴ This internal alignment produces a transformation that allows the practitioner to manifest wisdom, compassion, and protective power needed to influence their environment. Prayer is not merely wishful thinking; rather, it is a catalyst for the courageous action required to actualize the three virtues and advance the goal of worldwide peace (

kosen-rufu).⁴

In modern practice, the Mentor-Disciple relationship often serves as the operational model for the integrated triad. The living mentor provides the **Teacher** (wisdom/guidance) and **Parent** (compassion/nurturing), while the disciple's commitment and courageous adherence to the correct teaching embodies the **Sovereign** virtue of the Sangha.³⁰ Through this relationship, the perfect spirit and courage of the Original Teacher are transmitted, ensuring the fidelity and efficacy of the Buddhist movement.

VII. Conclusion: The Enduring Significance of Integrated Authority

Nichiren Daishonin's doctrine of the Sovereign, Teacher, and Parent, articulated so incisively in the *Kitō-shō*, provides a definitive standard for ultimate spiritual authority. By systematically exposing the limitations of human parents (compassion without skill) and human masters (skill without compassion), Nichiren demonstrates that only the Eternal Buddha of the Lotus Sūtra possesses the perfect integration necessary for universal salvation. The Buddha's life state is characterized by the protective power (*Shu*), the profound wisdom (*Shi*), and the boundless compassion (*Shin*), rendering salvation certain and complete.

This doctrine performed crucial functions in Nichiren's system. Theologically, it established the exclusivity of the Lotus Sūtra as the definitive teaching for the Latter Day of the Law, serving as a powerful polemical weapon against rival Pure Land schools by framing their devotion as a profound act of spiritual negligence. Ethically, the triad provides an enduring blueprint for the Bodhisattva path, compelling practitioners to strive for the simultaneous cultivation of wisdom, compassion, and courage—the unified qualities necessary for both personal enlightenment and the betterment of the world. The imperative to embody this integrated authority remains the central mission for all who follow the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin.

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