

Modern Nichirenist Discourses on Life and Jōsei Toda's Buddhist Thought

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1. Introduction

TODA Jōsei's essay entitled "Seimei-ron (The Philosophy of Life Force)" was published in the first issue of *Daibyakurengē* (Great White Lotus), organ periodical of Sōka Gakkai (July, 1949 issue). It is not oversimplified to say that this essay determined the philosophical orientation of postwar Sōka Gakkai. The concept of life has been thereafter one of the main cores of the Sōka Gakkai's doctrine to date.

In this essay, Toda expounded that life is eternal from past to future and the life refers to the very existence of people as they are. "Nichiren," he said, "was not a sage but just an ordinary person who only reached the second stage of six stages of Tiantai Buddhism, but *he* expounded and revealed the eternity of life and the immanence of Buddha. It means that what we are is nothing but timeless original being." He also maintains that the universe itself is a life and our individual lives after death would fuse into the life of the universe.²

But Toda is not the first thinker that accepted the concept of life on the ground of Nichiren Buddhism. Before the end of the Second World War, some nationalistic Nichiren Buddhists who are usually called "Nichirenists" actively advocated the concept of life. Nonetheless, though they used the same word, Toda's connotation of "life" is definitely different from that of Nichirenists. In this paper, I would like to attempt to illuminate the characteristics of Toda's views on life through comparison to those of Nichirenists.

2. YAMAKAWA Chiō (1879–1956)

As far as I researched, YAMAKAWA Chiō was the first Nichirenist that wrote on the concept of life. His book *Nichiren-shugi to Genzai Shōrai* (Nichirenism and its view on the present and the future, Shinchō-sha, Tokyo, 1917) includes the chapter entitled "The four major attributes of life (The universe is one great life)."³ There he said, "It is Buddha who is a great person, a person who has expanded absoluteness of life to its

ultimate limit, perfectly assimilated the entire universe to his pure spirituality, made absolute life of the whole universe his own life, experienced the complete oneness of self and the universe, and realized three thousand possible realms in a single life-moment. He is a great person who, through his own experience, revealed the true lives of all humanity. Ultimately we can identify Buddha with the true life of the entire universe. ... The sixteenth chapter (“Life Span of the Thus Come One”) of the Lotus Sutra reveals the original Buddha as the absolute entity of this cosmic life” (op.cit., pp. 174–175). By this identification of the cosmic life with the original Buddha, he also interpreted the Three Great Secret Laws of Nichiren Buddhism as shown below:

The object of devotion (*honzon*) of the Hon-mon (the latter half of the Lotus Sutra): spiritual (symbolic) expression of cosmic life

The title (*daimoku*) of the Hon-mon: individual expression of cosmic life

The high sanctuary (*kaidan*) of the Hon-mon: social expression of cosmic life

Yamakawa also expressed “the absoluteness (of life)” as “spiritual expansion” (op.cit., p. 165). In short, he thought that it is the original Buddha whose essential entity is all-encompassing and assimilating cosmic life. “The life of an individual person,” he said, “is a temporary manifestation of the cosmic life” (op.cit., p. 175). He maintains that individual life of each person “becomes a child of Shakyamuni. ... [it] becomes one with Shakyamuni and thus becomes one with the Mystic Law that is inseparable with Shakyamuni” (op.cit., pp. 175–6) by taking faith in the original Buddha. Yamakawa said “Becoming a buddha without bodily transformation means oneness of individual life and absolute life” (op.cit., p. 178). From the standpoint of an individual person, this means its integration with the original Buddha that is the cosmic life itself.

Although Yamakawa said “I would like to publish the further detail of this theory on later date” (op.cit., p. 1), we cannot find his publication of such a detailed theory. Nonetheless Yamakawa’s theory contains all the possible features of Nichirenist view on life, so his pioneering role seems large.⁴

3. SATOMI Kishio (1897–1974)

SATOMI Kishio inherited the Nichirenist view on life whose basic idea was outlined by Yamakawa. But it leaves some room for examination

whether their arguments are directly related because Satomi made no mention of Yamakawa's view. Nonetheless, it is a fact that they share basic points in common.

Satomi seems to have changed his understanding of the concept of life as his theory developed.⁵ In his *Hokekyō no Kenkyū* (A Study on the Lotus Sutra, Heirakuji Shoten, Kyoto, 1924), he said "What is a Buddha? He is nothing but the purest form and/or the highest ideal of life phenomena. He is the typical character that is the standard of perfection of life for all the individual lives. ... What is the original Buddha? He is the absolute essence of life that not only permeates all individual lives but is the source of them. To put it differently, it is nothing but a name which we attribute to the cosmic life in its entirety as a person" (op.cit., p. 356). The characteristic of Satomi's thought in this stage is his emphasis on personhood of the original Buddha as is seen in the above quotation. In this regard, he said "All humanity must look up to Shakyamuni as an absolute state and the highest standard for perfection of humanity and they should be assimilated to it" (op.cit., p. 567). He also called such religious life as "a life perfection movement" (op.cit., p. 574). As is seen in his usage of a term, "life-personhood" (op.cit., p. 566), it can be understood that the word "life" here indicates individual life that is identifiable with personhood.

However, in his *Hoero Nichiren* ("Roar, Nichiren!", Shunjū-sha, Tokyo, 1931)⁶, he writes as follows, "When we regard the original Buddha as a system of life, it wouldn't be surprising at all even if it becomes grass or tree" (op.cit., p. 120). "The original Buddha is originally a term to express life. And the life is, generally speaking, a beginningless and endless entity. Its lowest level manifestation is plants and animals, while its higher manifestation is humanity" (op.cit., p. 127). "Original Buddha can be said to be an all-encompassing life system in terms of mechanical view on nature, the law expressed as Myōhō-enge-kyō which is an expression of the law of life in terms of the ideal of law, conscious grasping of ourselves and its altruistic practice in terms of the view that regards personhood as end, and Shakyamuni and Nichiren in terms of moral view on religion" (op.cit., p. 129). From these observations, it might be perceived that Satomi shifted his focus from individual life to the system of life that underlies the individual life. Though we should need further research to understand why this change had happened,⁷ we can conclude that the Satomi's view on life landed on the same point as Yamakawa's as a consequence.

The influence of Satomi's view on life can be seen in various intellectuals. For example, his father TANAKA Chigaku (1861–1939), founder

of Kokuchū-kai, said “The doctrine of the Shakyamuni’s original enlightenment in the distant past is revealed and then the eternal and immutable great life is manifested; it is called the original Buddha. In other words, a true entity of Buddha is thus manifested. ... It is the absolute existence and the great life of the universe.”⁸ It is also pointed out that ISHIWARA Kanji (1889–1949), one of the officers primarily responsible for the Manchurian Incident, was influenced by Satomi and supported his view on cosmic life.⁹

The influence of Nichirenist discourses on life was not limited to followers of Kokuchū-kai and those of similar groups. For instance, we can find HORIZOME Taiei (Nichijun, 1898–1959)’s acceptance of the concept of life¹⁰. In his “Shinjienū Hitobito e (To those who cannot believe),” he said “Only those who perceive the eternity of life will be able to transcend the transmigration with differences and limitations and the transmigration with change and advance; and only those who have directly reached enlightenment to the world of original Buddha of *tathatā* (suchness, the absolute reality) will be possible to emancipate themselves from human sufferings.”¹¹ He also said “When one becomes wakened to the fact that human being is originally life itself, there should be no necessity to put forth an extra effort to live” (op. cit., p. 692), “Life which underlies art, science and ethic is in itself the entity of religion” (op. cit., p. 694). Though not in direct expressions, the “life” referred to here seems to be equated to Buddhist concepts such as the original Buddha and/or *tathatā*.¹²

4. KOBAYASHI Ichirō (1876–1944)

Now I would like to examine KOBAYASHI Ichirō (1876-1944) whose idea was directly related to that of Toda (although Horigome was also deeply connected to Toda). Kobayashi was a scholar of philosophy and literature. He served in positions including lecturer at the Imperial University of Tokyo and professor at Nichiren-shū Daigakurin (seminary for monks of the Nichiren Sect, present Risshō University) and Chūō University. He was a lay believer of Nichiren Buddhism and served as a central figure of Hokke-kai (assembly of the Lotus Sutra), a lay believers’ organization of Nichiren Buddhism. The Hokke-kai clearly distinguished itself from ultranationalistic tendencies held by Kokuchū-kai led by Tanaka Chigaku, promoting moderate practice of Nichiren Buddhism whose main membership were intellectuals. Kobayashi’s *Hokekyō Dai-kōza* (Enlarged Lectures on the Lotus Sutra, 1935–1936) was published from Heibon-sha. The publication was said to be a major

project that would determine the future of the publishing company and achieved a great success.¹³ His published lectures on the Lotus Sutra were originally based on the dictation of the lectures he had delivered and therefore written in very plain language. Though some doctrinal concepts are taken up in the lectures, they are also explained in extremely simple terms. Such plain approach is highly appreciated even today. He often referred to topics other than Buddhism in the lectures. Because of this, the overall coloring of the book is highly educational based on general learning. For the purpose of comparing his works against Toda's works, I would like to quote Kobayashi's lecture on a passage "this, my land, remains safe and tranquil, constantly filled with heavenly and human beings ("Wo ci tu an-wen. Tian-ren chang chong-man" in Kumārajīva's translation)" from the Life Span chapter of the Lotus Sutra:

"My land" does not refer to the land where you are at. It refers to the world seen from Buddha's eyes and the world in Buddha's mind. ... According to the Buddha's view, if the mind of all humanity becomes pure, the world will be truly peaceful. When that state is realized, regardless of any changes in the boundaries surrounding us, under any circumstances, we will not be influenced or bothered by them. ... This refers to the world of those whose minds are purified. (vol. 7, pp. 247–248)

It is worth noticing that Kobayashi regards the law that "governs all things in the universe" as being "life." On this point, we will elaborate later comparing his idea of "life" with that of Toda.

Kobayashi said that:

We express such overarching life using the term Buddha. Nevertheless, the Buddha should never be considered as an existence far apart from ourselves. It is a matter of course that the Buddha is far higher than our mortal daily lives. Having said that, being higher than us does not mean the Buddha is far removed from ourselves. I think we are all embraced by the Buddha's encompassing power and the protection rendered by that power makes it possible for us to exist (vol. 7, pp. 83–84).

Further, Kobayashi also calls this "overarching life" as original Buddha. In the case of Kobayashi, like Yamakawa and Satomi, "we" are the existence that is to be embraced by the original Buddha, an overarching life, and he does not emphasize the point that "we" ourselves are nothing but "life." We can find herein the uniqueness of Toda.

5. Jōsei Toda's Lectures on the Lotus Sutra

Toda started his lectures on the Lotus Sutra from January 1946, after his release from prison. After his inauguration as the second Sōka Gakkai president on May 3, 1951, he delivered lectures on the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” Chapters of the Lotus Sutra as the lectures for beginners’ classes of the Sōka Gakkai Study Department. The lectures were so popular that the audience was said to be overflowing out of the venue. The record of the lectures was published serially in Sōka Gakkai’s organ periodical *Daibyakurenge* (from the 60th issue through the 65th issue and from the 68th issue through the 73rd issue). Based on the installments, *Hōbenbon Juryōbon Seikai* (Comprehensive lectures on the Expedient Means and Life Span chapters) was published in 1958.

Toda graduated from Chūō University, where he studied ethics and philosophy under Kobayashi. He also read Kobayashi’s lectures on the Lotus Sutra.¹⁴ However Toda was critical about the Kobayashi’s lectures commenting “His understanding of the Lotus Sutra is by any standard Confucian ideas, failing to elucidate Buddha.”¹⁵ The Toda’s comment on Kobayashi’s lectures as being Confucian can be understood as his criticism to Kobayashi’s interpretation based on educational and cultural outlook. As is stated by Toda himself, the largest difference between their views can be found in their perceptions of Buddha. However, before going into that subject, I would like to examine the general characteristics of Toda’s lectures.

Though omitted in the book edition, “(laughter)” insertion appears very often in the lectures in the *Daibyakurenge* serialization text, indicating there were obviously a lot of laughter from the audience during the lectures. Such sense of humor setting the audience laughing is one of the characteristics of Toda’s lectures on the Lotus Sutra. This did not come simply from amusing way of his talk but rather from his vivid description of ordinary people’s lives that he conveyed with spontaneous humor. For a comparison with Kobayashi, I would like to show a Toda’s lecture on the same section as quoted above:

“This, my land, remains safe and tranquil”—your house where the Gohonzon (object of devotion) is enshrined is “this, my land, remains safe and tranquil,” so it must remain safe and tranquil. It shouldn’t be “All is consumed in a great fire.” And it also says “constantly filled with heavenly and human beings”—it must be constantly filled with people whose life condition is that of heavenly beings and tranquil people. But if you have its opposite, you will be in big trouble: the wife is sulky, the

husband angry, and children crying. If you have occasional visitors at your house, all of them are debt collectors. Isn't it far from being "constantly filled with heavenly and human beings", is it?¹⁶

While in the Kobayashi's lecture cited earlier "This, my land, remains safe and tranquil" is interpreted as a pure world perceived by Buddha, according to the Toda's interpretation the same passage of the sutra is all about our own (common mortal's) ordinary lives.

Toda's lectures are said to have unique feature of "reading what is hidden in the depth of the sutra." This is a way to re-read the Lotus Sutra as expressions of Nichiren's behavior and ideas. In the commentaries of the Lotus Sutra of other sects which belong to Nichiren Buddhism, too, the Lotus Sutra is interpreted in line with Nichiren's intention. However this only remains as a process of adding new interpretations based on the interpretation made in Chinese commentaries such as Zhi-yi's *Fa-hua wen-ju* (The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra). No major difference is seen in the process applied in the Nichiren Shōshū's doctrinal method on which Toda based his interpretation. However, Toda's lectures were given from a perspective different from such kind of interpretations. He not only gained direct understanding of the Lotus Sutra as an expression of Nichiren's ideas, but also went on to interpret it as a relevant expression of believers' daily lives as is seen in the aforementioned quote. The profound enlightenment Toda had attained in the prison had deep impact on this approach.

Toda writes about his own experience of enlightenment in the prison in his novel, *The Human Revolution*:¹⁷

"The Buddha is life itself!"

When Gan (a central character of the novel modeled after Toda) exclaimed in front of the table, a powerful sound of his clapping hands in excitement resounded in the room that had been still and silent infused with cold like a frozen seabed.

"The Buddha is an expression of life! It exists not outside our lives but within our own lives. Nay, it exists outside, too. That is an entity of cosmic life!"¹⁸

From the standpoint of his view on life that Toda had realized in prison, the Buddha is nothing but a life inherent in individual human being.¹⁹ This view may look seemingly similar to Kobayashi Ichiro's and other Nichirenists' views on life but is actually quite different from their notions. Those Nichirenists held a view that Buddha is a cosmic life that

subsumes individual persons. On the contrary, in Toda's view, Buddha is nothing but life inherent in an individual person and its external embodiment is cosmic life. According to this logic, the Lotus Sutra is interpreted as the sutra that not only expounds on Nichiren who is interpreted as the original Buddha in the doctrine of Nichiren Shōshū and Sōka Gakkai, but also precisely elucidates our own lives. Although this view can be also found in the discourses of Nichiren himself²⁰ and the *Ongi kuden* (Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings),²¹ Toda gave a clear picture of this view through the medium of the concept of life. This is the most unique feature of Toda's lectures on the Lotus Sutra. Because a dramatic transformation of ordinary people's identity is shown there: a transformation from a passive stance that ordinary people are to be saved by Buddha to a revelation that ordinary people are Buddhas themselves, highlighting their independent, spontaneous attitude. It can be said that herein lies the secret of Toda's lectures' success in attracting many people and that his lectures on the Lotus Sutra have a very unique, distinctive place in the history of interpretations of the Lotus Sutra.

Conclusion

Despite the basic commonality between Nichirenists and Jōsei Toda in their views to see Buddha as life, yet there is a great discrepancy in their actual understandings. Their differences derive from the priority or emphasis they placed in their concepts of Buddha being equal to life. In prewar Nichirenists' view, the concept of life when they say it is equal to Buddha, it indicates cosmic life as original Buddha; they did not necessarily placed importance on the fact that the life exists inherently within individual lives. On the contrary, Toda placed importance on the fact that the life is first and foremost the life inherent in individual lives thus emphasizing that each and everyone is Buddha.

From the perspective of social thought, Nichirenists' notion to see the original Buddha equal to life has a high affinity for totalitarian view of society due to its centrality of comprehensive cosmic life. In fact, many of the Nichirenists are known to be fervent nationalists.²² On the other hand Toda's view on life that stressed individual lives is an idea that readily conformed to the context of postwar regime that upheld the doctrine of popular sovereignty. While we cannot find in the prewar Nichirenists' ideas a thought content to give top priority to and respect for human survival that should derive from their religious conviction,²³ Toda declared, "we, the citizens of the world, have an inviolable right to live."²⁴ Their difference may be said to have resulted from their diver-

gence in the underlying structure of their respective views on life.

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Notes

¹ TODA Jōsei, *Toda Jōsei Zenshū* (The Collected Works of Jōsei Toda), Seikyo Shimbunsha, 1983, Tokyo, vol. 3, p. 14.

² With regard to his enlightenment in the prison, Toda only said, “I had a very mystic experience and there appeared the unfathomable feeling I had never known” (*Toda Jōsei Zenshū*, vol. 3, p. 7).

³ The four major attributes of life consist of continuance, expansivity, autonomy and absoluteness. These attributes are said to respond respectively to a desire to live, a desire for reproduction, a desire for freedom and a desire to assimilate.

⁴ After *Nichiren-shugi to Genzai Shōrai*, Yamakawa published *Warera no Shin no Eisei* (Our true eternal life, Tengen Minpō-sha, Tokyo, 1923), which includes the similar view on life. However, that is just a short essay and therefore it is hard to call it a detailed description of his view. In addition, we cannot know why Yamakawa took interest in the concept of life.

⁵ Satomi said he first elaborated his discourses on life in his *Nichiren Shōnin Seiten no Shin-kaishaku* (A new interpretation of Nichiren’s sacred texts, Tengen Minpō-sha, Tokyo, 1920). This book is not available now for the author to read. Satomi’s first book, *Nichiren-shugi no Shin-kenkyū* (A new study on Nichirenism, Kokuchū Sangyō Shoseki-bu, Tokyo, 1919) did not mention the concept of life. This book is a publication of his graduation thesis presented to Waseda University.

⁶ This book is a retitled edition of *Nichiren wa yomigaeru* (Nichiren revives), Koku-tai-kagaku-sha, Kyoto, 1929.

⁷ His studying abroad may have influenced his thought.

⁸ “Honge no Shin (Faith of the disciples of the True Buddha),” a lecture in 1932. Tanaka Chigaku, *Nichiren-shugi no Shinkō* (Nichirenist Faith), Shinsekai-sha, Tokyo, 1965, p. 83.

⁹ MATSUOKA Mikio, *Nichiren Bukkyō no Shakai-shisō-teki Tenkai* (The Development of Nichiren Buddhism as a Social Thought: A Religious Ideology in Modern Japan), University of Tokyo Press, Tokyo, 2005, pp. 124–5, pp. 135–6.

¹⁰ Horigome became the 65th patriarch of Nichiren Shōshū. He was one of a few monks who supported Toda and Sōka Gakkai.

¹¹ *Nichijun Shōnin Zenshū* (The Collected Works of Rev. Nichijun), vol. 2, Nichiren-shōshū Bussho Kanko-kai, Tokyo, 1960, p. 691.

¹² Horigome also studied at Waseda University as Satomi did, but it is not known whether they were in the relation to influence one another.

¹³ Kobayashi’s life and achievements are reported in *Kobayashi Ichiro Sensei no*

Omoide (In Memoriam Prof. Kobayashi), a collection of essays, included in vol. 12 of the new edition of *Hokekyō Dai-kōza* (Nisshin Shuppan, Tokyo, 1965). Quotes from *Hokekyō Dai-kōza* hereinafter are from its first edition published by Heibon-sha.

¹⁴ “Since I studied ethics and philosophy under Prof. Kobayashi at Chūō University, I am not supposed to criticize his lectures on the Lotus Sutra. For it is said that a disciple should not criticize his mentor. But, however repeatedly I read them, I have to say his lectures do not make sense at all.” Toda, *Shitsumon-kai Shū* (Answers to questions, Sōka Gakkai, 1963, Tokyo), p. 172. *Toda Jōsei Zenshū* (1982), vol. 2, p. 200. On the relationship between Kobayashi and Toda, see ŌNISHI Katsuaki, “Nichiren-kei Shin-shūkyō ni okeru Seimei-shugi-teki Kyūsai-kan no Seisei, Tenkai, Hen’yō (Genesis, Expansion, and Transfiguration of the Vitalistic Conception of Salvation among Nichiren-affiliated New Religions),” *Tōyōgaku-kenkyū* (Toyo University Oriental Studies), No. 47, March, 2010, pp. 219–223.

¹⁵ Toda, *Shitsumon-kai Shū.*, p. 172.

¹⁶ *Daibyakurenge*, 65th issue, pp. 16–17. *Toda Jōsei Zenshū* (1985), vol. 5, p. 420.

¹⁷ Toda’s enlightenment was based on the passage of *Wu-liang yi jing* (the Sutra of Immeasurable Meaning), beginning “His body (the entity of the Buddha) neither existing nor not existing, neither caused nor conditioned, neither self nor other.” This illustrates that the Toda made his view on life independently from other Nichirenists’ views including that of Kobayashi’s. Because Nichirenists’ notion of life was developed around the notion of original Buddha in the Life Span chapter of the Lotus Sutra.

¹⁸ Jōsei Toda, *Shōsetsu Ningen Kakumei* (Human Revolution: A Novel), vol. 2, 1972, Seikyō Shimbun-sha, Tokyo, paperback edition, p. 238.

¹⁹ The following statements aptly demonstrate where Toda placed the emphasis in his usage of the word, “life.” “The Gohonzon exists within the life of each person ... whether we believe it or not, the Gohonzon is inherent in our lives.” “Nichiren Daishonin expounded that the entity of ‘Nam-myōhō-rence-kyō’ encompasses that which activates and motivates everything. That same motivating force also exists within our own lives. What we should do is to manifest it” (“Mirai no Kōfuku no Tameni [For the sake of happiness in the future],” a lecture in 1953, *Toda Jōsei Zenshū*, 1984, vol. 4, p. 70).

²⁰ The view can be seen in passages such as, “Shakyamuni Buddha, who has attained perfect enlightenment, is our own flesh and blood. His practices and the resulting virtues are our bones and marrow” (“The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind Established in the Fifth Five-Hundred-Year Period after the Thus Come One’s Passing,” *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Sōka Gakkai, Tokyo, 1999, p. 365), and “the storehouse of the eighty-four thousand teachings represents a day-to-day record of one’s own existence” (“The Unanimous Declaration by the Buddhas of the Three Existences regarding the Classification of the Teachings and Which Are to Be Abandoned and Which Upheld,” *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin Volume II*, Sōka Gakkai, Tokyo, 2006, p. 843).

²¹ In a passage for example it reads, “Now it is the understanding of Nichiren and his followers that, generally speaking, the term ‘Thus Come One’ refers to all living beings. More specifically, it refers to the disciples and lay supporters of Nichiren” (*The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings*, trans. by Burton Watson, Sōka Gakkai, Tokyo, 2004, p. 124).

²² Although Kobayashi held a line against Tanaka and other Kokuchū-kai followers, he also authored a book such as *Kōkoku Seishin Kōza* (Lectures on the national spirituality of the Empire of Japan, 1941–43).

²³ Matsuoka, op. cit., p. 313.

²⁴ “*Gensuibaku-shiyōsha wa shikei ni* (Declaration Calling for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons),” a speech in 1957, *Toda Josei Zenshū* (1984), vol. 4, p. 566. On the later development and transfiguration of the concept “life” in the doctrine of Sōka Gakkai, see Ōnishi, op. cit., pp. 215–217.