

CHAPTER 1

The Deviations of the Five Senior Priests

The history of the Fuji School, founded by Nikko Shonin, began when he departed from Kuon temple at

Nikko Shonin's Departure From Mount Minobu

Mount Minobu. Because of his deep understanding of the Daishonin's teachings and his courageous action to propagate it despite numerous persecutions, Nikko Shonin inherited the Daishonin's

spiritual legacy. In fact, the Daishonin had entrusted Nikko Shonin with "the Law that Nichiren propagated throughout his lifetime" and referred to him as "the great leader of the propagation of true Buddhism" (GZ, 1600). The Daishonin also called this outstanding disciple "a chief priest of Kuon temple at Mount Minobu" (GZ, 1600).

So why did Nikko Shonin feel compelled to leave Mount Minobu where his teacher had spent his last years?

The direct cause of Nikko Shonin's departure from Mount Minobu lies in the so-called four slanderous acts of Hakiri Sanenaga, the steward of Minobu. Hakiri contradicted the Daishonin's teachings in four ways:

- He had a statue of Shakyamuni made and regarded it as

an object of devotion.

- He visited a Shinto shrine.
- He made an offering to a stupa¹ of the Nembutsu sect.
- He built a place of religious practice for the Nembutsu sect.

Although Nikko Shonin strongly admonished Hakiri for his errors, he would not listen.

Regarding these errors, the fifty-ninth high priest, Nichiko Hori, points out: “Of the four slanderous acts, the gravest is his restoration of the Buddha’s statue” (*Detailed Accounts of Nikko Shonin of the Fuji School*, p. 218). Viewing Shakyamuni’s statue as an object of devotion goes against the Daishonin’s essential teaching that the Gohonzon is the basis of our faith and the fundamental object of devotion. Because of the gravity of Hakiri’s behavior, Nikko Shonin refused to compromise.

In his letter “Reply to Mimasaka-bo,” Nikko Shonin recounts the Daishonin’s last will and testament: “When the steward [of Minobu] goes against the Law, I shall not reside here” (*Hennentai Nichiren Daishonin Goshō*,² p. 1729). Following the Daishonin’s last instruction and to protect the integrity of Buddhism, Nikko Shonin moved to the Fuji area.

Behind Hakiri Sanenaga’s slanderous acts was the influence of Niko, chief priest of the seminary at Minobu. Sanenaga had been converted to the Daishonin’s Buddhism by Nikko Shonin, so he regarded him as a teacher in the beginning. But when Nikko Shonin admonished the steward’s behavior, he replied, “I have taken Minbu Ajari [Niko] as my teacher” (*ibid.*, p. 1733).

Aware of the circumstances under which Sanenaga committed these slanderous acts, Nikko Shonin states in “Reply to Lord Hara”: “These things are not the fault of lay priest

[Hakiri]. They are solely the errors of the twisted priest” (ibid., p. 1733).

Niko propounded that “When those upholding the Lotus Sutra visit [a Shinto shrine], the Buddhist deities as well will come to that shrine” (ibid., p. 1732). However, in his treatise “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land,” the Daishonin states that when people ignore the Law, all the Buddhist deities (i.e., the protective forces in the universe that protect life) will abandon the land so that people’s misery and suffering will increase.

Based on the Daishonin’s teaching, Nikko Shonin discouraged believers from visiting a Shinto shrine. But Niko allowed believers to visit them and criticized Nikko Shonin, stating that “Byakuren Ajari [Nikko] reads only non-Buddhist scriptures and is ignorant of the ultimate teaching of Buddhism” (ibid., p. 1732).

Niko deviated both in his understanding of Buddhism and in his behavior. In “Reply to Lord Hara,” Nikko Shonin describes Niko’s aberrant behavior: Niko invited a painter to the estate of lay priest Moro’oka and had him paint a mandala. To consecrate the painted mandala, he gave a sermon for one day and one night and then got drunk on sake while holding fast to the offering he received for performing the consecration. Furthermore, heavily drunk, he sang vulgar songs and made a laughingstock of himself. Regarding Niko’s disgraceful behavior, Nikko Shonin writes: “What could possibly bring more shame upon Nichiren than this?” (ibid., p. 1734).

Commenting on this statement, Nichiko Hori states: “We priests and lay believers of the modern day must deeply understand his statement and regard it as golden words with which to admonish ourselves. We must not take these words

lightly, thinking of them as empty words from six-hundred-some years ago” (February 1956, *Daibyakurenge*, p. 3).

Of the six senior disciples designated by the Daishonin, all except Nikko Shonin betrayed their teacher’s will, thereby

***The Five Senior
Priests’ Betrayal***

nearly destroying his teaching. On October 8, 1282, five days before his death, the Daishonin designated Nissho, Nichiro, Nikko, Niko, Nitcho and Nichiji as “main disciples” but noted that “the order of listing is irrelevant” (*The Collected Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 8, pp. 2–3). The order of the Daishonin’s designation indicates the order of conversion, not the order of seniority.

These “main disciples” were later called “the six senior priests.” The Daishonin designated the six senior priests under the leadership of Nikko Shonin to protect and spread his teachings after his death. While designating Nikko Shonin as chief priest of Kuon temple at Minobu, the Daishonin also intended the other five senior priests to continue to take leadership in their assigned areas for the further propagation of the Law. As Nichiko Hori later wrote, the Daishonin “asked them to become leaders for believers scattered in various areas and exert themselves in propagation, thus accomplishing the great desire of kosen-rufu.”

On October 13, 1282, the Daishonin died at the estate of Ikegami Munenaka. His body was cremated, and Nikko Shonin brought the ashes back to Minobu for burial. At the end of January 1283, after having conducted a memorial service for the hundred-day anniversary of the Daishonin’s passing, Nikko Shonin consulted other disciples and instituted a vigil for their teacher’s grave at Minobu. Eighteen

leading disciples were selected to take turns attending the grave by making offerings and prayers.

Each of the six senior priests and two of the rest were to stay at Mount Minobu for one month at a time and protect the Daishonin's gravesite. Of the eighteen priests, nine (Nichii, Nippo, Echizen-ko, Nitchi, Nichiji, Nichimoku, Nisshu, Nichiben and Nikke) had entered the priesthood under the guardianship and guidance of Nikko Shonin, demonstrating his outstanding leadership.

When the disciples eventually returned to their respective areas, Nissho took with him an annotated copy of the Lotus Sutra, which the Daishonin had instructed to keep by his tomb. And Nichiro took a statue of Shakyamuni, which the Daishonin had received as a gift from the steward of Ito when he was exiled to Izu and had since kept by his side. The Daishonin had also willed this statue to be kept by his tomb. Nissho and Nichiro never returned to Minobu as long as Nikko Shonin remained there, completely neglecting the vigil over their teacher's grave.

In his "Reply to Mimasaka-bo," Nikko Shonin explains his circumstances: "[The five senior priests] seem to have abandoned the grave [of the Daishonin]. Though they propounded a teaching not to discard one's teacher, they have already abandoned their own. It cannot be helped that they may be subjected to criticism in the secular world" (*Hennen-tai Nichiren Daishonin Goshō*, p. 1729).

When Nikko Shonin became chief priest of Kuon temple, Hakiri Sanenaga, the steward of Minobu, rejoiced: "I am pleased as if the late sage had come back once again" (*Detailed Accounts of Nikko Shonin of the Fuji School*, p. 164). But after Niko was designated as head of the seminary at Minobu in 1285, Hakiri gradually came under his influence.

Niko would not hesitate to bend the Daishonin's Buddhism to curry favor with Hakiri, which eventually led to slanderous acts.

The five senior priests could not support Nikko Shonin and thus betrayed the Daishonin's teaching, because they were

***Jealousy Toward
Nikko Shonin***

jealous of him. Their ill feelings toward the Daishonin's foremost disciple eventually clouded their perspective and led them astray.

Of the five senior priests, Nissho and Nichiro became disciples of the Daishonin before Nikko Shonin had. To them, Nikko Shonin was a junior priest. Niko and Nitcho joined the Daishonin's order after Nikko Shonin, but they considered themselves his equals in status and seniority. Nichiji entered the priesthood under the guidance of Nikko Shonin, but he disliked obeying his senior. Their jealousy and emotionalism clouded their judgment so much that they eventually stopped visiting Minobu and started to propound their own teachings.

Besides jealousy, the five senior priests' cowardice and ignorance of the Daishonin's Buddhism also played a role in their betrayal. After the Daishonin's passing, Nissho and Nichiro—who lived in Kamakura, the seat of the shogunate government—were oppressed by the government, which threatened to destroy their temples. They managed to escape from this predicament by offering to pray for the government based on the Tendai sect's practice. Fearing persecution and eager to preserve their security and social status, they curried favor with the government while compromising their teacher's will.

The five senior priests' shallow understanding of Buddhism

and weak faith led them to believe that the Daishonin was spreading the Lotus Sutra based on the Tendai doctrine. In this regard, Nikko Shonin explains: “The five senior priests proclaimed that Sage Nichiren’s teaching is that of the Tendai school, so they called themselves in their letters submitted to the government ‘the followers of the Tendai school’” (GZ, 1601). They also allowed their junior priests to receive the precepts at the Tendai school’s head temple at Mount Hiei (GZ, 1602).

The five senior priests’ betrayal of the Daishonin’s teaching was detailed in Nikko Shonin’s writings such as “On the Matters That the Believers of the Fuji School Must Know” (GZ, 1601–09) and “Refuting the Five Senior Priests” (GZ, 1610–16). According to Nikko Shonin’s account, the five senior priests’ errors can be summarized as follows:

1) They asserted that the Daishonin’s teachings belong to the Tendai school, and that he spread the teaching of the Lotus Sutra following the teaching of Dengyo.

2) They visited Shinto shrines in places such as Ise, Mount Izu, Hakone and Kumano.

3) They regarded copying of the Lotus Sutra as a legitimate practice and encouraged it.

4) They allowed their disciples to enter the priesthood and receive the precepts at the Tendai sect’s head temple at Mount Hiei.

5) They called the Daishonin’s letters written in the common language of the time (Japanese phonetic characters) their teacher’s shame and destroyed them.

6) They made a statue of Shakyamuni and regarded it as an object of devotion.

7) They disrespected Gohonzon inscribed by the Daishonin,

hanging them behind Shakyamuni's statues, leaving them in a corridor, burying them with bodies or selling them off for profit.

Not only did the five senior priests go against the Daishonin's teaching, but they also slandered Nikko Shonin for admonishing their errors. As Minobu school scholars acknowledge in *The Doctrinal History of the Nichiren Sect*, there was nothing remarkable in the five senior priests' Buddhist study. They grew weak in faith, became fearful of persecutions, became oblivious to the Daishonin's desire to spread the Law and eventually completely strayed from the Daishonin's teaching. These characteristics shared by the five senior priests are applicable to those who betrayed Buddhism throughout its history.

In the document entrusting Kuon Temple at Mount Minobu to Nikko Shonin (dated the thirteenth day of the tenth month in the fifth year of Koan [1282]), the Daishonin states: "The teachings expounded by Shakyamuni for fifty years I have transferred to Byakuren Ajari Nikko. He shall be chief priest of Kuon Temple at Mount Minobu. Those who betray him, be they lay believers or priests, shall be known as slanderers of the Law" (GZ, 1600). When the five senior priests started opposing and denouncing Nikko Shonin, they further proved themselves to be slanderers of the Law.

In "Letter from Sado," the Daishonin also warns his followers of the treachery of priests against Buddhism: "Neither non-Buddhists nor the enemies of Buddhism can destroy the correct teaching of the Thus Come One, but the Buddha's disciples definitely can. As a sutra says, only worms born of the lion's body feed on the lion" (WND, 302). The Daishonin's premonition came true soon after his passing. The five

senior priests, as “the Buddha’s disciples,” attempted to destroy their teacher’s work from within. As the Daishonin points out, throughout the history of Buddhism, its decline and corruption have been caused by priests, especially those of high status. The history of the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood is no exception to this historical pattern.

The five senior priests’ betrayal of the Daishonin is instructive for those of us practicing today. Nikko Shonin’s resolute

***The Five Senior Priests
and Today’s Nichiren
Shoshu Priesthood***

and uncompromising efforts to refute the five senior priests’ erroneous teachings and clarify believers’ confusion may be regarded as examples of

how a true Buddhist acts.

As Nichiko Hori has said: “The flow of the Law of Nichiren Daishonin is frequently obstructed. Obstacles arise from both within and without, but those from within inflict the most serious wounds. . . . With external obstacles, even if they interrupt the flow [of kosen-rufu], it will revive again after a period. With internal obstacles, however, the flow is interrupted as a result of a complete drying up [of the flow itself], thus it is not as easy to revive. Unless we all profoundly recognize this point, the prospects of seeing the dawn of kosen-rufu even in a thousand or ten thousand years will be extremely dim.”

The treacherous nature of the five senior priests corresponds to the basic tendency of the current Nichiren Shoshu priesthood. Just like the five senior priests seven-hundred years ago, today’s priesthood has completely strayed from the Daishonin’s teaching. Its denial of the

equality of lay believers and priests; its attempt to insert itself between believers and their enlightenment by claiming control and authority over the Gohonzon; and its view of the high priest as the sole embodiment of the Daishonin's teaching—none of these principles come from the Daishonin's Buddhism. Furthermore, the priesthood acts like the five senior priests by being jealous and slandering the SGI, which is correctly carrying on the Daishonin's will just as Nikko Shonin did.

A parallel can also be drawn between Nichiren Shoshu's head temple, Taiseki-ji, which has degenerated into a slanderous place, and Mount Minobu, which became a slanderous place because of the actions of Hakiri Sanenaga. That's why Nikko Shonin left Mount Minobu, the place where his teacher had spent his last years. Similarly, Taiseki-ji, under the control of Nikken, has turned into a place of slander.

While the Dai-Gohonzon that was bestowed upon the entire world remains the basis of our faith, to donate money to Nikken in order to see the Dai-Gohonzon would amount to condoning his slander of the Law. Supporting slanderous priests in this way would mean being guilty of the same offenses they are.

To use a metaphor, the “Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King” chapter of the Lotus Sutra likens the sutra to “a clear cool pond [that] can satisfy all those who are thirsty.” Today, we can say that the Dai-Gohonzon is the “clear cool pond.” But the area surrounding this pond is a swamp of slander. To reach the pond, one must travel through the swamp. So while the pond is still every bit as clear as before, because of the surrounding swamp, one's life will be muddied when he or she tries to approach it.

Continuing with the same analogy, the water that feeds

the pond also feeds the spring that is the Gohonzon in our own homes; there is no difference at all between the water of the pond and that of the spring.

In the Daishonin's Buddhism, what connects us with our innate Buddhahood is our faith. In this sense, whether we directly pray to the Gohonzon may be considered secondary to our faith. Faith—not our physical proximity to the object of devotion—leads us to our enlightenment.

For example, the Daishonin wrote to his follower Lord Matsuno, whom he had never met: "How is it that you can have faith in Nichiren, though you have never met him? It is, no doubt, the result of good causes you have planted in your life in the past. Since the time has come when you are certain to attain Buddhahood in your next life, you now have aroused faith" (GZ, 1379). The Daishonin exclaimed how wonderful it was that Lord Matsuno had taken faith despite never meeting the Daishonin personally and assured him that he would attain Buddhahood.

Today, we could say that not to have met the Daishonin is equivalent to not having physically chanted before the Gohonzon and also, naturally, not having physically chanted before the Dai-Gohonzon. Attaining Buddhahood is not decided by externals such as meeting the Daishonin or chanting before the Dai-Gohonzon. It goes without saying that to assert that a person does not have faith unless he or she visits the head temple Taiseki-ji—as today's priests insist—contradicts the Daishonin's words.

We should look upon the Gohonzon enshrined in each of our homes as the life of the Daishonin, the entity of the original Buddha. When chanting daimoku with that conviction, it is the same as if we are worshipping the Dai-Gohonzon itself, right where we are.

As High Priest Nittatsu said: “Wherever the Gohonzon is enshrined, that place, in a broad sense, takes on the significance of the high sanctuary. The sincere daimoku you chant to that Gohonzon with a concentrated mind free of all extraneous thoughts is instantly received by the Dai-Gohonzon of the High Sanctuary of True Buddhism. The place where you chant Nam-myoho-rence-kyo is instantly transformed into Eagle Peak. And this is where you attain Buddhahood in your present form.”

Nikko Shonin left Mount Minobu, a place dear to him, as an expression of his resolve never to compromise his teacher’s will and intent. His departure from Mount Minobu prevented the Daishonin’s Buddhism from being polluted by the five senior priests’ corruption. In the spirit of Nikko Shonin, the SGI is now discouraging its members from visiting Taiseki-ji because doing so would condone the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood’s erroneous claims.

No matter where we may be, as long as we pray with sincere faith, we can manifest the Buddha’s life from within. The fact that SGI members throughout the world are receiving benefit from their practice is eloquent testimony to the importance of faith as taught by the Daishonin.

1. stupa: A kind of shrine in India where the relics of Shakyamuni or other saints are housed. They originated from burial mounds and are usually dome-shaped or mound-shaped.
2. *Hennentai Nichiren Daishonin Goshō*: The chronological compilation of Nichiren Daishonin’s writings published by the Soka Gakkai in 1973. It also includes two letters by Nikko Shonin (“Reply to Mimasaka-bo” and “Reply to Lord Hara”), which are not in *Goshō Zenshu*. *Goshō Zenshu* is the first compilation of Nichiren Daishonin’s writings published by the Soka Gakkai in 1952.