

## EPILOGUE

# Learning From the Past

This book traces the history of the Fuji School, a denomination of Nichiren Buddhism founded by Nikko Shonin at Taiseki-ji toward the end of the thirteenth century. A review of the school's history helps to shed light on the current condition of Nichiren Shoshu and the current priesthood's assertions—especially, its dogma concerning the high priest's infallibility.

Like any other religious movement, there are light and dark sides in the Fuji School's seven-century history. The school has seen some exemplary priests who earnestly strove to extol, protect and spread Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. Nikko Shonin, the school's founder, upheld his mentor's intent against the corruption and distortions perpetrated by the five senior priests whom the Daishonin designated to help Nikko Shonin lead the Buddhist order after his death. By taking an uncompromising stance toward the five senior priests, Nikko Shonin proved the validity of the transmission of Buddhism that he had received from the Daishonin. Nikko's legitimacy, in other words, rested entirely upon his faith and understanding, which he demonstrated in his practice and efforts of propagation not only when the Daishonin was alive,

but also after his death. The transmission of Buddhism from the Daishonin to Nikko Shonin, in this sense, serves as a prototype showing present practitioners how they may inherit the Daishonin's Buddhism and practice it.

Another exemplary priest in the history of the Fuji School is Nichikan, the twenty-sixth high priest. Like Nikko Shonin, Nichikan proved himself as the Daishonin's true disciple by challenging the erroneous teachings that his predecessors had brought into the school. Just as Nikko Shonin strictly pointed out the errors of the five senior priests in worshipping Shakyamuni's statue as an object of devotion, Nichikan refuted the same errors committed by his predecessors and reestablished the Gohonzon as the correct and only object of devotion in the Daishonin's Buddhism. Without Nikko and Nichikan, it would be hard to imagine that anyone today could have a correct understanding or practice of the Daishonin's Buddhism. Their legacies serve as a guide to our practice.

Whereas some high priests at Taiseki-ji, such as Nikko and Nichikan, exemplified the Daishonin's Buddhism through their actions and intent, their number is unfortunately few. As we have learned from the Fuji School's recorded history, many high priests distorted the Daishonin's Buddhism while asserting the authority they had inherited. Their actions betrayed the Daishonin's intent. For example, in the fourteenth century, Taiseki-ji was divided into two camps that for more than seventy years fought bitterly over claims to the head temple property. During the seventeenth century, several high priests accepted and promoted erroneous traditions from other Nichiren schools, such as the worship of Shakyamuni's statue. As recently as the twentieth century, high-ranking priests contended for the seat of high priest through a fraudulent election process.

As this series has highlighted using the school's own records, such examples of corruption and error among leading priests abound in the history of the Fuji School. But what value is there in reviewing these errors of the past?

First, through understanding the history of the Daishonin's Buddhism, we can view the present condition of the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood in context. The current problems within the priesthood that have resulted in its attacks on the SGI did not begin suddenly in 1990 when Nikken hatched his plan to do away with the lay organization. Nikken was able to do what he did because conditions that were conducive to his plan already existed within the priesthood. The majority of priests held that they were inherently superior to lay believers, with many feeling threatened by and jealous toward the large and growing lay Buddhist movement. Viewing the high priest as an absolute authority was a familiar concept. For many priests, direct control over believers took priority over the spread of the Daishonin's Buddhism. Temple services and rituals, such as conducting funerals and the sale of memorial tablets, had long been viewed primarily as sources of income.

These conditions made the idea of protecting their authority, and the enterprise that stemmed from that authority, a cause that most priests could support. The perceived threat to that authority in the minds of many priests was a lay organization that was enthusiastically supported and appreciated by the believers. Put another way, the unprecedented development of the SGI stemming from the pure faith and effort of the laity juxtaposed with the priesthood's seven-century-old pattern of authoritarianism and corruption made the current situation a historical certainty. If it weren't Nikken, someone else within the priesthood would

have taken advantage of tensions that arose between the two groups. By understanding more about the school's history, we can gain insight into the causes of the current problems, causes that are rooted centuries in the past. With knowledge of the past, we can gain a broader perspective on the present—the reason why things are the way they are and insight as to what should be done.

A second benefit of learning about the Fuji School's past is our realization that at the core of the priesthood's corruption lie human weaknesses we are all familiar with: arrogance, jealousy and greed. Cloistered behind the veil of clerical authority for centuries, these delusions became deeply rooted in the collective psyche of the priesthood. This is not a unique situation in the history of religion. Any religious movement can become corrupt and degenerate when its leaders cease to be diligent in combating those human frailties within themselves. To spread the Daishonin's Buddhism and ensure its transmission to future generations, therefore, we must not repeat the errors of the priesthood. We are not immune to the potential for rigid authoritarianism and dogmatism simply because ours is a lay movement. With an understanding of the past, we can better guide ourselves and our Buddhist movement into the future.

Finally, by tracking the tortuous path of the Fuji School over the past seven centuries, we can better grasp the significance of the SGI and its mission in a broad historical and global context. Following the deaths of Nikko Shonin and Nichimoku in 1333, the true vigor and spirit of the Daishonin's Buddhism became dormant for centuries, with a few sporadic periods of revival, such as that of Nichikan's tenure in the early eighteenth century. The Daishonin's teaching gave rise to many different schools of so-called Nichiren

Buddhism. But their tenets and practices stray significantly from the Daishonin's original intent. As we have examined in this series, the same is true of the Fuji School. When Makiguchi and Toda founded the Soka Gakkai in 1930, the Daishonin's Buddhism had been existing in form but not in substance; that is, its practitioners had not been dedicated to its spread for the happiness of all people. And until Soka Gakkai members brought the Daishonin's Buddhism to the rest of the world, the Daishonin's promise for the global spread of his teaching had rung hollow. It was the Soka Gakkai, in fact, that revived the Daishonin's Buddhism after almost seven centuries of dormancy. Through the efforts of SGI members, the Daishonin's teaching has taken on concrete meaning in the lives of more than ten million people throughout the world.

It is no coincidence that this unprecedented spread of the Daishonin's Buddhism by lay believers rattled the priesthood's authoritarianism at its core. Our understanding of what has transpired in the years since the time of Nichiren Daishonin, Nikko and Nichimoku, makes us aware that we are practicing the Daishonin's Buddhism at a most important juncture in its history. That is, our understanding and practice of the Daishonin's teaching will determine its further development or decline from this point on.

We stand at the threshold of an entirely new stage of development. In light of this realization, the so-called temple issue no longer pertains merely to the priesthood's misconduct. It is really about the unprecedented renewal of Nichiren Buddhism—the true renewal of Buddhism and humanism—into the new millennium. As such the term “temple issue” is a bit limiting.

We can make sense of history when we understand how it

affects us today, when we understand that the past is part of our present lives. It may be difficult to say what effect the event that took place at Taiseki-ji in 1482, for example, has on our practice today. In this year, the ninth high priest, Nichiu, transferred the office of high priest to a thirteen-year-old boy. Following the appointment, Nikkyo, one of the young high priest's strong supporters, began a series of writings extolling the lineage and authority of the high priest. Nikkyo may be considered one of the key authors of the dogma of the high priest's absolute authority.

Needless to say, understanding the history of the Fuji School does not provide us with everything we need to grasp the circumstances surrounding the issues between the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood and the Soka Gakkai. More than ever, we must return to a thorough study of the basics of the Daishonin's Buddhism and deepen our understanding of what it means to practice his teaching today. Knowing our past, however, helps us realize the importance of taking such action.