

CHAPTER 2

Nikko Shonin: Protector of the Daishonin's Buddhism

Among the six senior priests appointed by Nichiren Daishonin, only Nikko Shonin proved to be a true disciple. He cor-

A True Disciple

rectly grasped the Daishonin's intent and dedicated his life to propagating Buddhism. He viewed the Daishonin as the original Buddha of the Latter Day and understood that the teaching of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo of the Three Great Secret Laws was implicit in the "Life Span" chapter of the Lotus Sutra. The other senior priests likely viewed the Daishonin as their senior, a person with vast knowledge of Buddhism, but they appeared to lack the capacity to recognize the Daishonin's true identity and the true import of his teachings. This is the fundamental difference between Nikko Shonin and the five senior priests.

Nikko became a disciple of the Daishonin in 1258 (when he was twelve years old) and, until the Daishonin's death in 1282, stayed by his side, serving his mentor and receiving instructions from him. This allowed him to read the Daishonin's treatises and letters and helped him to correctly grasp the entirety and distinction of the Daishonin's teachings.

While serving his teacher, Nikko Shonin also visited various places to spread the Daishonin's Buddhism and teach other disciples. Because of his efforts, many people started to take faith, including some priests at the Tendai sect temples Jisso-ji and Ryusen-ji in Fuji County of Suruga Province, as well as others at Shijuku-in temple in Kanbara County.

Nikko Shonin's propagation efforts, however, met with strong opposition. The chief priest of Shijuku-in, for example, persecuted those who converted to the Daishonin's teaching. The acting chief priest of Ryusen-ji, alarmed by the growing number of converts in his own parish, conspired to have twenty peasants who had taken faith in the Daishonin's teaching arrested on false charges. The believers, all from the Atsuhara district, were taken to Kamakura, the seat of the shogunate government, and interrogated by Hei no Saemon, deputy chief of the Office of Military and Police Affairs and steward of the ruling Hojo clan.

Because none of the twenty gave up their faith despite being tortured, the three leading believers (Jinshiro, Yagoro and Yarokuro) were executed and the rest banished. The three executed peasants are known in the history of the Daishonin's Buddhism as the three martyrs of Atsuhara, and this incident is known as the Atsuhara Persecution.

Having seen that ordinary people would risk their lives for the sake of Buddhism, the Daishonin felt that the time had come to fulfill the purpose of his advent. On October 12, 1279, he inscribed "the Dai-Gohonzon bestowed upon the world."

As evidenced by his behavior and achievements as the Daishonin's disciple, Nikko Shonin far surpassed the five senior priests. In light of Nikko Shonin's faith, practice, study,

character and leadership, which were tested through numerous persecutions, it was natural for the Daishonin to entrust his teaching to his most outstanding disciple.

After the Daishonin's death, his ashes were interred in a small temple on Mount Minobu, and the six senior priests were to take turns watching over the ashes. But Hakiri Sane-naga, a steward of Minobu, and his family were swayed by the erroneous teachings of the five senior priests, causing Nikko Shonin to sever his ties with the priests and the Hakiri family.

To protect the integrity of the Daishonin's Buddhism and thus establish the foundation for its future, he left Minobu and moved to Fuji at the invitation of Nanjo Tokimitsu. Nikko Shonin states in his "Reply to Lord Hara": "No matter where we may go, it is of utmost importance to carry on the teaching of the sage and establish it in the world. Although I think in this way, all other disciples have committed treachery against the teacher. Nikko alone knows the correct teaching of the original teacher and thus achieves the true purpose of his life. So I shall never become oblivious to the true intent [of Nichiren]" (*Hennentai Nichiren Daishonin Goshō*, p. 1733).

Stressing the importance of rebuking the destroyers of Buddhism, the Daishonin states: "And if there should be eminent priests who keep the precepts and practice religious austerities, and who appear to be spreading the teachings of the Lotus Sutra but are, in fact, subverting them, you should perceive the truth of the matter and reprimand them" (WND, 518). Following the Daishonin's teaching, Nikko Shonin continued to point out the errors of the five senior priests.

As Nikko Shonin taught through his own example, unless we remain vigilant against corruption and reveal injustice

whenever it occurs, the Daishonin's Buddhism will eventually be obscured and lost.

Moreover, if we slacken in our efforts to challenge Nichiren Shoshu's affront on the Daishonin's Buddhism and develop a halfhearted attitude toward slander of the Law, we will eventually destroy our faith and thus the good fortune that we have otherwise accumulated.

As the Daishonin teaches, "It is the way of a devil to assume the form of a venerable monk or to take possession of one's father, mother, or brother in order to obstruct happiness in one's next life" (WND, 81). The essence of the current problem with the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood becomes clear as day when viewed in light of this passage.

In the spring of 1289, nearly seven years after the Daishonin's passing, Nikko Shonin departed from Minobu and stayed for a while at the estate of lay priest Yui—his grandfather on his mother's side. He then moved to Ueno (present-day Fujinomiya City, Shizuoka Prefecture) at the earnest request of Nanjo Tokimitsu, the steward of the area.

***Nikko Shonin's
Establishment
of Taiseki-ji***

In October of the following year, Nikko Shonin founded Taiseki-ji on the scenic field of Oishigahara on the Nanjo family's estate. A lodging temple, called Dai-bo or Mutsu-bo, was built for Nikko Shonin. In the area surrounding Dai-bo, other lodging temples were built for Nikko Shonin's disciples: Renzo-bo for Nichimoku, Jakunichi-bo for Nikke, Rikyo-bo for Nisshu, Joren-bo for Nichido, Minamino-bo for Nichizen, Hyakkan-bo for Nissen, Ryosho-bo for Nichijo, and Kujo-bo for Nichizon. At this time, Nikko Shonin also

designated his “six main disciples” to preserve the Daishonin’s Buddhism: they were Nichimoku, Nikke, Nisshu, Nichizen, Nissen and Nichijo (“On the Matters That the Believers of the Fuji School Must Know,” GZ, 1603).

On February 15, 1298, Nikko Shonin established a temple to enshrine the Daishonin’s image in Omosu, the area adjacent to Ueno, at the request of its steward Ishikawa Magosaburo Yoshitada. He then entrusted Nichimoku with Taiseki-ji and moved to Omosu. Nikko Shonin focused on the further education and development of his disciples, who commuted there to receive instructions from their teacher. This temple in Omosu became known as Omosu Seminary.

At Omosu Seminary, Nikko Shonin read and gave lectures on the Daishonin’s writings, which he called “Gosho,” meaning “the Buddha’s writings” (“On the Matters That the Believers of the Fuji School Must Know,” GZ, 1604). [The word *gosho* consists of two characters: *go* and *sho*. *Go* is an honorific prefix, meaning “respectable or noble,” and *sho* literally means “writings.”] Out of the Daishonin’s six senior disciples, Nikko Shonin alone understood the importance of these writings. For the sake of posterity, Nikko Shonin copied many of his mentor’s writings. Of those, forty-nine copies of the Daishonin’s writings are extant today, including “On Chanting the Daimoku of the Lotus Sutra,” “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land,” excerpts from “The Opening of the Eyes,” “The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind Established in the Fifth Five-Hundred-Year Period after the Thus Come One’s Passing” and “The Essentials of the Lotus Sutra.” Besides those copies made by Nikko Shonin, there are only three copies by Nichimoku and two by Nippo still in existence. None of the five senior priests attempted to preserve their

teacher's writings.

Furthermore, Nikko Shonin selected the ten major writings of the Daishonin and recorded the location of each of these writings for the sake of future believers. The ten major writings designated by Nikko Shonin are: 1) "On Chanting the Daimoku of the Lotus Sutra"; 2) "On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land"; 3) "The Opening of the Eyes"; 4) "The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind"; 5) "The Essentials of the Lotus Sutra"; 6) "The Selection of the Time"; 7) "On Repaying Debts of Gratitude"; 8) "On the Four Stages of Faith and the Five Stages of Practice"; 9) "Letter to Shimoyama"; and 10) "Questions and Answers about Embracing the Lotus Sutra." He selected these writings as essential for the practitioners of the Daishonin's Buddhism and added to the manuscripts the phrase *the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra*.

Nikko Shonin dedicated his later years to the development of his disciples at Omosu Seminary. According to legend, he expelled a disciple named Nichizon during a lecture for absent-mindedly staring at the leaves falling from a pear tree in the yard, saying: "One who wishes to spread the great Law does not let his mind wander and stare at leaves falling while listening to the preaching of Buddhism" (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 5, p. 227). Spurred by his teacher's strict rebuke, Nichizon traveled throughout various provinces and spread the Daishonin's Buddhism. It is said that after establishing thirty-six temples in twelve years, he was pardoned by his teacher. This story tells us something of Nikko Shonin's dedication to the Daishonin's Buddhism.

A believer named Jakusen-bo Nitcho, originally a disciple of Niko (one of the five senior priests who betrayed the Daishonin), later renounced Niko and chose Nikko Shonin

as his mentor. Nikko Shonin appointed Nitcho as the first chief priest of Omosu Seminary, entrusting him with the instruction of student priests. When Nitcho died at a young age, Nikko Shonin appointed Sanmi Nichijun as the second chief priest.

Nichijun wrote: “I received instructions [from Nikko Shonin] at Dai-bo lodging in the morning and, in the evening, preached at Mie-do [where the image of Nichiren Daishonin is enshrined]” (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 2, p. 124). As he states, Nichijun lectured on the Daishonin’s writings, such as “The Opening of the Eyes” and “The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind.” In this manner, many young student priests were nurtured, including six new disciples designated by Nikko Shonin: Nichidai, Nitcho, Nichido, Nichimyo, Nichigo and Nichijo.

Meanwhile, Nichimoku stayed at Taiseki-ji. He often visited the estate of his Niida clan and founded several temples and also traveled to many other areas, spreading the Daishonin’s Buddhism and developing many new disciples. Furthermore, on behalf of Nikko Shonin, Nichimoku remonstrated with the sovereign forty-two times, visiting the shogunate government in Kamakura and the imperial palace in Kyoto.

During his youth, Nichimoku began traveling so extensively on foot that he seriously injured his left ankle. But this did not prevent him from traveling for the sake of the Daishonin’s Buddhism.

When at Taiseki-ji, he led a simple life, which included growing vegetables in the fields. Nichimoku often sent his homegrown melons to Nikko Shonin at Omosu. In one reply, Nikko Shonin writes: “Since I could not harvest melons in my field at Omosu due to the drought, I am grateful for your rare gift” (*One Hundred Sacred Admonitions*, p. 192).

This indicates that Nikko Shonin also lived a modest life, farming himself.

Regarding the behavior and lifestyle of a priest, the Daishonin states: “Priests in the Latter Day of the Law are ignorant of the principles of Buddhism and are conceited, so they despise the correct teacher and fawn on patrons. True priests are those who are honest and who desire little and yet know satisfaction” (WND, 747).

Nikko Shonin and Nichimoku lived in accord with their teacher’s expectations while the five senior priests degenerated into “priests in the Latter Day of the Law.” The Daishonin severely condemns this type of priest, referring to him as “an animal dressed in priestly robes” (WND, 760).

Nikko Shonin wrote “On the Matters That the Believers of the Fuji School Must Know” (GZ, 1601–09) and “Refuting the Five Senior Priests” (GZ, 1610–16) to clarify the doctrinal differences between himself and the five senior priests. Furthermore, to prevent the destruction of the Daishonin’s Buddhism by corrupt priests, Nikko Shonin penned “Twenty-six Admonitions” (GZ, 1617–19) on January 13, 1333.

In these cautionary articles, Nikko Shonin clarifies that the Fuji School (i.e., the school founded by Nikko Shonin) is the orthodox school of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, while the schools founded by the five senior priests deviate from his mentor’s teaching. Nikko Shonin urges his disciples: “Until kosen-rufu is achieved, propagate the Law to the full extent of your ability without begrudging your life” (GZ, 1618). He also teaches his disciples to give their utmost respect to those who

practice in accord with the Daishonin's writings.

Nikko Shonin cautions that those priests who seek worldly fame and profit without spreading Buddhism and rebuking slander may not be known as his disciples. Furthermore, he strictly admonishes that even the chief priest of Taiseki-ji (i.e., the high priest of the Fuji School) is not an exception to his warning articles, stating: "Do not follow even the high priest if he goes against the Buddha's Law and propounds his own views" (GZ, 1618).

Throughout his "Twenty-six Admonitions," Nikko Shonin emphasizes that to protect and spread the Daishonin's Buddhism is of utmost importance. Nikko Shonin's fundamental stance may be summarized thusly: Those who wish to practice the Daishonin's Buddhism must regard the Gohonzon and his writings as the bases of faith, and practice and strive toward the widespread propagation of their mentor's teaching. He concludes his admonitions by saying: "Those who violate even one of these articles cannot be called disciples of Nikko" (GZ, 1619).

When we examine the aberrant behavior of the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood in light of Nikko Shonin's "Twenty-six Admonitions," it becomes clear that the SGI is the only group carrying on the orthodoxy of the Daishonin's Buddhism today. Shortly after World War II, Nichiko Hori, the fifty-ninth high priest, said to one of his disciples: "Does the current priesthood have anything other than the Gakkai? The priesthood must be detested if it excludes the Gakkai." But now that it has unilaterally severed its ties with the SGI, Nichiren Shoshu has strayed from the Daishonin's Buddhism.

On February 7, 1333, soon after completing "Twenty-six Admonitions," Nikko Shonin died at Omosu, at age eighty-eight. Before his passing, Nikko Shonin appointed

Nichimoku as his successor in a document titled “Articles Regarding the Succession of Nikko,” dated November 10, 1330 (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 8, p. 17).

Until his death, Nikko Shonin continued to lead the spread of the Daishonin’s Buddhism, responding to the expectations placed on him by his mentor, who referred to him as “the great leader of the propagation of true Buddhism” (GZ, 1600). Under Nikko Shonin’s leadership, Nichimoku and other disciples also made valiant efforts in propagation. As a result, by the time of Nikko Shonin’s death, the Fuji School had spread throughout Japan—from Tohoku, the northeastern part of Japan’s main island (present-day Miyagi, Yamagata and Fukushima prefectures) down to the southern island of Kyushu (present-day Fukuoka and Miyazaki prefectures).

Because Nikko Shonin spread the Daishonin’s Buddhism despite persecution and protected its integrity when threatened by the five senior priests, he is regarded as the treasure of the *samgha* or group of believers—priests and lay believers alike—dedicated to the transmission and preservation of the Buddha’s teaching. The *samgha* has been regarded as one of the three treasures of Buddhism along with the treasures of the Buddha and the Law (i.e., the Buddha’s teaching) because, without it, people could not possibly benefit from the treasures of the Buddha and the Law. As Buddhism migrated from India to China and then to Japan, the functions of the *samgha* were fulfilled chiefly by the clergy. Hence the *samgha* came to denote the Buddhist priesthood, and thus the treasure of the *samgha* has often been translated as the treasure of the priesthood.

In the Fuji School, the treasure of the Buddha is Nichiren Daishonin because he expounded the Mystic Law, which

enables all people to reveal their innate Buddhahood; the treasure of the Law is the Gohonzon bestowed upon all humanity because it is the essence of the Daishonin's teaching; and the treasure of the *samgha* is Nikko Shonin because, as mentioned previously, he correctly transmitted and preserved the Daishonin's Buddhism. Without his efforts, we could not enjoy the benefit of the Daishonin's Buddhism today.

Regarding the three treasures of the Fuji School, Nittatsu Hosoi, the sixty-sixth high priest, stated:

In our school, the three treasures are established as follows: the treasure of the Law is the Gohonzon; the treasure of the Buddha is the Daishonin; and the treasure of the *samgha* is Nikko Shonin. . . . The successive high priests are not the same as the Daishonin. The high priest is often described falsely as the Daishonin himself, and this causes problems. I wish to clarify this point." (From a sermon delivered on May 26, 1977)

The current Nichiren Shoshu priesthood, however, proclaims that "the high priest is the Daishonin of the modern day" (June 1991 *Dai-Nichiren*) and that "the high priest and the Dai-Gohonzon are one and inseparable" (a document by the Nichiren Shoshu executive priests dated September 6, 1991). These assertions clearly ignore the meaning of the three treasures in the Daishonin's Buddhism.

Regarding believers' reverence for the three treasures, Nittatsu Hosoi also stated: "In short, the correct way of our school is to regard the Gohonzon of the oneness of the Person and the Law as the basis of all. In the Gohonzon are contained all of the three treasures. When you enshrine the Gohonzon in a Buddhist altar and exert yourself in faith

morning and evening, you are already paying sufficient respect toward the three treasures” (from a sermon delivered on July 27, 1977). In other words, to revere the three treasures of the Daishonin’s Buddhism means to regard the Gohonzon as the basis of faith and practice.

The current priesthood’s erroneous interpretation of the three treasures clearly indicates its ignorance of the Daishonin’s Buddhism as well as of Nikko Shonin’s efforts to spread and protect his mentor’s teaching.