

CHAPTER 15

The SGI's Conferral of the Gohonzon

On September 7, 1993, about two months short of the second anniversary of its excommunication by the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood, the SGI announced its decision to issue the Gohonzon to its members worldwide. It was one of the defining moments of the SGI's lay Buddhist movement because it signaled the return of the object of devotion from the hold of clerical authority to its rightful heirs—ordinary people who practice the Daishonin's Buddhism.

***The Gohonzon:
The Object of
Devotion for
All People***

Gohonzon issued by the SGI are reproduced from a Gohonzon transcribed by the twenty-sixth high priest, Nichikan, in 1720. This so-called Nichikan Gohonzon was in the possession of Joen-ji, a temple in Tochigi Prefecture, Japan, whose chief priest offered it for the Soka Gakkai's use. That chief priest, Sendo Narita, had previously seceded from Taiseki-ji in protest to the high priest's abusive policy toward the SGI. In his June 6, 1993, letter to Soka Gakkai President Einosuke Akiya, Chief Priest Narita writes: "The existing situation, in which Nikken has unjustly terminated

the conferral of Gohonzon upon Soka Gakkai members, convinced me that the best and most just course—as well as the course that, I feel, would win the approval of the Daishonin—would be to enable Soka Gakkai members to receive Gohonzon based on this Gohonzon.”

On August 23, 1993, the Association for the Reformation of Nichiren Shoshu and the Association of Youthful Priests Dedicated to the Reformation of Nichiren Shoshu—representing about thirty reform priests who had seceded from Taiseki-ji—issued a joint resolution supporting Narita’s proposal. In it, the reform priests stated: “We declare that the Soka Gakkai is qualified in every way to confer *okatagi* Gohonzon based on the Gohonzon transcribed by High Priest Nichikan and assert that by so doing the Soka Gakkai will fulfill a sacred mission consistent with the spirit of Nichiren Daishonin.” With the approval of the council and other committees, the Soka Gakkai decided to accept Chief Priest Narita’s proposal.

Before this historic decision, conferral of the Gohonzon—the basis of the faith and practice of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism—was regarded by the priesthood as the high priest’s prerogative, and lay believers had been long taught to support that view. After the excommunication in November 1991, many SGI members had been forced to practice without the Gohonzon. The priesthood had taken advantage of the situation and used its monopoly of the Gohonzon as leverage to entice Gakkai members to secede from their lay organization and join a temple parish.

Upon learning of the Gakkai’s decision, the priesthood expressed its concern: “[The Soka Gakkai] will begin to independently bestow Gohonzons [*sic*], thus declaring complete independence from Nichiren Shoshu.” (*NST News*,

Special Issue, p. 2). In the same publication, the priesthood also said: “The Soka Gakkai is a group that has been excommunicated by Nichiren Shoshu and has absolutely no relationship with Nichiren Shoshu” (ibid., p. 1). Those seemingly contradictory statements—declaring that the Gakkai had initiated independence, then that the priesthood’s prior excommunication had severed the relationship—demonstrate the complex anxiety the priesthood felt toward its former believers. The priests wished that even after being excommunicated, lay believers would still feel dependent upon their clerical authority. They knew that their continued prosperity may depend on the return of its former believers. And this dependence upon its excommunicated laity, whom it despises, has been a source of mixed feelings.

Nikken’s action to deny Gohonzon to the Soka Gakkai—the sole organization consistently dedicated to propagation this century—clearly runs counter to the Daishonin’s intent in inscribing the Gohonzon, which he described as “the banner of propagation of the Lotus Sutra” (WND, 831).

Because of these circumstances—and based on its sense of responsibility as a harmoniously united order (*samgha*) of the Daishonin’s Buddhism—the SGI decided to make Gohonzon available to its worldwide membership. It was a decision made solely to preserve the integrity of the Daishonin’s Buddhism by replying to the sincerity of those seeking the Gohonzon and, thereby, further promoting the spread of the teaching.

Since the SGI announced its intent to confer Gohonzon, the priesthood has been denouncing this Gohonzon as counterfeit for three main reasons: 1) “It does not receive the sanction of the High Priest”; 2) “It is not bestowed by the Head Temple”; and 3) “It is arbitrarily manufactured by the Gakkai” (*Refuting the Soka Gakkai’s “Counterfeit Object of*

Worship": 100 Questions and Answers, compiled by the Nichiren Shoshu Doctrinal Research Committee. Nichiren Shoshu Temple, 1996, p. 12).

The priesthood maintains that Gohonzon issued without the high priest's eye-opening ceremony is counterfeit (*NST News, Special Issue*, p. 9). According to the priesthood, however, the practical meaning of the eye-opening ceremony apparently is not that the high priest must infuse his presumed spiritual power, which he claims to have inherited from the Daishonin, into every Gohonzon issued by the head temple. Rather, the eye-opening ceremony seems to mean being sanctioned. As the priesthood states: "Up to now, the Gohonzons [*sic*] granted to believers at the branch temples have all been sanctioned by the High Priest, that is, their eyes have been opened" (*Refuting the Soka Gakkai's "Counterfeit Object of Worship": 100 Questions and Answers*, p. 37). And: "In Nichiren Shoshu from the ancient past, the High Priest's sanction was essential for everything related to the Gohonzon. The arbitrary copying of the Gohonzon and the conferral of the copies by the Gakkai today are unpardonable acts" (*ibid.*, p. 39). All their arguments against the Nichikan Gohonzon boil down to one point: They are counterfeit because the high priest did not authorize them.

The term *arbitrary* in the temple's usage can only be interpreted to mean "in a way not according with the high priest's intention," which was essentially to punish those affiliated with the Gakkai by depriving them of the Gohonzon. However, it is the high priest's sudden denial of the Gohonzon to those seeking it that better fits the definition of an arbitrary act.

Regarding the reproduction and conferral of the Gohonzon, the priesthood maintains: "The only person who is able to transcribe the innermost enlightenment of the Dai-Gohonzon

of the High Sanctuary is the High Priest who received the bestowal of the lifeblood to only a single person from the Dai-shonin. . . . During the seven-hundred-year history of Nichiren Shoshu, priests other than the High Priest, even if they were of eminent virtue, erudite or experts at calligraphy, have never transcribed the Gohonzon. However, there are instances where a retired High Priest transcribed the Gohonzon after being commissioned to do so by the current High Priest” (*Refuting the Soka Gakkai’s “Counterfeit Object of Worship”*: 100 Questions and Answers, pp. 29–30). In a nutshell, the priesthood asserts that unless Gohonzon are transcribed by the high priest and their printing sanctioned by him, they are not legitimate and constitute a grave doctrinal error.

The history of the Fuji School, however, contradicts this. There are numerous recorded instances in which priests other than the high priests transcribed Gohonzon since the earliest period of the Fuji School. According to the priesthood, those transcriptions of Gohonzon would be “unpardonable acts” since no one but the high priest can transcribe Gohonzon. Despite numerous records of such instances, however, there is no evidence of protest from anyone in the Fuji School, including the successive high priests. Its own history suggests, therefore, that the priesthood’s assertions lack substance.

In February 1332, when Nikko and Nichimoku were still alive, Nissen, one of Nikko’s six main disciples, transcribed a

***The History of
the Transcription
of the Gohonzon***

Gohonzon and conferred it to one of his parishioners (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 8, p. 214). There is no record of either Nikko or Nichimoku opposing Nissen’s transcription.

According to a document written in 1340 and attributed to Nichizon, one of Nikko's disciples, Nikko instructed that in the Fuji School, only one designated disciple should transcribe Gohonzon in order to keep the "lantern of the Law" lit—to keep the Gohonzon available to believers (*Complete Works of the Nichiren School*, vol. 2, p. 418). The same document records that, after the Daishonin's death, his six senior disciples started to transcribe Gohonzon, and there was no dispute among them about their right to produce transcriptions (ibid.). From those records, it may be surmised that Nikko made it a general rule that only one designated priest is to transcribe Gohonzon to maintain the order of the school.

For this reason, it was permissible for Nissen, who resided in the distant province of Sanuki, to transcribe a Gohonzon for one of his parishioners. There was no mention of any mysterious or exclusive power possessed by a high priest that would inject the Daishonin's soul into a transcribed Gohonzon. Other records further confirm this point.

During the late fourteenth century, after the deaths of the second high priest Nikko Shonin and the third high priest Nichimoku in 1333, Taiseki-ji priests other than the high priest transcribed many Gohonzon (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 8). For example, Nissen transcribed two Gohonzon in 1337 and one in 1338. Nichigo, one of Nikko's six new disciples at Omosu Seminary, transcribed two in 1344, two in 1345 and one in 1350. (The dates of two additional Gohonzon transcribed by Nichigo are unknown.) In 1340, Nichizon had a wooden Gohonzon made from a Gohonzon inscribed by Nichimoku. Nichimyō, one of Nikko's six disciples at Omosu Seminary, transcribed one in 1344. Nichiman, Nikko's disciple on Sado Island, transcribed one in 1352 and another in 1357. Nichidai, one of Nikko's six new disciples at Omosu

Seminary, transcribed one in 1388. While those Gohonzon were transcribed by priests other than the high priest during the tenures of the fourth high priest Nichido (1333-39), the fifth high priest Nichigyō (1339-65) and the sixth high priest Nichiji (1365-1406), none of those high priests left any record of denouncing those transcriptions as unorthodox. It is especially noteworthy that Nichigyō never accused Nichigo, his adversary in a bitter land dispute over Taiseki-ji, of transcribing Gohonzon in an unauthorized manner and thus violating the high priest's alleged prerogative.

In other words, during the early days of the Fuji School after Nikkō Shōnin established Taiseki-ji and appointed Nichimoku as his successor in 1290, the priesthood intended to limit the transcription of the Gohonzon to one designated person for the orderly management of the Fuji School. However, it did not consider transcription of the Gohonzon by a priest other than the high priest to be a grave doctrinal error. For this reason, Nichū, the ninth high priest, allowed branch temple chief priests to transcribe the Gohonzon. He states in "On Formalities": "Those at branch temples who have disciples and lay patrons may transcribe the amulet [i.e., the Gohonzon]. However, they should not place their seals on it... Those at branch temples who have disciples and lay patrons may transcribe the mandala [i.e., the Gohonzon] yet may not place their seal on it" (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 1, p. 71).

Those Gohonzon transcribed by chief priests at the branch temples and without the transcriber's written seal were considered temporary, conferred before believers received one transcribed by the high priest. By allowing chief priests to transcribe the Gohonzon, yet asking them not to affix their personal seals, Nichū tried to accomplish two

things: meeting the needs of believers who could not otherwise receive Gohonzon while maintaining order within the school regarding the transcription of the Gohonzon. Since Gohonzon transcribed by chief priests were considered temporary and usually without transcription date or name of a transcriber, not many of them survive today. Nonetheless, there are enough recorded instances to verify the Fuji School's practice of transcribing Gohonzon by priests other than the high priest. For example, according to Jundo Nose's *Miscellaneous Records* (Jpn Shokiroku), Nissho, a chief priest of a lodging temple on the head temple grounds, transcribed a Gohonzon for the parish of a Shinto shrine near the head temple in 1823 (vol. 7, p. 355). When Nissho transcribed this Gohonzon, the forty-ninth high priest Nisso and the retired forty-eighth high priest Nichiryō were residing at Taiseki-ji, so there was no immediate need for Nissho to transcribe a Gohonzon on behalf of the high priest. Nissho was a veteran priest at Taiseki-ji who served eight high priests, and he probably simply responded to a request from his local parish.

In 1860, Nichigen, a disciple of Nissho, also transcribed a Gohonzon for one of his parishioners (*Miscellaneous Records*, vol. 7, p. 242). The dates and the transcriber's name for this Gohonzon appear on the back probably because it was customary that only the high priest place his seal on the Gohonzon. Both Nissho and his disciple Nichigen were high-ranking priests at Taiseki-ji but did not become high priests. Nevertheless, they still transcribed Gohonzon and conferred them on their parishioners.

There are also records of Gohonzon whose transcribers are unknown. Since the high priest customarily placed his seal on Gohonzon he transcribed, it is certain that someone other than a high priest transcribed these Gohonzon. In 1760,

during the tenure of the thirty-third high priest Nichigen, someone other than the high priest transcribed a Gohonzon dedicated to a Shinto deity and kept it at Honjo-ji, a branch temple of Taiseki-ji (*Miscellaneous Records*, vol. 7, p. 226).

As a side note, during the eighteenth century, many Gohonzon were transcribed for Shinto shrines near Taiseki-ji and its other branch temples, supposedly to call forth the power of Shinto deities dwelling there. Often these Gohonzon, many of which were transcribed by high priests, were requested by lay parishioners for a Shinto shrine in their home village. Such parishioners rarely understood the tenets of the Daishonin's Buddhism concerning the Gohonzon, and mixed their practice of Shintoism with other forms of Buddhism. The priests who transcribed Gohonzon for this purpose must surely have known this and that it violated the guidelines set down by Nikko Shonin, the founder of the Fuji School. One such Gohonzon, for example, bears the inscription, "Bestowed to summon forth the body of the god of the Tenman Shrine." Nevertheless, the doctrinal legitimacy of these "Shinto Shrine" Gohonzon was never questioned.

There were two Taiseki-ji priests who became chief priests of Myoren-ji, a prominent old temple near Taiseki-ji, who transcribed Gohonzon. On March 1, 1707, Nichiju became the twenty-fourth chief priest of Myoren-ji. From that time until 1727, when he left his position at Myoren-ji, he continued to transcribe Gohonzon for his parishioners and the chief priests of branch temples that belonged to Myoren-ji. (Myoren-ji and its branch temples joined Nichiren Shoshu, under the head temple Taiseki-ji, in 1950. Before that, it was regarded as one of the eight head temples of the Fuji School that maintained its own branch temples. Taiseki-ji was also one of these eight.)

According to one source, Nichiju transcribed eleven Gohonzon while he was chief priest of Myoren-ji (*Ideas of the Fuji School* [Jpn Fuji Monryu Shiko], ed. Mitsuaki Osawa; no. 4, p. 9). During this time, Nichiei (twenty-fourth), Nichiyu (twenty-fifth), Nichikan (twenty-sixth), Nichiyo (twenty-seventh) and Nissho (twenty-eighth) became high priests successively at Taiseki-ji, but none of them criticized Nichiju for transcribing Gohonzon. Neither was Nichiju excommunicated by his teacher, Nichiei. Even after he went to Myoren-ji, Nichiju maintained friendly ties with Taiseki-ji.

In 1727, when he retired, Nichiju appointed Nichiho as chief priest of Myoren-ji. Between 1727 and 1732, Nichiho transcribed Gohonzon for his parishioners. Three of them were recorded (*Ideas of the Fuji School*, no. 4, p. 10). After he left Myoren-ji, he returned to Taiseki-ji, and in 1736, the twenty-ninth high priest, Nitto, transferred the lineage of high priest to Nichiho, who then renamed himself Nitchu. There is no record of Nitchu being criticized for having transcribed Gohonzon before he received the lineage.

Nichiju and Nitchu demonstrate the Taiseki-ji priesthood's view that the transcription and conferral of the Gohonzon is an administrative responsibility of priests. Myoren-ji, as a head temple, had to meet the needs of its own parish and branch temples.

The nineteenth high priest, Nisshun, and the twenty-second high priest, Nisshun (same pronunciation, but written with different Chinese characters), also transcribed Gohonzon before they assumed the post of high priest. The nineteenth high priest became the chief priest of Taiseki-ji in the summer of 1641 without receiving the lineage of high priest from his predecessor, the seventeenth high priest, Nissei. Nissei had fallen out of favor with Kyodai-in, an in-

fluent lay patron, who maneuvered him out of office (see chapter 4 for more information). With strong backing from Kyodai-in, Nisshun was selected as Nissei's successor (*The Sacred Scriptures of Nichiren Shoshu* [Jpn Nichiren Shoshu Seiten], p. 763). (Editor's note: Kyodai-in was an adopted daughter of Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of the Edo shogunate government.)

For approximately four years, though out of office, Nissei refused to transfer the lineage. Until he finally received the lineage of high priest on October 27, 1645, Nisshun carried out various responsibilities—including the transcription and conferral of Gohonzon—as chief priest of Taiseki-ji but not as high priest of the school. There are two records of Gohonzon transcribed by Nisshun before he received the lineage of high priest. He transcribed one on January 8, 1645, and another on February 28 of the same year—approximately ten and eight months, respectively, before he received the lineage (*Miscellaneous Records*, vol. 2, p. 101; vol. 3, p. 104).

The twenty-second high priest, Nisshun, received the lineage of high priest from the twenty-first high priest, Nichinin, in 1680 (*The Chronology of Nichiren Shoshu and the Fuji School* [Jpn Nichiren Shoshu Fuji Nenpyo], p. 257). In 1676, four years earlier, however, Nisshun transcribed a Gohonzon for the parish of Shinko-ji in the Chiba area (*Miscellaneous Records*, vol. 7, p. 254). It is not certain where Nisshun was at that time, but he was not high priest of Taiseki-ji. Nisshun was the first Taiseki-ji priest who became a teacher at the Hosokusa Seminary in Chiba. Probably because of his reputation as an erudite priest, the parish of Shinko-ji near the seminary might have asked Nisshun to transcribe a Gohonzon.

In addition to the Gohonzon transcribed by persons other than the high priest, the school's history also reveals

numerous records of ordinary priests reproducing the Daishonin's original Gohonzon as well as Gohonzon transcribed by some prominent high priests such as Nikko and Nichikan. In the process of reproduction, a priest would place the original beside the new reproduction and copy it as closely as possible. Or the image would be traced on thin paper placed atop the original. An artisan would then use the copies made in this manner to carve a wooden Gohonzon, or a wood block template, from which further reproductions would be printed.

In February 1836, for example, Nikki, the chief priest of Butsugen-ji in Sendai, copied a Gohonzon that Nikko had transcribed in 1303 and had a wooden Gohonzon made from the copy. He then removed a Gohonzon transcribed by the thirty-seventh high priest from the temple altar and enshrined this wooden Gohonzon in its place (*Miscellaneous Records*, vol. 8, p. 215). While he described the process in writing on the back of the wooden Gohonzon, Nikki did not mention anything about receiving sanction from the high priest at Taiseki-ji to reproduce Nikko's Gohonzon or whether the high priest conducted an eye-opening ceremony on it. (At that time, the fiftieth high priest, Nichijo, and the retired forty-eighth high priest, Nichiryō, were present at Taiseki-ji.)

According to *Miscellaneous Records*, while some wooden Gohonzon carry the high priest's signature, many others bear no such inscription or record. Furthermore, there is only one wooden Gohonzon in existence that bears a record of a high priest having performed an eye-opening ceremony upon it. This wooden Gohonzon was made after a Gohonzon transcribed by Nikko in 1306 (*Miscellaneous Records*, vol. 15, p. 445). Furthermore, in *Miscellaneous Records* and other documents, there are many records of Gohonzon reproduced

through wood block printing whose templates were produced by those other than the high priests. These include Gohonzon reproduced from the Gohonzon inscribed by the Daishonin in 1282 and kept at Kyodai-ji in Tokushima Prefecture and widely distributed throughout Japan; Gohonzon reproduced from the Gohonzon transcribed by Nikko Shonin in March 1306 and kept at Honko-ji in Shizuoka Prefecture and other temples; and Gohonzon reproduced from the Gohonzon transcribed by Nichikan in 1718 and widely distributed during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century.

The same 1718 Gohonzon by Nichikan was also conferred upon Gakkai members after World War II. None of these *okatagi* Gohonzon bear the high priest's signature, indicating that their templates were transcribed by someone other than a high priest. Those numerous records indicate clearly that the high priest's sanction or eye-opening ceremony was not a necessary condition for the reproduction of Gohonzon.

Some high priests of modern times have claimed that the lineage of high priest is an absolutely necessary condition for the transcription of the Gohonzon. For example, fifty-sixth high priest Nichio (1848-1922), states: "Unless one receives the bequeathal of the golden utterance to the direct successor, one can never transcribe the object of worship" (*Dispelling Illusion and Observing One's Mind* [Jpn Bennaku Kanjin Sho], p. 212, as translated in *Refuting the Soka Gakkai's "Counterfeit Object of Worship": 100 Questions and Answers*, p. 29). Nichio's claim is either an indication of his ignorance of the school's history or a blatant attempt to revise the tradition for the sake of aggrandizing the high priest's authority. In light of the recorded history of the Fuji School, the high priest's prerogative over the transcription and conferral of the Gohonzon is merely an administrative device to maintain the orderly relationship between

Taiseki-ji and its branch temples and thereby prevent internal schism. It was never meant as a doctrinal or metaphysical necessity. For this reason, there are abundant records of Gohonzon transcribed by priests without the lineage of high priest.

The current priesthood's claims against the Gohonzon issued by the SGI clearly contradict the precedents set down in the Fuji School's own history. Furthermore, the transcription from which this Gohonzon is derived was made by Nichikan, the twenty-sixth high priest recognized by both the priesthood and the Soka Gakkai as the "restorer of the Fuji School." (For more discussions regarding the reproduction of the Gohonzon and its history, please refer to "A Historical Perspective on the Transcription of the Gohonzon" and "The Recent History of the Conferral of the Gohonzon" in *Reaffirming Our Right to Happiness: On the Gohonzon Transcribed by High Priest Nichikan*, published by the SGI-USA in 1996.)

When the priesthood excommunicated it in 1991, the SGI was liberated from the priesthood's authoritarianism in several important areas. The SGI's decision to issue Gohonzon to its worldwide membership in 1993 freed the lay Buddhist movement from myths promulgated by the priesthood that had long shrouded the significance of the Gohonzon.

Before this epochal decision, the priesthood deliberately led lay believers to think that they must leave matters concerning the Gohonzon—especially its transcription, printing and conferral—to the priesthood because they involve a level of mysticism beyond the grasp of ordinary practitioners. The

priesthood's attitude toward the Gohonzon also promoted the tendency to view the Gohonzon as an external entity endowed with mysterious powers that control the lives of believers.

The SGI's conferral of Gohonzon, however, has helped to clarify correct faith in the Gohonzon. It is no longer a magical object, the understanding of which is veiled by an alleged mysterious and exclusive heritage of an elite individual—the high priest. Meanwhile, the truly “mystic” quality of the Gohonzon has been made clear: that is, its power to call forth, in response to the believer's powers of faith and practice, the “Gohonzon”—the enlightened life-state of Buddhahood equal to that of the Daishonin—from within each believer's life. As the Daishonin states: “Never seek this Gohonzon outside yourself. . . . This Gohonzon also is found only in the two characters for faith” (WND, 832). Put another way, from the viewpoint of SGI members, the Gohonzon has ceased to be an object of spiritual dependency and has become the genuine object of their religious devotion and practice as intended by the Daishonin—a mirror to reflect their own inner enlightenment.

* The section on the history of the transcription of the Gohonzon in this installment is partly based on Mikio Matsuoka's pamphlet *A Historical Perspective on the Transcription of the Gohonzon in the Taiseki-ji School* (Jpn Taiseki-ji monryu no honzon shoshaken ni kansuru shiteki kosatsu), published by the Institute of Oriental Philosophy in 1997.