

## Diagram of the Five Periods of the Buddha's Lifetime Teachings



**T**HE *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* says that Shakyamuni left household life at age nineteen and gained enlightenment at age thirty.

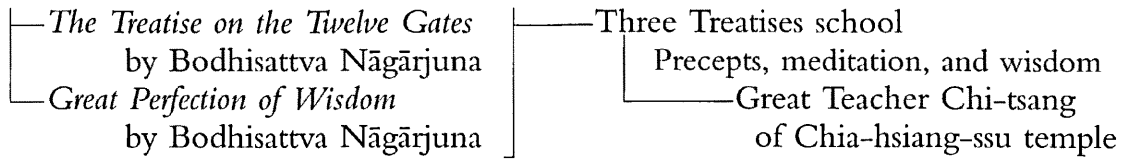
Flower Garland Sutra provisional Mahayana [preached for] 21 days or 14 days <sup>1</sup>	Flower Garland school Precepts, meditation, and wisdom	[ Tu-shun Chih-yen Fa-tsang Ch'eng-kuan
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Āgama sutras Hinayana [preached for] 12 years	Dharma Analysis Treasury school Precepts, meditation, and wisdom Establishment of Truth school Precepts, meditation, and wisdom Precepts school Precepts, meditation, and wisdom	Reverend Ganjin
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Correct and Equal sutras provisional Mahayana		
— Great Collection Sutra		
— Profound Secrets Sutra	Dharma Characteristics school Precepts, meditation, and wisdom	[ Hsüan-tsang Tz'u-en
— Lankāvatāra Sutra	Zen school	
— [Meditation Sutra Two-Volumed Sutra Amida Sutra]	Pure Land school	Shan-tao
— [Diamond Crown Sutra Mahāvairochana Sutra Susiddhikara Sutra]	True Word school Precepts, meditation, and wisdom	

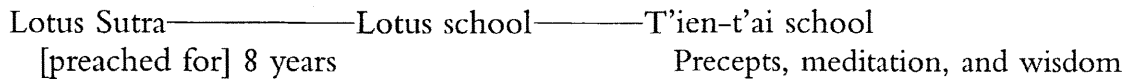
Wisdom sutras provisional Mahayana	
— <i>The One-Hundred-Verse Treatise</i> by Bodhisattva Āryadeva	]
— <i>The Treatise on the Middle Way</i> by Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna	

DIAGRAM OF THE FIVE PERIODS



[The Correct and Equal sutras and Wisdom sutras were preached for] 30 years.<sup>2</sup>

The Immeasurable Meanings Sutra states: “I made use of the power of expedient means. But in these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth.” It also says: “Though immeasurable, boundless, inconceivable asamkhya kalpas may pass, they will in the end fail to gain unsurpassed enlightenment. Why? Because they will not know about the great direct way to enlightenment, but will travel perilous by-ways beset by numerous hindrances and trials.” It also says: “Because, practicing it, one travels a great direct way free of hindrances and trials.”



The Lotus Sutra says: “The World-Honored One has long expounded his doctrines and now must reveal the truth.”<sup>3</sup>

“Though they [the Buddhas] point out various different paths, in truth they do so for the sake of the Buddha vehicle.”<sup>4</sup>

“Honestly discarding expedient means, I will preach only the unsurpassed way.”<sup>5</sup>

“But now this threefold world is all my domain, and the living beings in it are all my children. Now this place is beset by many pains and trials. I am the only person who can rescue and protect others, but though I teach and instruct them, they do not believe or accept my teachings.”<sup>6</sup>

“If a person fails to have faith but instead slanders this sutra, immediately he will destroy all the seeds for becoming a Buddha in this world. . . . When his life comes to an end he will enter the Avīchi hell.”<sup>7</sup>

“Is this not a devil pretending to be the Buddha, trying to vex and confuse my mind? I thought.”<sup>8</sup> (Shāriputra’s doubt, volume two)

“The Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law . . . all that you have expounded is the truth!”<sup>9</sup> (Words of testimony spoken by Many Treasures Buddha)

Taken from volume six of the Nirvana Sutra:

Nirvana Sutra

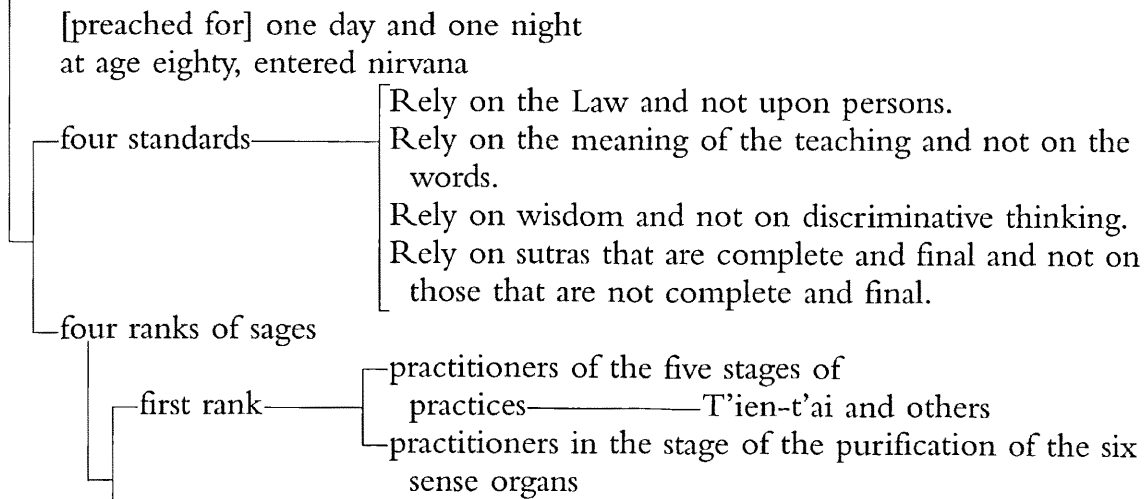
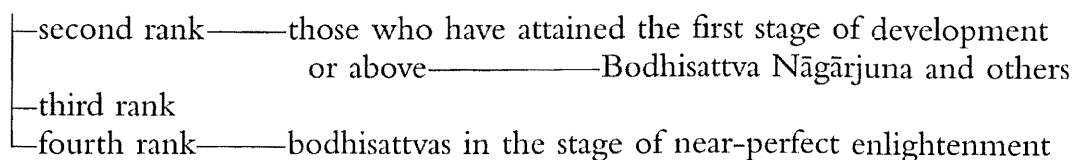


DIAGRAM OF THE FIVE PERIODS



—The *Commentary on the Ten Stages Sutra* states:

[Ways] to reach the stage of non-regression

- difficult-to-practice way——like traveling an overland route, where the going is hard

- easy-to-practice way——

- like going by boat over water, where the going is easy

- [calling the names of] ten Buddhas,<sup>10</sup> 130 and more bodhisattvas, Amida Buddha, etc.

The Sanskrit text of *Commentary on the Ten Stages Sutra* in India comprises 14, 15, or 16 volumes. It was written by Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna, and translated by the Tripitaka Master Kumārajīva.

—The Dharma Teacher T'an-luan, a person of the Ch'i dynasty and originally of the Three Treatises school, wrote *The Commentary on "The Treatise on the Pure Land,"* 2 volumes.

—The Meditation Master Tao-ch'o, a person of the T'ang dynasty and teacher of Shan-tao, wrote *The Collected Essays on the World of Peace and Delight*, 2 volumes.

*Collected Essays on the World of Peace and Delight* states: "The Great Collection Moon Storehouse Sutra says, 'In the Latter Day of the Law when my [Shakya-muni's] teachings lose the power of salvation, though millions and millions of people may adopt my teachings and practice the way, not a single person will attain Buddhahood.' This Latter Day of the Law we now face is an evil age stained by the five impurities. Only this single doctrine of the Pure Land offers a road by which one can gain admittance."<sup>11</sup>

—Shan-tao, a person of the T'ang dynasty, wrote [a commentary on the Meditation Sutra made up of four volumes entitled] "Profound Meaning Section," 1 volume, "Meaning of the Introduction," 1 volume, "Meaning of the Meditative Good Acts," 1 volume, and "Meaning of the Unconcentrated Acts," 1 volume; *The Teaching on Meditation Sutra*, 1 volume; *Praising Rebirth in the Pure Land*, 1 volume; *Praising the Meditation to Behold the Buddha*, 1 volume; *Hymns for Services*, 2 parts. The above works come to 9 volumes in all.

—Hōnen, also known as Genkū, lived 50 some years ago, in the Kennin era of the Retired Emperor of Oki.

*The Nembutsu Chosen above All*, 1 volume

—Difficult-to-practice way, Sacred Way teachings, and sundry practices

"Not a single person has ever attained Buddhahood," and "not even one person in a thousand . . ."

belief in the Lotus Sutra or any of the other sutras with the exception of the three Pure Land sutras, and belief in all Buddhas and bodhisattvas and all deities with the exception of the Buddha Amida

the Tendai Lotus school and the others of the eight schools, which one should "discard, close, ignore, and abandon"

—Easy-to-practice way, Pure Land teachings, and correct practices

Belief in Amida Buddha insures that “ten persons out of ten and a hundred persons out of a hundred will be reborn in the Pure Land.”

A total of 637 sutras in 2,883 volumes should be discarded, closed, ignored, and abandoned.

The Two-Volumed Sutra states: “After I have attained Buddhahood, if any among the living beings in the ten directions have sincere minds and faith, and wish to be reborn in my land, and if they meditate on me ten times and yet are not reborn there, may I not attain correct enlightenment—excepting only those who commit the five cardinal sins and those who slander the correct teaching.” Tao-ch’o’s statement that “not a single person has ever attained Buddhahood,” Shan-tao’s assertion that “not even one person in a thousand” can be saved, Hōnen’s injunction to “discard, close, ignore, and abandon”—all these constitute slander of the correct teaching, do they not?

The Lotus Sutra, volume two, the “Simile and Parable” chapter, states: “If a person fails to have faith but instead slanders this sutra, immediately he will destroy all the seeds for becoming a Buddha in this world. Or perhaps he will scowl with knitted brows and harbor doubt or perplexity. Listen and I will tell you the penalty this person must pay. Whether the Buddha is in the world or has already entered extinction, if this person should slander a sutra such as this, or on seeing those who read, recite, copy, and uphold this sutra, should despise, hate, envy, or bear grudges against them, the penalty this person must pay—listen, I will tell you now: When his life comes to an end he will enter the Avīchi hell, be confined there for a whole kalpa, and when the kalpa ends, be born there again. He will keep repeating this cycle for a countless number of kalpas. Though he may emerge from hell, he will fall into the realm of beasts.”

The Nirvana Sutra, volume ten, states: “[Chunda spoke once more], asking, ‘What is the meaning of the term “icchantika”?’

“The Buddha said: ‘Chunda, suppose there should be monks or nuns, lay men or women who speak careless and evil words and slander the correct teaching, and that they should go on committing these grave acts without ever showing any inclination to reform or any sign of repentance in their hearts. Persons of this kind I would say are following the path of the icchantika.

“‘Again there may be those who commit the four grave offenses or are guilty of the five cardinal sins, and who, though aware that they are guilty of serious faults, from the beginning have no trace of fear or contrition in their hearts or, if they do, give no outward sign of it. When it comes to the correct teaching, they show no inclination to protect, treasure, and establish it over the ages, but rather speak of it with malice and contempt, their words replete with error. Persons of this kind too I would say are following the path of the icchantika.

“‘Again, if there are those who deny the existence of the Buddha, the Law, and its believers, persons of this kind too I would say are following the path of the icchantika. With the exception of this one group of people called icchantikas, however, you may offer alms to all others, and everyone will praise you.’”

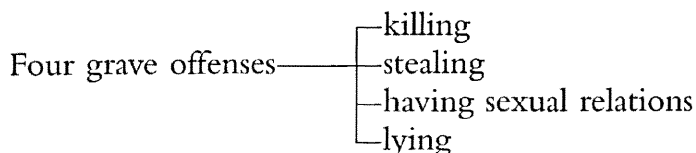
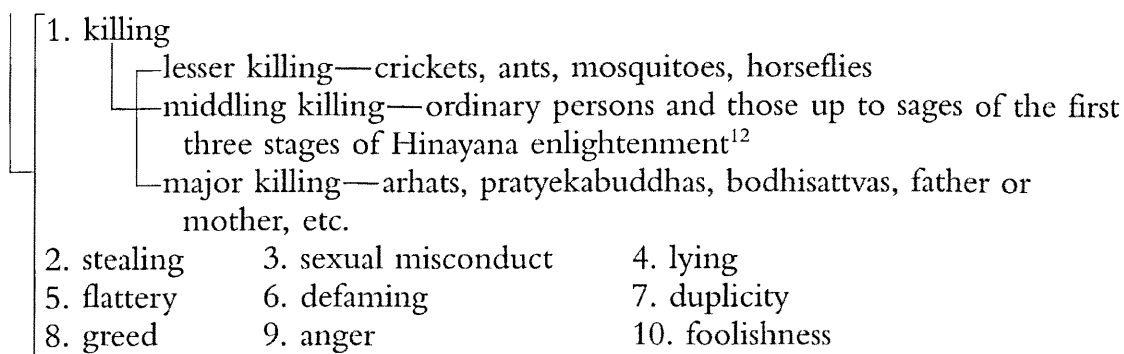
Ten evil acts

Major wrongdoers fall into hell.

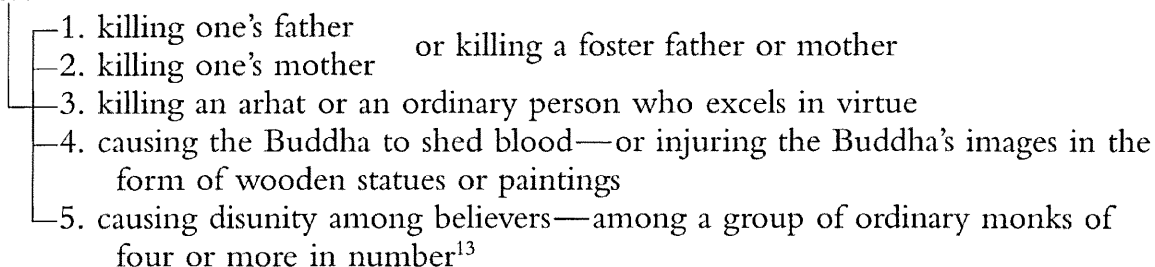
Middling wrongdoers fall into the realm of hungry spirits.

Lesser wrongdoers fall into the realm of animals.

DIAGRAM OF THE FIVE PERIODS



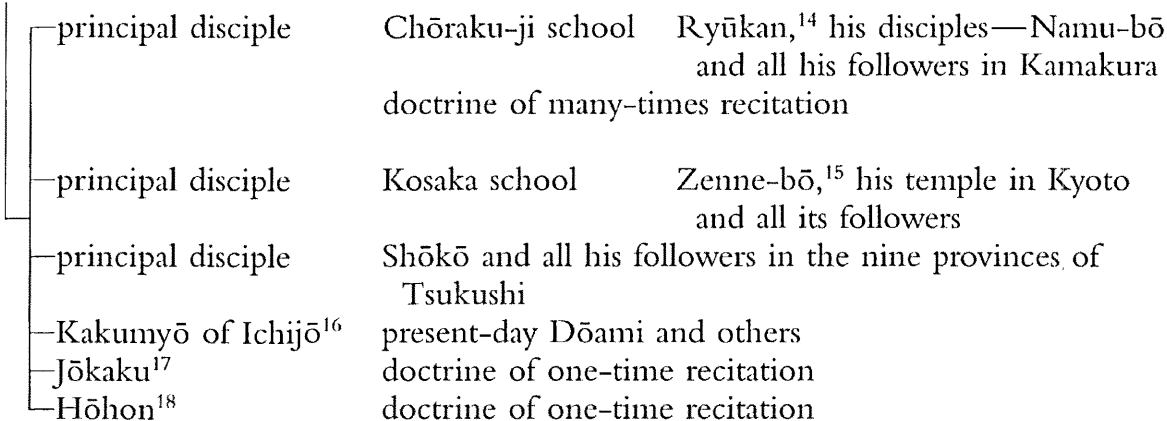
Five cardinal sins



The karma incurred by the committing of any one of these offenses will last for the space of a single lifetime. Therefore, if as a result one falls into one of the evil paths of existence, one will not fall into the evil paths a second time. But the karma incurred by slandering the Law lasts for many lifetimes. Therefore, if one once acts in a manner injurious to the three treasures of Buddhism, one will again and again be reborn in the evil paths.

The Great Teacher Dengyō in his work *An Essay on the Protection of the Nation* states: "None of the students of Buddhism should believe and accept doctrines that are incorrect. Why? Because the place that the teachers of these doctrines fall into in their next existence the disciples will likewise fall into, and the lay supporters will likewise fall into. Should one not therefore take care to abide by the teachings clearly enunciated by the golden mouth of the Buddha? Should one not?"

Hōnen



These eighty or more disciples of Hōnen, and all the Nembutsu priests throughout the country of Japan, along with their lay supporters, as well as all the persons of the Tendai, True Word, and other schools, cannot surpass the wisdom of Hōnen. Though they may observe the practices of their various different schools, in their hearts they are all alike Nembutsu believers. Though they read the Lotus Sutra or carry out True Word practices, these actions are all regarded as supplementary practices. Their primary practice they believe to be the Nembutsu. Can they fail to be regarded as slanderers of the Law?



## Background

This work, consisting primarily of diagrams or charts and quotes from sutras and commentaries, presents an outline of the five periods of teachings—a classification of Shakyamuni Buddha's lifetime teachings as set forth by the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai. No recipient is indicated or known, but the document was probably intended as reference material for Nichiren Daishonin's disciples.

It is thought to have been written in 1260. Another writing by the same name (p. 736) is also extant; the work discussed here is known as the extended version and the other, as the abbreviated version.

The five periods are the Flower Garland period, the Āgama period, the Correct and Equal period, the Wisdom period, and the Lotus-Nirvana period. T'ien-t'ai's system of five periods identifies the Lotus Sutra as the teaching expounded by the Buddha during the final eight years of his life, and the Nirvana Sutra as that preached in just one day and one night prior to his death. The Daishonin cites the passage from the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra "In these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth," and identifies the teachings of the preceding four periods as not revealing the truth. They are classified as "Hinayana" or "provisional Mahayana." Nine of the ten schools of Buddhism in Japan are based

on the sutras preached during the four periods, the one exception being the Tendai school.

The diagrams at the beginning show the first four of the five periods, indicating the period name, the length of time the Buddha spent expounding its teachings, and the sutras, treatises, schools, and Chinese patriarchs of each school.

Next, the fifth period, the Lotus-Nirvana period, is equated with the Lotus and Nirvana sutras. The Daishonin quotes a number of passages from the Lotus Sutra indicating that it represents the true teaching of the Buddha, that the teachings preached prior to it are expedient means to lead people to an understanding of the Lotus Sutra, and that if they do not believe this sutra but slander it, they will fall into hell.

The Nirvana Sutra, shown in chart form, indicates that it was taught as a follow-up to the Lotus Sutra, reiterating the Buddha's final instructions to his disciples in order to perpetuate his teachings. The Daishonin summarizes two teachings found in volume six of the Nirvana Sutra. The first concerns the four standards for Buddhist believers, that is, (1) to rely on the Law and not upon persons, (2) to rely on the meaning of the teaching and not on the words, (3) to rely on wisdom and not on discriminative thinking, and

(4) to rely on sutras that are complete and final and not on those that are not complete and final. The second is the four ranks of sages—Buddhist teachers to rely on in the ages after the Buddha's passing, classified into four categories according to their level of understanding and attainment.

The next section charts the Pure Land, or Nembutsu, school, citing its doctrinal origins in *The Commentary on the Ten Stages Sutra*, which sets forth the ideas of a difficult-to-practice way and an easy-to-practice way, the latter being to call on the names of Buddhas to achieve salvation. The chart then lists the patriarchs of the Pure Land doctrines in China, and finally and most recently, Hōnen in Japan. The diagram that follows outlines, for the purposes of refutation, basic claims put forth by Hōnen in his primary work, *The Nembutsu Chosen above All*, which places the Nembutsu, or Pure Land, teaching above all other teachings, including those of the Tendai Lotus school.

Next, the Daishonin quotes the Two-Volumed Sutra, another name for the Buddha Infinite Life Sutra and one of the three basic sutras of the Pure Land school, which records Amida Buddha's forty-eight vows. Quoted is the eighteenth vow—that not even one person who meditates on Amida will fail to be reborn into the Pure

Land, with the exception of those who commit the five cardinal sins and those who slander the correct teaching.

The Daishonin points out the inconsistency of Pure Land teachers such as Tao-ch'ō, who assert that none at all will fail to be reborn in the Pure Land, while they themselves “slander the correct teaching [the Lotus Sutra].” Next the Daishonin quotes the Lotus and Nirvana sutras to show the gravity of the offense of slandering the correct teaching. Following that is an outline in chart form of traditional Buddhist definitions of evil acts, the ten evil acts, the four grave offenses, and the five cardinal sins.

He points out that the negative karma created by such offenses is relatively light compared to the heavy karma created by committing offenses against the correct teaching. He quotes Dengyō's statement that Buddhist teachers who act against the correct teaching, as well as their disciples and lay followers, destine themselves for hell. The final diagram lists the disciples of Hōnen, the founder of the Pure Land school in Japan. The Daishonin concludes by pointing out that all priests and lay believers of the time, regardless of their sectarian affiliation, are in effect Nembutsu believers. This is because all accept and embrace the Nembutsu practice, and thus are guilty of slander of the Lotus Sutra.

## Notes

1. According to the Dharma Characteristics school, after attaining enlightenment Shakyamuni Buddha preached the Flower Garland Sutra for fourteen days. The T'ien-t'ai school regards the period of this preaching as twenty-one days.

2. According to one account, the Correct and Equal sutras were preached for 16 years and the Wisdom sutras for 14 years; according to another, for 8 years and 22 years.

3. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., chap. 3.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., chap. II.

10. “Ten Buddhas” are Buddhas of the ten directions enumerated in *The Commentary on the Ten Stages Sutra*: the Buddha Good Virtue in the east, the Buddha Infinite Brightness in the west, the Buddha Banner-like Virtue in the north, the Bud-

dha Sandalwood Virtue in the south, the Buddha Sorrow-Dispelling Virtue in the southeast, the Buddha Giver of Treasure in the southwest, the Buddha Flower Virtue in the northwest, the Buddha Three Vehicle Practice in the northeast, the Buddha Vast Myriad Virtue of the upper region, and the Buddha Brilliant Virtue in the lower region.

11. The Daishonin says the following about this quotation: "Though they [the persons of the Pure Land school] falsely attribute these statements to the Great Collection Sutra, no such passages appear in that sutra" (I, p. 878).

12. See four stages of Hinayana enlightenment in Glossary.

13. In the early stage of Buddhism, a group of at least four monks living in a communal arrangement was called a samgha.

14. Ryūkan (1148-1227) is known as the founder of the Chōraku-ji branch of the Pure Land school. Though he first studied the Tendai teachings under Jien, chief priest of Enryaku-ji temple, he changed his allegiance to Hōnen, the founder of the Pure Land school.

15. Zenne-bō (1177-1247) is known as the founder of the Nishiyama branch of the Pure Land school. At age fourteen he

became a disciple of Hōnen. After Hōnen died, Zenne-bō lived in the Ōjō-in hall of Nishiyama Zempō-ji temple. Because he once lived in Kosaka, Kyoto, his branch is also called the Kosaka branch.

16. Kakumyō (b. 1184) founded the Kuhon branch of the Pure Land school. At age nineteen he became a disciple of Hōnen. After his teacher died, he also studied the Tendai teaching of concentration and insight and the Zen teachings. Ichijō is supposed to be the place in Kyoto where he lived at Kuhon-ji temple. Dōami in the same line was a disciple of Kakumyō.

17. Jōkaku (1163-1247) is another name for Kōsai. At age thirty-six he became a disciple of Hōnen. He upheld the one-time recitation, asserting that one need not chant the name of Amida Buddha many times. For this he was denounced by other priests of the Pure Land school.

18. Hōhon (n.d.) is also known as Gyōkū. A disciple of Hōnen, he and another disciple, Jōkaku, later advocated the one-time recitation. This teaching says that chanting Amida Buddha's name just once leads to rebirth in his Pure Land. Because this contradicted Hōnen's teaching, the two men were expelled from the Pure Land school.