The Flawed Vessel and the Supreme Jewel: A Theological Analysis of Praise and Paradox in Nichiren's Urabon Gosho

I. Introduction: The Paradox of Lord Jibu

Within the vast corpus of Nichiren Daishonin's writings, few passages are as rhetorically striking or theologically dense as his assessment of the priest Jibu-bō in the *Treatise on the Ullambana Service* (*Urabon Gosho*). Written to the priest's grandmother, the letter contains a description that appears, at first glance, to be a devastating critique followed by a perplexing non sequitur of praise. Nichiren writes:

> You have a grandson, Jibu-bo, who is a Buddhist priest. This priest does not uphold the precepts and is lacking in wisdom. He does not observe a...source

This passage presents a profound interpretive challenge. How can a priest so thoroughly denigrated—stripped of monastic discipline, wisdom, and even basic dignity—be simultaneously exalted with some of the most sacred imagery in the Buddhist tradition? How can a figure who fails by every conventional metric of spiritual attainment be lauded as a "fine jewel of a grandson" capable of bringing comfort and salvation not only to his immediate family but to "all his relatives down to the seventh generation"?.[1]

This report posits that Nichiren's depiction of Lord Jibu is a deliberate and masterful rhetorical construction, not a contradictory assessment. Jibu, in his very imperfection, serves as Nichiren's ideal exemplar of a practitioner in the Latter Day of the Law (*Mappō*), an age of spiritual decline where traditional paths to enlightenment have become inaccessible to ordinary people. His lack of conventional merit is not a hindrance but is, in fact, the necessary precondition for demonstrating the core doctrine that pure, unadulterated faith in the Lotus Sutra is the sole and sufficient cause for attaining Buddhahood. The passage is not a mixed review but a unified, radical theological statement about the absolute power of the Wonderful Dharma (*Myōhō*). To fully comprehend this, it is necessary to analyze the letter's context, deconstruct its seemingly critical language and laudatory metaphors, and situate it within the unique soteriological framework that Nichiren established in the turbulent religious landscape

of 13th-century Japan. This analysis will proceed by first examining Nichiren's strategic reinterpretation of the Ullambana service itself, then deconstructing the "criticism" and "praise" of Jibu, exploring the underlying doctrinal principles of faith in the age of *Mappō*, and finally, placing Nichiren's claims within a comparative framework of contemporary Buddhist schools to reveal their revolutionary nature.

II. The Ullambana Service Reinterpreted: From Filial Piety to the Power of the Lotus Sutra

To understand Nichiren's praise of Lord Jibu, one must first grasp his radical reinterpretation of the very ceremony that occasioned the letter: the Ullambana (Jp. *Urabon*) service for deceased ancestors. Nichiren appropriates this foundational narrative, which traditionally legitimizes the authority of the monastic establishment, and subverts it to establish the supreme and exclusive power of the Lotus Sutra.

The Traditional Narrative of Maudgalyayana

Nichiren begins his treatise by recounting the well-known origin of the Urabon festival, centered on the Venerable Maudgalyayana, one of Śākyamuni Buddha's ten major disciples.[2] He carefully establishes Maudgalyayana's impeccable credentials, describing him as "the foremost in transcendental powers among the disciples," a figure who ranked alongside Śāriputra, the "foremost in wisdom".[1] His spiritual attainments were beyond reproach; his observance of the 250 precepts was "as firm as a rock," his wisdom was "like the sun," and his powers were so great he could encircle and move the cosmic Mount Sumeru.[1]

Despite this immense personal power, he faced a tragic limit. Using his heavenly eye, he discovered that his deceased mother, Shodai-nyo, had been reborn in the realm of hungry spirits as karmic retribution for her "greed and stinginess" in her former life.[1] Nichiren vividly recounts her suffering, using graphic imagery from the sutras: "Her skin was like that of a golden pheasant when its feathers have been plucked; her bones were like round stones placed one beside the other. Her head was big as a ball, her neck thin as a thread, and her stomach swelled like the sea".[1]

The story reaches its critical turning point when Maudgalyayana, overwhelmed with pity, uses his great transcendental powers to offer his mother a bowl of rice. In a moment of profound

failure, his mother's lingering greed causes the rice to burst into flames the moment she puts it in her mouth, intensifying her agony.[1] Water he summons to douse the flames turns to firewood, making the situation even worse.[1] This failure demonstrates the absolute inadequacy of an individual's power, even that of a great arhat, when confronted with the deep-seated negative karma of another. Realizing his own limitations, Maudgalyayana appeals to the Buddha, who reveals the traditional solution: on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, he must make offerings of a hundred flavors to the assembly of "sage monks of the ten directions".[1] By relying on the collective merit of the monastic community (*sangha*), Maudgalyayana is finally able to free his mother from her suffering. This act forms the basis of the traditional Urabon ceremony.[2]

Nichiren's Doctrinal Subversion

It is at this point that Nichiren executes a theological coup. He does not end the story with the traditional conclusion. Instead, he argues that this initial act of salvation was incomplete. While Maudgalyayana could relieve his mother's suffering for a time, he "could not enable her to become a Buddha".[4] Nichiren explicitly diagnoses the cause of this ultimate failure: Maudgalyayana "put his faith in the Hinayana version of Buddhism and devoted himself to the observance of the two hundred and fifty precepts".[1] Because he himself had not yet attained Buddhahood, his ability to save others was fundamentally limited.

Nichiren then introduces a crucial addendum to the story, drawn from the Lotus Sutra. He explains that it was only later, during the eight-year assembly on Eagle Peak, that Maudgalyayana truly fulfilled his filial duty. There, he heard the supreme teaching of the Lotus Sutra, followed its directive to "honestly discard expedient means," and cast aside the Hinayana precepts to chant *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*.[1] Through this act of faith in the ultimate teaching, Maudgalyayana himself attained Buddhahood, becoming the Buddha Tamalapattra Sandalwood Fragrance. Critically, it was only at this moment that "his father and mother, too, attained Buddhahood".[1]

This strategic reframing is profound. The source of salvific power is decisively shifted away from the collective merit of the monastic community and is relocated entirely within the individual practitioner's faith in the Lotus Sutra. The ultimate act of filial piety is no longer defined as making material offerings to monks but as personally embracing and practicing the Wonderful Law. Nichiren's argument is that the established priesthood of his day, which he viewed as corrupt and heretical, had no power to save anyone. Their wisdom was "in a class with that of oxen," and a "huge stone could sooner ascend to heaven than they could exercise" transcendental powers.[1] Therefore, relying on them through traditional Urabon offerings was a futile, even fraudulent, act. The only true path to saving one's ancestors was

through the direct power of the Lotus Sutra, a power accessible to any individual, regardless of their status or the state of the institutional *sangha*.

III. Deconstructing the "Criticism": Annihilating Conventional Merit

Nichiren's seemingly harsh depiction of Lord Jibu is not a personal attack but a calculated rhetorical strategy. It is an act of theological demolition designed to clear the ground of all conventional notions of spiritual worth, thereby making space for the singular, absolute value of faith in the Lotus Sutra.

A Litany of Failures

The "criticism" systematically dismantles every pillar of traditional Buddhist practice. First, Nichiren addresses monastic discipline (*vinaya*), the very foundation of the priesthood. He states that Jibu "neither observes even one of the 250 precepts nor maintains even one of the 3000 solemn rules of conduct".[1] For a traditional school like Theravada, where the monastic code is paramount, this is a declaration of total failure.[7] It immediately disqualifies Jibu from any claim to clerical authority or sanctity.

Second, he negates the pillar of wisdom (*prajna*), which was the central focus of meditative schools like Zen.[8] By declaring that Jibu's wisdom is "like a horse or a cow," Nichiren dismisses any possibility that Jibu might possess profound insight or understanding gained through study or meditation.[1] This comparison is not accidental; it directly echoes Nichiren's critique of the priests of his day, whose wisdom he similarly equates with that of "oxen" or "sheep".[1]

Finally, he attacks Jibu's very character and comportment, stating that "in dignity he is like a monkey".[1] This removes any residual claim to personal virtue, charisma, or the kind of respectable bearing that would command the devotion of lay followers. For Jibu's grandmother, hearing that her grandson had failed in every single aspect of his chosen vocation—discipline, wisdom, and dignity—would have been profoundly unsettling. Nichiren deliberately invokes the highest standards of Buddhist clerical life only to show how utterly and completely Jibu fails to meet them.

Rhetorical Demolition as a Foundation for Rebuilding

This systematic annihilation of Jibu's personal merit serves a crucial theological purpose. By portraying Jibu as a complete failure by every conventional metric, Nichiren creates a spiritual *tabula rasa*. He is not offering a balanced assessment of Jibu's character; he is rhetorically stripping him of any claim to self-generated spiritual power. This is essential to his argument. Just as the great Maudgalyayana, with all his powers and perfect observance of the precepts, could not save his mother through his own efforts, the flawed Jibu certainly cannot. The "criticism" forces the reader to confront the inadequacy of personal attainment as a basis for salvation.

Nichiren's writings are filled with fierce polemics against rival schools, using extreme language to shock his audience into recognizing what he considered the grave slander of rejecting the Lotus Sutra.[9] Here, he turns that polemical style not against Jibu himself, but against the *standards* by which Jibu and all others would be judged. He demolishes the value system that prizes preceptual purity and intellectual wisdom as the primary qualifications for spiritual efficacy. This creates a vacuum of power. If Jibu's own efforts are worthless, where does the power to save his ancestors come from? This rhetorical demolition thus functions as a dramatic setup for the revelation that follows: the all-sufficient and unconditional power of the Lotus Sutra, which requires no pre-existing merit from the practitioner. The criticism is the necessary darkness that makes the subsequent light of the Dharma appear all the more brilliant.

IV. The Vessel of the Dharma: Symbolism of the Snake, Dragon, and Jewel

Having established Lord Jibu's absolute lack of intrinsic spiritual worth, Nichiren proceeds to praise him in the highest possible terms. This praise is rooted in a doctrine of derived sanctity, articulated through powerful and precisely chosen metaphors. Jibu is not holy in and of himself; he is made holy by the object of his faith.

The Metaphor of Exaltation

The turning point in the passage is the word "Nevertheless" (しかれども, *shikaredomo*), which

pivots from demolition to reconstruction. Nichiren states: "Nevertheless, what he reveres is Śākyamuni Buddha and what he believes in is the Lotus Sutra. This like a snake holding a gem or a dragon gratefully holding the relics of the Buddha in Dharma Body".[1] This single sentence redefines Jibu's identity entirely, transforming him from a failed priest into a sacred vessel.

Deconstructing the Symbolism

The power of this praise lies in the deep mythological resonance of its symbols within the Buddhist tradition.

- **The Snake (Nāga) with a Gem:** In Buddhist mythology, the Nāga (often translated as serpent or dragon) is not the malevolent tempter of Abrahamic traditions but a powerful, semi-divine being residing in subterranean or aquatic realms.[11] Nāgas are revered as potent protectors of the Dharma, guarding sacred texts, temples, and the Buddha himself.[11] They are also symbols of profound wisdom and transformation, as the shedding of their skin represents the casting off of ignorance.[11] Critically, they are often depicted as the possessors or guardians of a wish-fulfilling jewel, the *nāgamaṇi* or *cintāmaṇi*, which represents the supreme value of the teachings.[12] The snake's own nature is secondary; its ultimate worth and power are derived from the precious jewel it holds.
- **The Dragon with Relics:** In East Asian Buddhism, the dragon is a symbol of imperial authority, cosmic power, and benevolence.[15] Its role as a Dharma protector is paramount. Dragons are specifically described as the guardians of the Buddha's sacred relics (*śarīra*), the physical remnants that embody his enlightened life-state and are housed in stupas.[17] To be a dragon holding the Buddha's relics is to be the ultimate guardian of the most sacred treasure in the Buddhist cosmos, a being entrusted with preserving the very essence of enlightenment for future generations.

The Doctrine of Derived Sanctity

By likening Jibu to these figures, Nichiren makes a profound theological point. The snake does not *create* the gem; it *holds* it. The dragon does not *produce* the relics; it *guards* them. Similarly, Jibu does not generate enlightenment through his own wisdom or discipline. Instead, his simple, sincere faith in the Lotus Sutra (the gem, the relics) transforms him into a sacred protector of that truth. His personal identity is subsumed and redefined by his function as a votary of the Lotus Sutra.

Nichiren reinforces this with two further analogies that leave no room for ambiguity: "A

wisteria vine, by twining around a pine, may climb a thousand fathoms into the air; and a crane, because it has its wings to rely upon, can travel ten thousand ri. It is not their own strength that allows them to do these things".[1] Jibu is the humble wisteria vine; the Lotus Sutra is the mighty pine. By clinging to the Lotus Sutra, he "is able to ascend the mountain of perfect enlightenment".[1] He is the flightless creature given the wings of the "single vehicle" (*ekayāna*) of the Lotus Sutra, allowing him to "soar into the sky of Tranquil Light".[1]

This is the highest possible praise because it attributes to him not his own limited power, but the infinite power of the Dharma itself. His personal flaws—being like a cow, a horse, or a monkey—become utterly irrelevant. A simple, earthbound snake is still the guardian of the ultimate treasure. A weak vine can still reach the highest point by clinging to the great pine. Jibu, by clinging to the Lotus Sutra through faith alone, becomes a conduit for its boundless merit, capable of ensuring the enlightenment of his entire lineage.

V. The Primacy of Faith in the Latter Day of the Law (Mappō)

The radical logic undergirding Nichiren's praise of Lord Jibu is his understanding of the specific spiritual era in which he and his followers were living. The description of Jibu as a flawed but faithful priest is not merely a personal assessment but a diagnosis of the human condition in the Latter Day of the Law (*Mappō*).

The Age of Degeneration (Mappō)

The concept of *Mappō* was a pervasive belief in Kamakura Japan. Buddhist cosmology divides time after the Buddha's passing into three periods: the Former Day of the Law, when the teaching, practice, and proof of enlightenment all exist; the Middle Day of the Law, when teaching and practice remain but proof is difficult to obtain; and the Latter Day of the Law, when only the teaching remains, and the capacity of people to achieve enlightenment through traditional practices has severely declined.[19] This final age is characterized by social strife, political turmoil, natural disasters, and clerical corruption—a description that many felt accurately reflected the state of 13th-century Japan.[21]

In this degenerate age, Nichiren argued, the complex spiritual paths of the past have lost their efficacy. The rigorous observance of hundreds of precepts and the cultivation of profound

wisdom through years of silent meditation were practices designed for people of superior capacity in a more spiritually potent time.[23] For ordinary, flawed individuals in *Mappō*, attempting these paths was not only futile but could lead to arrogance and despair. Insisting on these now-inaccessible methods was, in Nichiren's view, a form of deception perpetrated by the established Buddhist schools.

The New Path: Substituting Faith for Wisdom (Ishin-daie)

In response to the challenges of *Mappō*, Nichiren championed a single, direct path accessible to all: the practice of faith. This doctrine, known as *ishin-daie* or "substituting faith for wisdom," posits that in the Latter Day, faith is not merely one component of practice but becomes the sole and sufficient cause for attaining enlightenment.[25] He found scriptural basis for this in the Lotus Sutra itself, which states in its third chapter, "Even you, Śāriputra, in the case of this sutra were able to gain entrance through faith alone. It was not due to any wisdom of your own".[25] If the disciple renowned as the "foremost in wisdom" required faith to grasp the sutra's ultimate truth, then it stood to reason that ordinary people in a degenerate age should rely on faith entirely.

For Nichiren, faith was not a passive or abstract belief. It was an active, concrete, and embodied practice: the vocal chanting of the *daimoku*, *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*, with deep conviction in the Gohonzon, the mandala he inscribed as the object of devotion.[26] This single practice was held to be all-encompassing, containing within it the merits of all other practices, including the keeping of precepts and the cultivation of wisdom.[24]

Lord Jibu as the Archetype of Mappō

This doctrinal framework provides the ultimate key to understanding the paradox of Lord Jibu. His inability to keep the precepts and his lack of wisdom are not presented as unique personal failings but as conditions symptomatic of the age itself. He is the archetypal ordinary person of *Mappō*. His one sterling quality—his pure, simple faith and reverence for the Lotus Sutra—is therefore the perfect and only required practice for this era.

In a stunning reversal of conventional religious logic, Nichiren presents Lord Jibu's spiritual deficiencies as his primary qualifications. Because he has no profound wisdom of his own to rely on, his faith must be pure and unadulterated. Because he cannot successfully observe the myriad rules of conduct, he is not tempted by the spiritual arrogance that might

accompany such observance—a fault Nichiren frequently attributed to the priests of other sects. Jibu is an empty vessel, which makes him perfectly receptive to the infinite power of the Wonderful Dharma. He is the living embodiment of the principle of *ishin-daie*. His "flaws" are precisely what make him such a powerful and reassuring example for his grandmother and for all of Nichiren's followers. They eliminate any ambiguity about the source of his salvific power. It cannot be his own merit, for he has none. It must come solely and completely from the Lotus Sutra he reveres.

VI. A Comparative Soteriology: Nichiren's Radical Path in the Kamakura Context

Nichiren's praise of the flawed Lord Jibu was not formulated in a vacuum. It was a pointed declaration made within the highly competitive and dynamic religious environment of Kamakura Japan. During this period, new, simplified forms of Buddhism—notably Zen and Pure Land—were emerging to meet the spiritual needs of a society convinced it was living in *Mappō*, challenging the authority of older, established schools like Tendai and Shingon.[20] To fully appreciate the radical nature of Nichiren's claims, it is essential to compare his path to salvation with those of his chief rivals.

A comparative analysis reveals that while other schools also simplified practice for the Latter Day, Nichiren's synthesis was unique. He combined the "single practice" accessibility of Pure Land with the "this-lifetime enlightenment" goal of Zen, but grounded it exclusively in the supreme authority of the Lotus Sutra and made it universally accessible through the vocal act of chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*.

Table 1: Comparative Paths to Enlightenment in Kamakura Buddhism				
Feature	**Nichiren Buddhism**	**Zen Buddhism (Rinzai/Soto)**	**Pure Land Buddhism (Jōdo shū/Jōdo**	**Traditional Schools (e.g., Theravada)**

			Shinshū)	
Primary Practice	Chanting *Daimoku* (*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*) to the Gohonzon.[20]	*Zazen* (sitting meditation), *Kōan* study.[8]	*Nembutsu* (chanting Amida's name).[31]	Observance of precepts, meditation, scriptural study.[7]
Basis of Salvation	Personal faith and practice manifesting innate Buddhahood (Self-Power).[27]	Personal effort in meditation to achieve direct insight (Self-Power).[8]	Faith in Amida Buddha's vow for rebirth (Other-Power).[32]	Gradual accumulation of merit through practice over many lifetimes (Self-Power).[34]
Role of Precepts	An *effect* of enlightenment, not a cause. Superseded by the single "Diamond Chalice Precept" of faith.[23]	A foundation for practice, but secondary to meditative insight.	Secondary to faith in Amida; seen as difficult for ordinary people in *Mappō*.[35]	Foundational and essential for spiritual progress.[7]
Ultimate Goal	Attaining Buddhahood *in this lifetime* (*sokushin jōbutsu*) in this world.[30]	Enlightenment (*satori/kenshō*) in this lifetime.[8]	Rebirth in the Pure Land *after death*, then eventual enlightenment there.[31]	Enlightenment over many *kalpas* (aeons).[34]

This comparative framework illuminates why Nichiren's assessment of Lord Jibu is so revolutionary. From the perspective of Zen, Jibu's lack of wisdom and meditative discipline would render him a hopeless case, far from the possibility of *satori*. From a Pure Land perspective, his faith would be commendable, but it would be directed toward the wrong object (Śākyamuni instead of Amida) and for the wrong goal (enlightenment in this world instead of rebirth in the Pure Land). From a traditionalist standpoint, his complete failure to observe the precepts would make him a disgrace to the priesthood.

Only within Nichiren's specific theological system does Jibu's condition transform from a

liability into an asset. His lack of self-power makes him the perfect candidate to demonstrate the efficacy of a teaching that relies solely on the power of the Dharma. His focus on this life aligns with the Lotus Sutra's promise of attaining Buddhahood in one's present form. His single-minded faith, unburdened by the complexities of other practices, is the exact practice Nichiren prescribed for the age. Thus, the praise of Lord Jibu is also an implicit critique of every other school of Buddhism. It asserts that their standards of judgment are obsolete and their paths to salvation are ineffective in the current age. Jibu's success, guaranteed by his faith alone, is the ultimate "actual proof" of the supremacy of Nichiren's teaching.[26]

VII. Conclusion: The Power of the Wonderful Dharma

The passage concerning Lord Jibu in Nichiren's *Treatise on the Ullambana Service* stands as a concise and brilliant manifesto of his entire soteriological system. What initially appears as a jarring contradiction—a scathing critique followed by effusive praise—is, upon deeper analysis, a perfectly unified and coherent theological argument. The "criticism" is a strategic demolition of the conventional framework of spiritual merit, which values personal attainment in precepts and wisdom. The "praise" establishes a new, absolute standard based solely and exclusively on faith in the Lotus Sutra, symbolized by the sacred act of a humble creature protecting the ultimate treasure.

This analysis has demonstrated that Nichiren first re-engineers the traditional Urabon narrative, shifting the source of salvific power from the monastic community to the individual's devotion to the Lotus Sutra. He then presents Lord Jibu as the ideal test case for this new paradigm. By systematically stripping Jibu of any claim to conventional merit, Nichiren creates a scenario where the priest's ability to save his ancestors can only be attributed to an external, absolute power. This power is the Wonderful Law, *Myōhō*, which Jibu connects to through his simple, sincere reverence.

The ultimate message of the passage is a profound statement on the relationship between the practitioner and the Dharma. In Nichiren's view, the power to attain Buddhahood and to benefit others resides not in the inherent skill, wisdom, or virtue of the practitioner, but in the supreme potency of the teaching they embrace. The Wonderful Law of *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* is so powerful that it can work through any individual, regardless of their personal flaws, intellectual capacity, or social standing. The vessel may be imperfect—as unwise as a cow, as undignified as a monkey—but the jewel it contains is supreme and untarnishable.

Lord Jibu, the flawed priest, thus becomes the ultimate symbol of hope for all ordinary people struggling in the Latter Day of the Law. He demonstrates that the simple, heartfelt act of faith is sufficient to make one a "fine jewel," a conduit for immeasurable good, and a true votary of

the Lotus Sutra. His ability to bring comfort to seven generations of his ancestors is guaranteed, not by his own non-existent power, but by his faith, which links him directly to the infinite, compassionate, and all-encompassing power of the eternal Buddha as revealed in the Lotus Sutra.

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