

Special Focus: Translating Buddhism



The Buddhist Dharma for Sale: Who Owns the Past? The Internet and Objects of Worship

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Abstract: The digital revolution has increased the ability of individuals to appropriate and profit from the cultural knowledge of religious groups that are largely unprotected by existing intellectual property law. Is it possible to claim ownership of the Buddhist dharma; the teachings of the Buddha? Does a group's relationship to its cultural productions constitute a form of ownership? Can a religious image be copyrighted? In an effort to address these questions, this article will focus on the emergence and transformation of the *Moji-Mandala* or Gohonzon (御本尊), created by the Japanese monk Nichiren (日蓮) (1222–1282). Nichiren's followers were persecuted, and some were executed when the scroll was found in their possession. Nichiren's hanging *mandala* was previously available only to individuals seriously practicing Nichiren's Buddhism. Currently, Nichiren's *mandala* is reproduced electronically over the internet by websites claiming to represent various Buddhist lay organizations.

Keywords: Art History, Intellectual Property, Japan, Religious Images, Copyright, Internet

Finding original Buddhist mandalas for sale as art works on eBay and on Amazon inspired me to look into the notion of “possession” of Buddhist images. Is it possible to claim ownership of the Buddhist *dharma*, the teachings of the Buddha? I contend that a group's relationship to its cultural productions constitute a form of ownership. However, the digital revolution has increased the ability of individuals to appropriate and profit from the cultural knowledge of religious groups that are largely unprotected by existing intellectual property law. I will argue that we are custodians with a responsibility to protect and care for precious works of art for future generations. To own a religious artifact is a privilege and a responsibility. As an art historian my primary interest is visual material. Exploring constructs of cultural heritage/cultural property, this article will examine ideas about objects of a sacred or religious nature, from multiple perspectives, including public and international policy, intellectual property, public custodianship, and heritage preservation. Over the course of this paper I will explore the historic use of mass production in the spread of religious images in medieval Japan and at present. The Gohonzon has made its way into cyberspace, and I

hope that this study will function as an aid to better understand Nichiren's Buddhism and clear up the veil of mystery that has historically surrounded Nichiren's *mandala*.

Methodology

In an effort to address these issues, this article will examine the emergence and transformation of the *Moji-Mandala* (文字曼荼羅) Gohonzon (御本尊), originally created by the Japanese monk Nichiren, (日蓮) (1222–1282). At great risk to himself and his followers, Nichiren secretly wrote down the Gohonzon that he bestowed upon his closest devotees. An individual would be severely punished and even beheaded if the scroll was found in their possession. Followers were seized and tortured, some were executed, but Nichiren's school gradually gathered strength (Yampolsky, 1990: 10). Nichiren was very restrictive in his choice of recipients when inscribing a Gohonzon. There are several passages in Nichiren's letters where he advises his disciples not to reveal important Buddhist doctrines, and not to mention the Gohonzon to the uninitiated. In a letter written in 1272, he states, "It is advisable that you do not let it be known that you are a believer" (Gosho Translation Committee, 1985: 30). Finally, this text will examine the international development of Nichiren's Buddhism and the role of Nichiren's *Moji-Mandala* in today's world. To support my argument, images presented in this paper have been copied from the internet.

In the context of Nichiren Buddhism, the Gohonzon refers specifically to a hanging paper scroll inscribed with Chinese calligraphic characters. The main characters spell out the title of the *Hokke-kyo* (法華經), or *Lotus Sūtra: Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō*—(南無妙法蓮華經). Since the thirteenth century, when Nichiren first inscribed the Gohonzon, its function as an object of worship has been the subject of controversy. In Japanese usage, Nichiren's Gohonzon is an object of devotion in its own right and is understood to represent a Buddhist *mandala*. Nichiren made the production of calligraphic objects of devotion into a major part of his ministry. Modern-day Nichiren Buddhists treat each Gohonzon with utmost respect as the *mandala* is believed to embody the life condition of the Buddha, as the words of the Buddha are inscribed on the hanging scroll. Practitioners generally avoid touching the hanging scroll and photographing or copying the *mandala* is discouraged. Each recipient of the sacred *mandala* makes a vow to not show the calligraphic image to uninitiated (Davis, 2011). I will examine the iconography of Nichiren's *mandala*, and evaluate the calligraphy that makes up the image of devotion. I would like to make note of the method used in researching this *mandala* and the Buddhist sect for which it is used as an object of worship. In addition to written sources, I have had personal conversations with Mr. Owada, former General Director of the Nichiren Buddhist lay group Sōka Gakkai in Scandinavia. Mr. Owada was originally a member of the Japanese branch of the Sōka Gakkai before moving to Stockholm, Sweden. He was one of the pioneers that introduced Nichiren's Buddhism to the Scandinavian countries in the early 1960s. Information regarding the Sōka Gakkai-USA has generously been provided by a longtime practitioner of Nichiren Buddhism in Birmingham, Alabama.

Intellectual Property and the Internet

In the twenty-first century, the Buddhist tradition exists in a social environment radically different from any previous era. The global horizon of contemporary Buddhism creates new questions that the tradition never confronted previously. The protection of intellectual property is currently at the heart of a heated debate. The Internet has had a profound impact on intellectual property law. How can a product of the mind become the subject of bounded property rights? Although it is important to have access to information, it is of importance to respect creators' rights to the material they produce. As the world becomes more technologically advanced, greater access is available to other people's ideas. It is this access that has necessitated greater protection of intellectual property, and the laws governing this protection have become more controversial (Peloso, 2003: vii).

Intellectual property law is dominated by the concept of copyright. Copyright is the exclusive, legal right to publish, reproduce, and sell a literary, artistic, dramatic, or musical work (Bielstein, 2006). U.S. copyright laws protect only the tangible expression of an idea. However, copyright law does not give copyright holders absolute control over their works. A major limitation is the fair use doctrine, which allows individuals to make a copy of a work for personal use or for education, commentary, criticism, parody, or other socially beneficial use. As an example, a critic may write a negative review of a copyrighted book and quote sections from the book, even if the author does not approve of the column (Peloso, 2003: 92). The public domain is often regarded as little more than an intellectual junkyard, a place where out-of-print books and antiquarian drawings languish. Which elements are currently found in the public domain, free for the taking, and which are not? Essentially, copyright law regards the public domain as a form of "nonproperty". This accounts for the indifference with which it is often treated. Copyright industries such as film, music, and publishing, routinely raid the public domain for material and try to privatize it (Bollier, 2005: 147). Today, in the new millennium, what are we to make of art and religious images that are virtual, not actual? Where will the legal boundaries be drawn to define which appropriations will be considered theft and which will be artistically justified? The fact that intellectual assets are public goods is the main reason for intellectual property laws chronic instability (Goldstein, 2008: 152).

What is the Role of Religion in the Twenty-First Century?

In the 1990s it was widely predicted that the Internet would become a dominant force reshaping the ways in which religions in Japan was done, providing religious groups with new means to boost themselves and turn around the decline in membership and support structures (Baffelli, Reader & Staemmler, 2011: 21). In 1999, Dawson and Hennebry conducted one of the earliest surveys on new religious movements on the internet. This survey included the Japanese Buddhist organization Sōka Gakkai (創価学会). The report suggested that the emergence of the World Wide Web may be changing the conditions of new religious life in our societies in significant ways. There are both promise and peril in the new technologies of cyberspace for the future of religion

(Dawson & Hennebry, 1999: 20). The term “new religious movements” (often abbreviated to NRMs) is an umbrella term used for movements or organizations also described as “alternative religions”, “non-conventional religions,” contemporary sects,” new religious groups,” or new religious sects”. For scholars in the sociology of religion, “new” is a relative term. Indeed, some “new” religions are more than a hundred years old (Baffelli, 2013: 208). In addition, while early studies suggested that the Internet would change religions, offering new ways of development and of spreading their messages, they also suggested that the Internet would present new challenges to religions. What is currently evident in the studies of new media in Japanese context is that the online religious practices and representations are to a great degree a rather conservative reiteration of the offline (Baffelli, Reader & Staemmler, 2011: 21–22). Gregory Price Grieve believes that modern practices of mindfulness have grown out of the history of technological developments in the postwar industrialized world (Grieve, 2015: 107). Regarding the role of religion in the Twenty-First Century, the former President of the Sōka Gakkai, Daisaku Ikeda states that in spite of being closer in material and informational terms, people today exist in a state of spiritual isolation, and he does not believe the internet has brought people closer together. The greater the influence of the internet becomes, the more energetically the ethics and responsibilities of the users come into question. Setting up rules based on reliable ethics and value criteria is indispensable. The golden rules of most religions against taking life, stealing and deceiving must be the foundation. Buddhism puts special emphasis on compassion, and we must reaffirm such universal values (Cox & Ikeda, 2009: 37–39).

A Virtual Relationship?

Anthropologist Jessica Falcone argues that in order to begin the conversation about virtual Buddhist sacred materials, one must understand the significance and variations on how these objects are understood in the physical world. Falcone explains that in contemporary Buddhist life, images often take center stage in religious spaces, either as paintings or statues of the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and learned teachers, since the veneration of sacred objects is thought to have many karmic benefits to the makers and worshippers of the object (Falcone: 2015: 175). I contend that for non-initiated laypersons, unable to communicate on intellectual and ritual terms with the item, the experience of facing an object of worship is entirely different. In his paper titled “Techno-Ritualization: the Gohonzon Controversy on the internet”, Mark MacWilliams asks why members of Nichiren Shōshū and the SGI (Sōka Gakkai) find Gohonzon on the Internet to be sacrilegious (MacWilliams, 2006: 96). MacWilliams found this to be a valuable lesson of the power of the Internet to transform religious practice in radically new and controversial ways. MacWilliams’ thesis state: what divides independents from institutional Nichiren Buddhists is a difference in understanding of how technology can be used ritually. Independents are explained as former members that chose to leave organized Nichiren Buddhism. MacWilliams stress that “independents” use cyberspace as an “expedient means” to achieve universal salvation (MacWilliams, 2006: 96). Grieve states that virtual worlds are just pixels on the screen that users manipulate through keystroke and mouse click. Such empty pixels are transformed into worlds by the

digital media practices that afford sociability (Grieve: 2015: 23). On the subject of pixels, confusion abounds. Pixels are the tiny bits that make up a digital image. A digital file has actual physical dimensions, just as a traditional photograph does. Authors, hoping to improve low resolution images they print out at home, often try to increase resolution using the Photoshop software that comes with their computers. The result is rarely satisfactory (Bielstein, 2006).

Appropriation is not especially new in art. Over the centuries, artists have studied the old masters and copied whatever motif they desired. On the other hand, why do many wait in line at the Louvre for several hours to get a glimpse of the *Mona Lisa*, while there are millions of copies found in books, poster, and even post cards depicting the mysterious woman painted by Leonardo Da Vinci? The answer may be simple; we want to see the original painting by the hand of the master. Jessica Falcone distinguishes between actual life images and virtual images, stating that in actual life, a holy object is already a stand-in for something else, metaphorically, but also quite literally (Falcone: 2015: 176). In a study on virtual holy objects, devotees assert they believe virtual objects are not as powerful as holy objects in actual life (Falcone: 2015: 185). Daniel Veidlinger attempts to clarify the nature of digital media, explaining that the key aspect information is reduced to a series of ones and zeros that can be stored and decoded by machines to render the content visible again (Veidlinger, 2015: 12). Photographic images of the Gohonzon have not really been an issue until recently, as Nichiren Buddhists traditionally respected the prohibition expressed by the priesthood. Photographing or copying the Gohonzon has historically been discouraged because the resulting copies can easily be desecrated, abused or misused. Modern day practitioners claim that unauthorized or printed copies of the Gohonzon are considered to be powerless and unable to benefit those who venerate them (Owada, 2011). The loss of information regarding the protection and care for the sacred image, is another issue resulting from easy accessibility over the internet. Buddhist knowledge regarding the function and use of the Gohonzon was not written down on paper, but was passed from master to disciple. The personal connection and information are vanishing as non-practitioners can purchase or print out Nichiren's Gohonzon online.

Nichiren

Nichiren (1222–1282) was the last reformer and sect-founder of the Kamakura period (1185–1333). He was the son of a lowly fisherman in the village of Kominato. According to the social structure of the time, Nichiren was born into the lowest level of Japanese society, reserved for those whose work related to blood or the killing of animals. Warriors, merchants, farmers, and women in general were categorized as evil, and outcasts such as hunters and fishermen who made their living by the taking of life, were thought to be beyond hope of salvation.¹ He was ordained at the age of sixteen and given the monastic name Zesho-bo Rencho (是聖房蓮長) before changing his name to

¹ Modern scholars point out that the term fisherman referred to a broad class of society. Kino Kazuyoshi (Rodd, 1980: 3) has suggested that Nichiren's father could have been head of a small group of fishermen and responsible for the group to local authorities. Takagi Yutaka, believes the father must have been a manorial functionary (*shokan*), for Nichiren sided with the manor lords in their feuds with officials and he was sent to the temple for an education, a privilege usually reserved for the sons of higher classes.

Nichiren. The Japanese word *nichi* (日) translates to sun, and *ren* (蓮) is the lotus flower (Rodd, 1980: 8).

By the thirteenth century, the Kamakura Shogunate ruled Japan from 1185 to 1333 from its capital Kamakura. Life in Japan was harsh and violent during the Kamakura era, when even Buddhist temples armed themselves to defend their properties (Bechert & Gombrich, 1984: 225). Beginning in 1256, Japan suffered a series of calamities. Storms, floods, droughts, earthquakes, and epidemics inflicted great hardship on the nation. In 1257, a severe earthquake destroyed many temples, government buildings, and homes in Kamakura. Plagues and famine ravaged the city and corpses littered the streets (Rodd, 1980: 9). Nichiren believed that only through faith in his teachings, could Japan be saved and cast blame for Japan's plight on the doctrine of the *Jōdo* (浄土真宗) or Pure Land. He was a fierce opponent of Pure Land Buddhism, and openly denounced the practice of reciting the *Nembutsu* (南無阿弥陀仏 *Namu-Amida-Butsu*). Nichiren was an outspoken critic of Japan's rulers for patronizing these heretics. While other religious leaders of the Kamakura period mainly emphasized the salvation of the individual, Nichiren strove for a socio-religious reform at the national level (Bechert & Gombrich, 1984: 225). Nichiren proclaimed himself the prophet and savior of Japan. He stated that only a belief in the True Law could establish a peaceful land (Gosho Translation Committee, 1985: 48). Followers of the Pure Land doctrine were outraged by Nichiren's accusations. They set fire to his house, barely allowing time for Nichiren to escape, and in 1261 the government charged him with heresy and banished him to the peninsula of Iso (Yampolsky, 1990: 7). Throughout his life, Nichiren was repeatedly exiled by the regent, and although many attempts were made on his life, he continued in his mission to save Japan. The atmosphere of hostility at the time of Nichiren's advent, and the plots against his life, prompted him to caution his close disciples to keep their Buddhist beliefs a secret.²

The Gohonzon

During his second exile on Sado between 1271 and 1273, Nichiren is believed to have inscribed the first Gohonzon. Originally, Nichiren inscribed each Gohonzon by hand in black ink (*sumi-iro* 墨色) for a few specific individuals. After Nichiren's death, personal Gohonzons were produced by the priesthood through the woodblock printing process, enabling the spread of Nichiren's Buddhism to a larger part of the population. These block-printed Gohonzon are known as *Okatagi* (お形木) Gohonzon. Each successive High Priest inscribed an original Gohonzon signed in the corner with their name. These originals became the design carved into the woodblock that was used to produce printed copies (Owada, 2017). Supreme among them is the *Dai* Gohonzon, a singular object of worship believed to have been inscribed by Nichiren for all human kind. According to

² According to Mr. Shoji Owada, Nichiren's strong opposition to Pure Land Buddhism was primarily for humanitarian reasons. In Nichiren's time, suicides among Pure Land practitioners were increasing at an alarming rate. The chaotic times gave credence to the conviction that the degenerate era of the Buddhist Law *mappō* (末法) was imminent. The era of *mappō* was understood to be the end of days, characterized by natural disasters, war and famine, and a pessimistic mood took hold of the population of Japan. During the turbulent times, many Pure Land practitioners decided to take their own lives, believing they would be reborn in Amida's paradise.

legend, on October 12, 1279, at the age of fifty-eight, Nichiren inscribed the *Dai* (great or large) Gohonzon (大御本尊), in response to the arrest and beheading of three of his followers, an event known as the Atsuhara Persecution (Gosho Translation Committee, 1985: xxxi). The *Dai* Gohonzon is considered to be the primary Gohonzon from which all other Gohonzon derive their power (Seager, 1999: 81). The printed scrolls modern Nichiren practitioners venerate today are consecrated replicas of the *Dai* Gohonzon. This large *mandala* is carved with Chinese characters, on a board of Japanese camphorwood that has been covered with black lacquer (*urushi* 漆), while the lettering is painted with gold. The *Dai* Gohonzon is housed in a sixty feet tall wood shrine or *butsudan* (仏壇), at the *Taiseki-ji* temple (総本山), located on the lower slopes of Mount Fuji in Fujinomiya.³ In my research I have found no documentation confirming the tales regarding the creation of the *Dai* Gohonzon, nor do any extant translated texts by Nichiren refer to a specific *Dai* Gohonzon. Buddhist images of worship venerated in Japan have historically been kept out of the view from the general public. Many images of devotion have been concealed in temples for centuries, only revealed to the public on special occasions. From 1972, until its demolition in 1998, the *Dai* Gohonzon was housed in the building known as the *Shōhondō* (正本堂). The construction of the *Shōhondō* was funded largely through donations contributed by lay believers around the world (Seager, 199: 82). Today the large wood mandala is to be found in the *Hoando* (奉安堂) built on the site of the old *Shōhondō* (Davis, 2011).

The Layout of Nichiren's *Mandala*

There are 125 identified Gohonzons made by Nichiren extant today. They are easily identified as they feature his name at the bottom, to the left of the *daimoku* (題目). Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis describes the layout and function of medieval Japanese Esoteric *mandalas* as a sacred gathering of deities that are assembled together to provide a focus for contemplation by devotees. *Mandalas* convey a sense of emanation outward from the sacred center. Generally, the deity who presides over the central court is synonymous with the generative power of the universe (ten Grothenhuis, 1999, 6). Nichiren's *mandala* is laid out in a similar manner. The iconography of the Gohonzon does not depict anthropomorphic representations of deities; instead Nichiren represented his view of a Buddhist universe through abstracted calligraphic lines, making use of Chinese ideograms to represent divine beings. Each one of Nichiren's Gohonzon is drawn by using the same set of characters, but the execution of the calligraphy is remarkably different. In China and Japan, calligraphy has been considered an important art form. The execution of the calligraphic line was believed to reveal the personality of the hand that held the brush. In the hands of a scholar, the twin arts of painting and calligraphy were an expression of the highest levels of sensibility and taste. An inscription could

³ There is some confusion regarding the creation of the *Dai* Gohonzon now at *Taiseki-ji*. Modern Nichiren practitioners question the notion of Nichiren carving the large wood mandala at the age of fifty-eight. Mr. Owada speculates that while Nichiren inscribed the *Dai* Gohonzon on a large paper scroll, he was personally not responsible for carving the large wood mandala now standing at *Taiseki-ji* temple in Japan. Instead, Nichiren's disciples were likely responsible for carving the large Gohonzon on the wood tablet after his death. In addition, according to legend, the Gohonzon used when carving the *Dai* Gohonzon was destroyed during the tracing process. This notion is now being challenged by modern day Buddhists.

turn out to be a very revealing document (Sullivan, 1974: 11). The paintings were done quickly with a few quickly executed brush strokes, leaving part of the paper blank, thus creating an imbalance; almost a conflict between the black ink and the white paper. The vitality of the Chinese characters comes across as a burst of energy on the page, and the elegant brushwork of the calligraphy is turned into a reduced (or minimal) form of painting. The slender lines of the writing reveal the artist's knowledge of earlier Chinese and Japanese pictorial and calligraphic works. The simple design of the paper background enhances the strong calligraphy executed in thick black ink with free, vigorous brushstrokes. The dexterity in the use of the brush and ink is characteristic of Nichiren, revealing the distinguished hand of the painter while the execution of the Chinese characters shows a strong vitality of the artist's spirit.

Inscribed on Nichiren's *mandala* are the second and sixteenth chapters of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Down the center column of the Gohonzon, Chinese characters spell out the title of the *Lotus Sūtra: Nam-Myōhō-Renge-Kyō (Homage to the Sūtra of the Lotus of the Wonderful Law)*, signed by Nichiren. This demonstrates the oneness of the person and the Universal Law. Nichiren added the Japanese word *Nam* (homage or devotion) before the title. The layout of Chinese characters on the paper symbolizes various Buddhist deities, and life conditions inherent in every human. Nichiren depicted the god of the Sun *Nitten* (日天), the god of the Moon *Gatten* (月天), the god of the stars *Myōjō-ten* (明星天), and other deities that represent life existing in outer cosmos, and the movement of heavenly bodies (Ikeda, 1985:28). *Bishamontenno* (毘沙門天), one of The Four Heavenly Kings, is placed in the upper right-hand corner. He vowed to protect those who embrace the *Lotus Sūtra*. *Tahō Buddha* (多宝如来) is depicted to the left of the *daimoku*, and *Fudō Myō-ō* (不動明王) the Immovable, is placed closer to the bottom of the *mandala*. *Fudō Myō-ō* is usually depicted as an angry deity surrounded by blazing fire, as he exudes flames that destroy karmic obstacles. To the left and right are the names of various Buddhist figures that represent the ten worlds.⁴ Nichiren included them to indicate that even the Buddha's life contains the lower nine worlds. The *mandala* symbolizes Nichiren's view of a Buddhist universe through simplified calligraphic lines for the devotee to focus on while meditating. Understanding the writing on the paper does not mean that one understands the Gohonzon itself. The majority of the lower classes of the population in medieval Japan were illiterate, and many of Nichiren's devotees may not have been able to read and understand the literal meaning of the Chinese characters on the Gohonzon (Figure 1).

Since each Gohonzon was executed in ink by hand on paper, they were all slightly dissimilar. Certain figures were added or excluded depending on when and for whom the scroll was inscribed. For example, Gohonzons made for males were larger and had additional characters compared to those for women. In addition, the figure of *Devadatta* (提婆達多), representing Hell, appears only on a third of the extant Gohonzon inscribed by Nichiren. *Ashura* (阿修羅), representing anger, is present in about half of Nichiren's Gohonzon. In the Mahāyāna School of Buddhism, every deity has both a peaceful aspect

⁴ Mr. Owada confirms that the Dai Gohonzon is housed at Taiseki-ji where he has observed the great mandala.

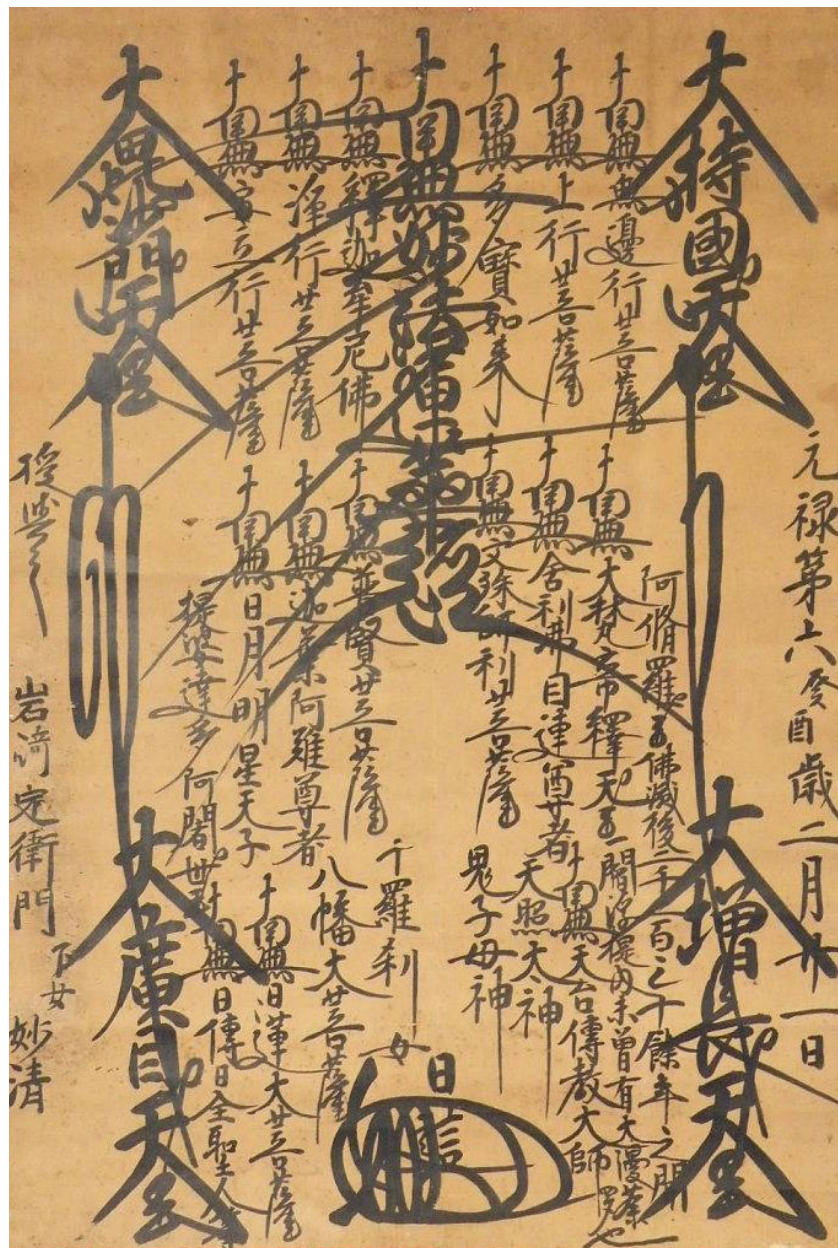


Figure 1—Nichiren—The Gohonzon. Ca. 1280, Kamakura period. Black ink on paper. <https://goo.gl/images/vHbHLe>

and an angry aspect that makes it easy to misinterpret the angry countenance of many esoteric deities. The anger is actually directed toward that which would prevent a person from attaining enlightenment, such as ignorance or pride. According to Japanese calligrapher Ryukyo Saito, each brush-stroke must be in line with the spirit of the artist in it. To bring to life the *sumi*, the artist must be able to pass on the feeling of a living quality to the one who views his work (Saito, 1959: 36).

Since the thirteenth century CE, when Nichiren first inscribed the Gohonzon, its function as an object of worship has been the subject of controversy. Each person who received the Gohonzon was able to venerate the *mandala* directly without the need for any intermediaries, thereby diminishing the power of the priesthood. Generous

offerings and donations from lay believers were a major part of support for the clergy at Buddhist temples (Causton, 1995: 35). Further, Nichiren promised Buddhahood to all, including women and members of the lower classes. For these reasons, Nichiren's object of worship was perceived to be a radical text at the time of its creation. Nichiren created powerful enemies within the clergy and was persecuted repeatedly by the regent for his nonconformist ideas.

The Mass Production of Religious Images

Buddhism played a crucial role in the development of printing technology specifically, and of some of the first mass-produced items more generally, which set the stage for the development of the modern digital technologies that permeate life today (Grieve, 2015: 6). In Japan, early Buddhists believed that one could acquire religious merit by making hundreds or even thousands of images of the Buddha. Since the simplest way to accomplish this task was to stamp images from a wooden block, many devout believers made a practice of stamping a large number of images each day. In many cases, a number of such sheets were rolled up and placed inside a statue of the deity whose image they carried, thereby sanctifying the image (Arkus, 1976: 21). A portrait sculpture of the monk Eison 叡尊 (1201–1290), founder of the Shingon Ritsu school of Buddhism (真言宗), was found to contain forty-seven items including the text of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The texts were so tightly packed that it would have been difficult to reinsert them had they been taken out (Groner, 2001: 123). By the eleventh century, Buddhist temples in Japan were producing printed books of *Sūtras*, *mandalas*, and Buddhist texts and images. Printing was restricted to the Buddhist sphere, as it was too expensive for mass production and Japan did not have a receptive, literate public interested in printed objects. Japanese Buddhists, believing that the age of *mappō* (末法) or the age of the final *dharma* was imminent, were committed to ensure the survival of Buddhism. Beginning in the eleventh century and continuing for more than five-hundred years, *Sūtras* were copied, consecrated, enshrined, and then interred in the confines of sacred mountains, shrines and temples. The sacred texts were not meant to be read, studied or even seen. They were deployed as ceremonial artifacts to assure the salvation of both the religion and the individual (Moerman, 2010: 71–90).

The Sōka Gakkai (創価学会)

By appealing to the lowest among society, Nichiren started a grassroots movement that has continued until our time. Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–1944) and Josei Toda (1900–1958) brought the Gohonzon to the international arena in 1930. Together they founded the Sōka Kyoiku Gakkai (創価教育学会), the precursor to the Sōka Gakkai (創価学会) a lay society based on Nichiren's Buddhism (Straus, 1995). During World War II, the wartime government of Japan banned the group founded by Makiguchi, and incarcerated the entire leadership. Makiguchi died in prison of malnutrition in 1944. He had been charged with treason for his resistance to incorporate state supported Shintoism into the doctrine of Nichiren Buddhism (Straus, 1995: 202). Even though suppressed during World War II by the military government, the organization experienced rapid growth



Figure 2. Nichikan Shonin The Gohonzon. Printed Copy. The original inscribed in black ink on paper. Ca. 1720. Crazysigns [CC BY-SA 3.0], from Wikimedia Commons.

in the aftermath of the war, due to the strong faith and spiritual activities of Japanese women (Owada, 2018).

Following several years of arguments over doctrinal and financial issues, the priesthood at Taisei-ji in Japan excommunicated the Sōka Gakkai (創価学会) in 1991. The paper replicas of the *Dai Gohonzon* presented to new converts were traditionally inscribed and consecrated by the high priest at Taisei-ji. The consecration ceremony performed at the temple symbolically connected each replica to the *Dai Gohonzon*. To receive the paper scroll, each convert underwent an initiation ritual (*gojukai* 御授戒) at the temple. After the break between the priests and the lay group, all Gohonzons were withheld, and members of the Sōka Gakkai were denied access to ritual functions

performed at Taiseki-ji and all other Nichiren Shoshu temples (Seager, 1999: 70). Today there are several groups in the United States, and around the world, that practice Nichiren's Buddhism and chant to the Gohonzon. In 1993, the Sōka Gakkai began to issue Gohonzons reproduced from an old *mandala* transcribed in 1720 by Nichikan (日寛), the 26th High Priest. In addition, the lay society recalled thousands of *okatagi* Gohonzons inscribed by the 67th High Priest Nikken (1922–) held by lay believers around the world. The recalled Gohonzons were ritually destroyed, and members received newly printed *mandalas* to venerate (Soka Gakkai International, 2011). The new Nichikan Gohonzon (Figure 2) differs in a number of ways from the *okatagi* Gohonzon fashioned at Taiseki-ji. *Devadatta*, representing hell, and *Ashura* representing anger, in addition to the Wheel-turning Kings representing humanity, are missing. While the *daimoku* is inscribed in the middle with bold strokes of the brush, much of the paper is left blank, creating a feeling of airiness, inspiring a sense of peace and harmony in the practitioner (Figure 2).

In his essay on Buddhism, consumerism, and the human environment, Richard K. Payne asserts that the self is not an isolated, independent, unchanging reality distinct from other people or the world around it (Payne, 2010: 3). Mark MacWilliams mentions “the independents” of Nichiren Buddhism that left the SGI and practice Buddhism outside of organized religion. The separation of SGI and the Temple caused many to feel ashamed of their religion (MacWilliams, 2006: 92). Indeed, controversy is not new to Nichiren's Buddhism. At the time of its creation, Nichiren's Gohonzon was considered to be a controversial and even dangerous piece of writing. Nichiren broke with traditional beliefs which stated that Buddhahood was reserved for only a few. Nichiren promised salvation to all who embraced the law of the universe embodied in the Gohonzon. Although he was nearly beheaded, exiled and persecuted by the regent and other Buddhist priests, he remained steadfast in his beliefs until his death. Seven hundred years later Josei Toda; the founder of the lay organization Sōka Gakkai, died under similar circumstances never wavering in his decision to not change the iconography of Nichiren's mandala (Owada, 2018).

The concept of *Itai-dōshin* (異体同心) is used to describe the unity of people with a common cause. Nichiren used the phrase to encourage unity among his followers. In his writing known as “*Many in Body, One in Mind*” Nichiren states, “If the spirit of many in body but one in mind prevails among the people, they will achieve all their goals, whereas if one in body but different in mind, they can achieve nothing remarkable” (Gosho Translation Committee, 1985: 153).

On the Idea of Uniqueness

The role of the Internet changed the uniqueness of the Gohonzon. The Gohonzon was previously available only to individuals seriously practicing Nichiren's Buddhism. Traditionally, Buddhist priests had a monopoly on the services and ceremonies of Nichiren Buddhism, including the creation of the Gohonzon *mandala*. Currently, however, Nichiren's *mandala* is reproduced electronically over the Internet by websites claiming to represent various Buddhist lay organizations. Anyone who so wishes can choose between a Gohonzon created by several high priests or an original Nichiren mandala, press “print”, and hang the image on a wall as a decoration. This development

raises several questions regarding respect for religious beliefs, and about the concept of ownership. Once a work enters the public domain it loses most protections (Brown, 1998: 193–222). Can the appearance of the image be manipulated online? Will digital images compromise the integrity of the medium? Can we trust the information we find on the internet regarding religious images? The loss of information regarding the protection and care for the sacred image is another issue resulting from easy access over the Internet. Buddhist knowledge regarding the protection and use of the Gohonzon was traditionally not written down on paper but was passed down from master to disciple. For non-initiated laypersons, the experience of facing a ritual object is not the same, being unable to communicate on intellectual or ritual terms with the characters on the scroll.

Anthropologist Michael F. Brown states that there exists an inherent right of cultural ownership, and this right should be guaranteed by new laws (Brown, 1998: 193–222). When it comes to devotion of Christian religious images, Ivan Gaskell believes there are degrees of sanctity. He states that a photograph of a saint is indistinguishable from a photograph of an ordinary person. Walter Benjamin states in *Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* that “The unique painting has aura whereas the photograph has none”. Referring to Walter Benjamin’s formula, Gaskell claims that photographs of religious images lack aura, and cannot be expected to work miracles (Gaskell, 2010). Walter Benjamin distinguishes between unique, original artworks imbued with aura and authenticity, ultimately derived from cultic associations, and media such as photography and film, characterized by multiple copies that lack aura and cannot work miracles. He defines aura as a strange web of space and time: the unique appearance of distance, no matter how close it may be (Benjamin, 2003: 251–283). Regarding religious images distributed on the internet, Gaskell considers the internet to be one of the most effective ways of promoting the miraculous status of an image. Gaskell believes that the future of miraculous images lies not in analogue photography, but rather in digital technology which preserves and spreads the image worldwide (Gaskell, 2010). By contrast, Brown claims that by copying religious images or texts we do not respect the integrity of the image. Instead, religious knowledge in the wrong hands may find its power diminished or distorted (Brown, 1998: 193–222).

I stress that we must keep in mind that the Gohonzon is a Buddhist object of worship. To be more precise; the Gohonzon is a hanging scroll expressing Nichiren’s Buddhist dogma. Nichiren Buddhists would state that the Gohonzon represents your life. Would you not protect your life and keep it safe? Facing the Gohonzon is like facing a mirror. While meditating, you recognize your weaknesses and faults, enabling you to polish your life by practicing the eightfold path. Richard Causton points out that the Gohonzon is not a god or talisman that grants wishes (Causton, 1995: 226). Mr. Shoji Owada explains that the Gohonzon is indeed a piece of paper. Paper is a fragile material vulnerable to water and fire. Like the human body, paper will perish if not properly taken care of. But then again, we must ask ourselves: what does this paper represent? Paper is a vulnerable material, easy to tear or burn. Devotees protect this piece of paper and kept it out of sight from the public eye (Owada, 2018). Allow me to make a comparison: a dollar bill is

a piece of paper as well. We keep this piece of paper hidden from the public eye in our wallet. The dollar bill sustains us, providing food. MacWilliams states that making many copies of the Gohonzon and spreading them around the world will bring fantastic results such as universal salvation (MacWilliams, 2006). I would ask McWilliams to make copies of a dollar bill. Would the copy have a value? Would the copy bring fantastic results? Of course not. We cannot turn back the clock. Historically, soiled or damaged Gohonzons were returned to the temple for cleaning or ceremonial disposal. Today, sacred images have found a way into cyberspace.

Conclusion

Looking at the Gohonzon we see a small piece of paper inscribed in black ink. The paper can be cut or ripped to shreds and may even be burned. It is not very colorful and therefore not really decorative. Why has this piece of paper caused so much controversy since its first inscription on October 12, 1279? At the time of its creation, Nichiren's Gohonzon was considered to be a controversial and even dangerous piece of writing. At great risk to himself and his devotees, Nichiren secretly wrote down the Gohonzon on paper and passed them on to his closest followers. Easy to hide and transport across long distances, these small objects were repositories of power, containing the life force of the Buddha. By protecting the *Lotus Sūtra* in the form of the Gohonzon, Nichiren's disciples were protecting the teachings of the Buddha. The religious beliefs and practices in Japan today are not necessarily the same as those in early medieval Japan. Buddhism met the spiritual needs of ordinary people and redefined the roles that women occupied in Buddhism. Nevertheless, there are cultural and historical influences that can be traced directly from that time to the present. Nichiren's Buddhism has adjusted to new cultures and spread around the globe. This process continues today as Buddhism establishes roots in new locations in the West. In addition, actions taken by leading figures of the lay organization demonstrate that the belief in the calligraphic line to retain and reveal the artist's personality and character is still prevalent in Japan. Ironically, by excommunicating the lay organization (Sōka Gakkai) the priesthood lost control over the Gohonzon, the main image of devotion of Nichiren Buddhism.

The keywords are respect and education. Respect each other's differences. Take the time to learn about the history of an object of worship before proclaiming that we should create millions of copies. A group's relationship to its cultural productions constitutes a form of ownership. To be in possession of a religious artifact is a privilege and an immense responsibility. As an art historian I maintain that we never really own a religious artifact or work of art. We are custodians with a responsibility to protect and care for precious works of art for future generations. Laws may be created to regulate the copyright of images, however, without a regulatory body to oversee and enforce moral and ethical standards of care and responsibility, the inherent value of religious, intellectual and historical artifacts will be discounted or perhaps even lost.

Regarding the matter of digital reproductions of objects not protected by copyright; the purpose of copyright under United States law, is to promote innovation and creativity. We owe a great debt to curatorial professionals who have preserved human cultural heritage for centuries. Without their foresight, many objects may have been lost

or decayed by now. Efforts have been made to standardize copyright laws among nations through agreements such as the Berne Convention and the Nagoya Protocol, but Global harmonization has yet to be reached (Blackwell & Blackwell, 2013). Regarding access to the Gohonzon on the internet; this is a complex issue that requires further study. Modern day practitioners claim that unauthorized or printed copies of the Gohonzon are considered to be powerless and unable to benefit those who venerate them. Nevertheless, the concept of copying images found on the internet raises questions regarding respect for religious beliefs, and concepts of cultural ownership. From the perspective of the user, the internet is a free medium that opens access to information. Can we control access to religious and cultural images over the Internet? Is it possible to copyright cultural images? The answer to this question returns us to the original point about the significance of ownership. We never really own a religious artifact or work of art. We are custodians with a responsibility to protect and care for precious works of art for future generations. Just because we can reproduce an image, does not mean that we should. The role of the internet altered the secrecy of the Gohonzon. Even though there has always been a prohibition against photographing or reproducing the Nichiren's *mandala*, it is easy to find images of various Gohonzons drawn by the hand of Nichiren; a person can order digital copies on line. Several old Gohonzons have sold on e-bay. The priesthood is against this practice, but they are powerless against the effectiveness of image reproduction during the mechanical age.

Hopefully, a profound shift in the way we conceptualize, and control cultural information is under way. This is a multifaceted situation, that must be made more complex by distinguishing purely commercial issues from issues of science and scholarship. More discussions are needed on this very intricate issue, as the notion of copyright varies in many cultures and nations. The prediction by Ivan Gaskell may prove to be correct, as unconsecrated images of the Gohonzon can spread around the globe by the millions. Consecrated, unconsecrated, inscribed by hand, printed by woodblock or digitally, the words of the Buddha do not change. The act of seeing has a prominent place in the history of Buddhism. The *Dharma* is commonly described as something one should come and see for oneself. Just as the Buddha opened his eyes to the ultimate truth (the Buddha translates to one who has awoken), so his words are said to enlighten those blinded by ignorance, hatred, and desire. The Buddha once said, "The one who sees the *Dharma* sees me; the one who sees me sees the *Dharma*". As stated in the *Lotus Sūtra*, wherever the word of the Buddha is to be found, there is already a whole body of the Buddha.

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