

CHAPTER 7

A High Priest Enshrines Shakyamuni's Statue

The seventeenth high priest of Nichiren Shoshu, Nissei, is known for two major doctrinal errors. One was the establishment of a statue of Shakyamuni as an object of devotion, and the other was mandating that all twenty-eight chapters of the Lotus Sutra be recited in gongyo.

Nissei originally came from Yobo-ji temple, which had splintered from the Fuji School (see chapter 6 for further explanation). He became a disciple of Nichiju, the sixteenth high priest, who had also been a Yobo-ji priest. In 1632, Nichiju transferred his office to Nissei. The following year, Nissei transferred the office to Nichiei, the eighteenth high priest, who had been his senior at Yobo-ji.

But in 1637, due to Nichiei's illness (he died in 1638), Nissei returned to Taiseki-ji to assume the office of high priest once again. In the same year, Nissei received government permission to ride in a litter to the shogun's castle in Edo for an official audience with the shogun. This was a rare privilege, especially for a priest. The source of such privilege, as well as Nissei's increasing influence and rise to the office of high priest at Taiseki-ji, was the powerful patronage of Kyodai-in, the widow of Hachisuka Yoshishige, an influential

governor of Awa province on Shikoku Island.

Nissei formed a close relationship with Kyodai-in, eight years his elder, considering her his “adopted mother.” Kyodai-in built Hosho-ji in Edo to honor her husband, who died in 1620. In 1623, on the recommendation of Kyodai-in, Nissei became the chief priest of Hosho-ji. There he enshrined a statue of Shakyamuni as an object of devotion and encouraged the recitation of the entire Lotus Sutra. In 1633, one year after he became high priest, he wrote a thesis later known as “Zuigi Ron,” attempting to justify his unorthodox practices and silence the criticism brought against him. He writes at the end of the “Zuigi Ron”: “A year after the completion of Hosho-ji, I had a statue of the Buddha made. Priests and lay believers of this school then brought up questions and criticism. To dispel the mist of their delusion and to avoid sinking into oblivion, I took up the writing brush to put down this one volume” (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 9, p. 69).

In his thesis, Nissei explains that Nichiren Daishonin did not establish Shakyamuni’s statue as an object of devotion simply because he constantly had to move from one place to another; it was never his intent not to establish Shakyamuni’s statue. Later Nichiin, the thirty-first high priest, added his commentary at the end of the thesis, stating that Nissei’s doctrines “differ greatly from the essential teachings of this school.”

Regarding Nissei’s errors, Nichiko Hori, the fifty-ninth high priest, states: “As Nissei established the foundation in Edo and started to build branch temples there to increase the sect’s influence, he at last began propounding the worship of the Buddha’s statue and the recitation of the entire Lotus Sutra, thus bringing into [this school] the doctrine that Yobo-ji was then propounding” (*Essential Writings of the Fuji*

School, vol. 9, p. 69). Shakyamuni's statues were enshrined at many branch temples—including Hosho-ji, Josen-ji, Seiryuji, Myokyo-ji, Honjo-ji, Kujo-ji, Choan-ji, Kujo-ji and Hongen-ji (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 9, pp. 69–70). Among these only Josen-ji and Myokyo-ji exist today. Another record shows that Shakyamuni's statues were enshrined at one point at Jozai-ji and Jitsujo-ji. Nissei erected Shakyamuni's statue at more than ten branch temples over which he had influence.

Nikko Shonin left Mount Minobu because of the doctrinal errors committed by Hakiri Sanenaga, the steward of the Minobu area, including Hakiri's establishing Shakyamuni's statue as an object of devotion. Nikko Shonin maintained that only the Gohonzon should be the object of devotion. Nikko Shonin foresaw the appearance of aberrant high priests such as Nissei in the future and wrote: "Do not follow even the high priest if he goes against the Buddha's Law and propounds his own views" (GZ, 1618).

Some priests and lay believers raised concerns over the high priest's new practices, but no one followed Nikko Shonin's injunction by refusing to follow Nissei. In fact, since Taiseki-ji was increasing its branch temples and adding many buildings on the head temple grounds through the efforts of Kyodai-in, Nissei was later regarded as a "restorer" of the Fuji School.

As quickly as Nissei had risen to the office of high priest and enjoyed rare privileges in the shogun's court through the patronage of Kyodai-in, his status fell when he argued with his powerful patron. In 1638, Nissei and Kyodai-in had a

***Powerful Lay Patron
Appoints High Priest***

status fell when he argued with his powerful patron. In 1638, Nissei and Kyodai-in had a

falling out, so he left Taiseki-ji suddenly and moved to Jozai-ji at Shitaya in Edo. Taiseki-ji was without a high priest for three years from 1638 to 1641 until Nisshun, the nineteenth high priest, arrived to assume the office. The biographical account of Nisshun states:

Because of his discord with the Venerable Priestess Nissho [Kyodai-in], a great patron, Teacher Nissei of the head temple left Mount Fuji and moved to Jozai-ji at Shitaya in Edo, thus leaving the head temple without its chief priest.

At that time, with the appointment of a new shogun, the government had to reissue the deed [for the head temple's property], yet there was no chief priest, so the head temple was about to be condemned.

Distressed by this, priests and lay believers entreated Venerable Priestess Nissho for her help regarding the appointment of the next chief priest. The venerable priestess was to choose one.

Nikkan, then chief priest of Hosho-ji temple, told her that there was no one like Nisshun. Thus the venerable priestess invited Teacher [Nisshun] to the head temple. (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 5, p. 269)

So Nisshun went to Taiseki-ji to assume the office of high priest in 1641. Put simply, the powerful lay patron Kyodai-in in effect appointed the high priest. The head temple could then renew the deed to its property and maintain its status as a head temple. If Taiseki-ji had remained without a high priest, the Fuji School would have lost its independent status and become a branch temple of some other sect.

The transfer of the office of high priest from Nissei to

Nisshun, however, did not take place until October 27, 1645. The biographical account of Nisshun states:

Later a reconciliation between Teacher Nissei and the venerable priestess [Kyodai-in] was realized, and the trust and respect between them were restored as it was before. So in the second year of Shoho [1645], Teacher Nissei went to the head temple and, on the twenty-seventh day of the tenth month of the same year, [Teacher Nisshun] received from Teacher Nissei the great transmission of the Golden Utterance of the Buddha and thus officially became the nineteenth high priest. (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 5, p. 270)

As mentioned here, Nisshun was a “high priest without the lineage” for about four years. It is also recorded that Nisshun transcribed Gohonzon in January and February of 1645. So it is noteworthy that without the formal transfer of the lineage of high priest, one could assume the office and conduct its various administrative responsibilities, including transcription of the Gohonzon. This is yet another historical fact that contradicts the current Nichiren Shoshu priesthood’s assertion that only a legitimate high priest can transcribe Gohonzon and confer them upon believers, thanks to the mystical spiritual property called the “Living Essence” that he received from his predecessor through the transfer ceremony (*The Liturgy of Nichiren Shoshu*, Nichiren Shoshu Head Temple Taiseki-ji edition, English version, p. 35).

Because of the unusual circumstances surrounding Nisshun’s appointment, some criticism and opposition were expected. So when Nisshun was invited to Taiseki-ji, Nikkan,

then chief priest of Hoshō-ji in Edo, who had recommended Nisshun to Kyōdai-in, sent the following letter to the high priest:

At Taiseki-ji, the heritage of the Law is transmitted through the Golden Utterance of the Buddha. One who receives this transmission—whether he is learned or un-learned—is a living person of Shakyamuni and Nichiren. Only by putting faith in this can people of the Latter Day sow the seed of Buddhahood. . . . Whoever becomes high priest, as long as he received the transmission of the heritage of the Law, should be known as a living person of Shakyamuni and Nichiren. This is the true intent of the founder [of Taiseki-ji, Nikkō Shōnin] and the basis for the school's believers. (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 5, p. 271)

To solidify support for Nisshun, the absolute authority of high priest was once again invoked by equating the successive high priests with the Daishōnin. The recorded history of the Fuji School demonstrates that the high priest's infallibility was advocated not because the high priest was worthy of respect; rather, this unorthodox doctrine was used as convenient dogma to silence criticism against the high priest and bolster his influence.

Even after he relinquished his office, Nissei continued to enjoy some influence in the Fuji School. Many branch temples continued to enshrine Shakyamuni's statue. Only after Nissei's death in 1683 could Nisshun, the twenty-second high priest [a different person from the nineteenth high priest, whose name is pronounced the same yet spelled with differ-

ent Chinese characters], and Nikkei, the twenty-third high priest, both of whom originally came from Yobo-ji, remove Shakyamuni's statues from Taiseki-ji's branch temples.

Shakyamuni's statues were enshrined as objects of devotion for nearly fifty years at some branch temples and even sixty years at others. Even after the removal of those statues, Yobo-ji's influence continued to be felt in the Fuji School until Nichikan, the twenty-sixth high priest, thoroughly refuted its teachings.