

CHAPTER 10

The Priesthood Renounces Celibacy

In December 1866, imperial rule was restored in Japan. The following January, the imperial army defeated the army of

***Starting in the
Nineteenth Century,
Priests Are Allowed
To Marry***

the Tokugawa shogunate at Toba and Fushimi near Kyoto. In September, the era name was changed to Meiji after the reigning emperor, and the imperial palace moved from Kyoto (whose name means “capital

city”) to Edo, which was then renamed Tokyo (“eastern capital”). During this tumultuous time of civil war leading to the inauguration of the imperial Meiji government, the Fuji School at Taiseki-ji was headed by Nichiden, its fifty-second high priest.

On April 25, 1872, the Meiji government issued a decree that would drastically transform the Buddhist clergy of Japan. It states in part: “Priests may eat meat, get married and grow their hair.” The decree also allowed priests to wear regular clothing instead of Buddhist robes and surplices when they were not attending religious services. From this time on, the majority of priests in Japan openly renounced

the time-honored monastic tradition of celibacy and began to marry.

Concerned about the demoralizing effect this might have on the Buddhist community, some priests strongly protested the decree and demanded that the government retract it. In February 1878, the government issued a notice clarifying that its decree was intended to lift the bans (on meat-eating, marriage and hair growth by priests) instituted by the shogunate government but not to force Buddhist schools to change their monastic rules. In other words, the government maintained that it was up to the priests themselves to decide if they were to eat meat, have wives and grow hair. But this notice came too late to reverse the trend. Most Buddhist priests at that time gladly took the government decree as an excuse to renounce celibacy. They saw the rules on sexual conduct as oppressive government restrictions on their private lives rather than as self-imposed rules derived from the Buddhist monastic tradition.

During the Edo period, the shogunate government monitored the activities of priests in order to maintain strict control of the Buddhist clergy and thereby ensure the effectiveness of the parish system. When priests were found to have had a sexual relationship with a woman, they were severely punished. If the guilty priest was the chief priest of a temple, he was exiled to a remote island. In the case of student priests, they were placed in stocks for public viewing and later expelled from their temples.

Once the restrictions were lifted by the new regime, priests gladly started to marry. This is a clear indication that the Buddhist community had lost the integrity to decide on matters of Buddhist tradition. Instead, priests regarded the government as the legitimate authority over their traditions.

Put simply, the years of strict government control had made the Buddhist clergy entirely dependent on political authority. Some contend that the Meiji government issued the decree to enfeeble the morale of the Buddhist community and thereby elevate Shinto, which was viewed as the chief means of extolling imperial authority.

Nichiden criticized priests of other Buddhist schools for their elation over the government decree, regarding it as an expression of imperial mercy. He stated that despite the trend in the Buddhist community, the priesthood of the Fuji School should uphold the precepts of the Daishonin and Nikko Shonin and remain celibate. But eventually the priesthood at Taiseki-ji succumbed to the trend.

The priesthood's renouncement of celibacy had a significant effect on the development of the Fuji School. It gave rise to nepotism and the hereditary succession of priesthood positions and temple properties within the school. Factions of related priests formed, vying for control. Instead of regarding the spread of the Daishonin's Buddhism as their goal, many priests became increasingly bound by family ties and personal interests.

Celibacy was the norm of Buddhist clergy that helped set them apart from the laity. Priests were known by the Japanese term *shukke*, meaning, "those who have left home," as distinguished from the laity, which was called *zaike*, "those who remain at home." Without remaining celibate, therefore, priests essentially became lay believers who dressed like priests.

Regarding the monastic tradition of celibacy, the Daishonin writes to Sairen-bo as follows:

Now that you have discarded the provisional teachings such as Nembutsu and others and taken faith in the

True Law, you are truly a pure sage among those who uphold the precepts. In any case, when one becomes a priest, even though he is from one of the provisional schools, he should be a priest [who remains celibate and eats no meat]. How much more should this be true of practitioners of the True Law? (GZ, 1357)

On the same subject, the Daishonin states: “Probably because the world has entered into the latter age, even monks who have wives and children have followers, as do priests who eat fish and fowl. I have neither wife nor children, nor do I eat fish or fowl. I have been blamed merely for trying to propagate the Lotus Sutra” (WND, 42). Following his teacher in this regard, Nikko Shonin also states in his “Twenty-six Admonitions”: “My disciples should conduct themselves as saintly priests, patterning their behavior after that of the late master” (GZ, 1619). “Saintly priests” indicates those who remain celibate and eat no meat. Judging from these passages, it is clear that the Daishonin and Nikko Shonin viewed celibacy as an essential requisite for those who enter the priesthood and never allowed their priestly followers to disavow that monastic rule.

Regarding the condition of the priesthood at Taiseki-ji after the government decree of 1872, Nichiko Hori, the fifty-ninth high priest, comments that “the recent conduct of priests, which makes them indistinguishable from lay believers,” is “a temporary anomaly.” He also expressed hope that priestly conduct within Nichiren Shoshu “be restored to the normal state of the period of the founder of the school as well as of the founder of the head temple” (*Detailed Accounts of Nikko Shonin of the Fuji School*, p. 437).

Concerning sexual misconduct by priests, Nikko Shonin

states in his “Twenty-six Admonitions,” “However, even if a high priest or a priest striving for practice and understanding should temporarily deviate from sexual abstinence, he should be assigned among the ranks of ordinary priests” (GZ, 1619). Ordinarily, when priests of any Buddhist school were found to have engaged in sexual misconduct, they were expelled from the priesthood and returned to the laity. In this article, however, Nikko Shonin suggests that if the offense constitutes a temporary lapse, those found guilty should be demoted to the rank of ordinary priests. As Nichiko Hori comments on this passage, “There is no other way to interpret [this passage] than as indicating demotion from the eminent position of high priest to that of low rank” (*Detailed Accounts of Nikko Shonin of the Fuji School*, p. 438). It is clear that Nikko Shonin saw the possibility that even a high priest might commit sexual misconduct. Once again this passage completely refutes the idea of the infallibility of the high priest.

In September 1872, five months after it issued the decree lifting the ban on priests’ marriages, the Meiji government de-

***Fuji School Merges
With Erroneous
Nichiren Schools***

ecided to organize Buddhism into seven schools, each of which was to be headed by one chief executive priest. They were: Tendai, True Word, Pure Land, Zen, True Pure Land, Nichiren and Ji

schools. Later, however, the Nichiren School was divided into two schools. One held that the essential and theoretical teachings of the Lotus Sutra are equal in merit. It was, therefore, called the Itchi (Oneness) School. The other asserted that the essential teaching is superior to the theoretical

teaching and was thus referred to as the Shoretsu (Superior–Inferior) School. In May 1874, Taiseki-ji joined the Shoretsu School of Nichiren Buddhism, which consisted of the Nikko branch, the Myoman-ji branch, the Honjo-ji branch, the Eight-chapter branch and the Honryu-ji branch. The Fuji School headed by Taiseki-ji was considered a sub-branch of the Nikko branch.

In February 1876, Taiseki-ji, Honmon-ji in Kitayama, Yobo-ji in Kyoto, Myoren-ji in Fuji, Kuon-ji in Koizumi, Myohon-ji in Hota, Honmon-ji in Nishiyama and Jitsujo-ji in Izu seceded from the Shoretsu School and formed the Nikko branch of the Nichiren School. The head priests of those eight temples took turns assuming a one-year term as chief executive priest. During this period, Taiseki-ji officially merged with other Nichiren schools and was placed under the jurisdiction of temples whose doctrines it considered to be slanderous of the Daishonin’s teaching. Furthermore, when Nippu and Nichio of Taiseki-ji became the chief executive priests of this combined school, they did nothing to refute the errors of the other temples.

Later, the Nikko branch renamed itself the Hon’mon or “True Teaching” School. Although the eight temples of the Nikko branch descended from Nikko Shonin, their historical background and doctrines differed significantly from one another. Hence, the alliance of various Nikko denominations was short-lived. In September 1900, Taiseki-ji’s request to become independent of other Nikko branches was granted by the government, and the temple named itself the Fuji branch of the Nichiren School. Later, in June 1912, Taiseki-ji decided that it was inappropriate to call itself a branch of the Nichiren School, which it considered doctrinally deviant. So, following its claim to the orthodoxy of the Daishonin’s

Buddhism, a group of temples led by Taiseki-ji renamed itself Nichiren Shoshu or “the true school of Nichiren.” In this context, Taiseki-ji’s history as Nichiren Shoshu, or an independent school of Nichiren Buddhism, is relatively short.

Taiseki-ji’s merger and associations with erroneous Nichiren schools during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were chiefly motivated by concern for its survival. The Fuji School led by Taiseki-ji then was a diminutive sect. According to research conducted in 1904, the Fuji School had eighty-seven temples with only forty-seven chief priests, and approximately fifty-eight thousand parish members. Its relatively small size motivated the head temple administration to seek alliances with larger schools to gain prestige and security.

One consequence of its merger with other Nichiren schools was that, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the Fuji School had grown desensitized to the doctrinal errors of those schools, which were descended from one or another of the five senior priest disciples of the Daishonin or from among the disciples of Nikko Shonin. The Fuji School’s disregard for its own doctrinal integrity is particularly apparent in an incident that took place in the early twentieth century concerning the bestowal of an imperial title upon Nichiren Daishonin.

On September 11, 1922, the high priests of various Nichiren schools submitted a petition to the emperor requesting that he bestow the title of “Great Teacher” upon the Daishonin. Nissho, then the fifty-seventh high priest of Taiseki-ji, also signed the petition. In response, the emperor declared that the Daishonin should be called Great Teacher Rishsho (The Establishment of the Truth). Eight representatives of the various Nichiren schools who submitted the petition went to

the ministry of the imperial household and received the decree. These included the high priest of the Mount Minobu-based Nichiren School, Nichien Isono; the high priest of Nichiren Shoshu, Nissho Abe; and the high priest of the Kempon Hokke School, Nissho Honda. This party of high priests then moved to the Suiko-sha, a clubhouse for high-ranking naval officers. There they recited the “Life Span” chapter of the Lotus Sutra and chanted daimoku, led by Nichien Isono. After reciting the sutra, congratulatory words were exchanged. Nissho, the high priest of Taiseki-ji, delivered a closing speech. After the event, all the high priests posed together for a commemorative photo.

To encourage his future disciples to protect the integrity of the Daishonin’s teaching, especially against the erroneous doctrines of the five senior priests, Nikko Shonin wrote in his “Twenty-six Admonitions”: “You should not sit together with slanderers of the Law for fear of suffering the same punishment as they” (GZ, 1618). Nissho’s action indicates that he was completely oblivious to this admonition from Nikko Shonin. Not only did he seat himself with priests from erroneous Nichiren schools in a religious ceremony, but he recited the sutra and chanted daimoku with them. Although the priesthood at Taiseki-ji called itself Nichiren Shoshu or “the true school of Nichiren,” its actions, as this incident indicates, contradicted its claim of orthodoxy.

Nichikan, the twenty-sixth high priest, asserted that Nichiren’s honorific title should be “Great Sage” [Jpn Daishonin], for he is the Buddha who revealed Nam-myohorenge-kyo as the seed of enlightenment for all people of the Latter Day (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 3, p. 306). Furthermore, Nichikan explains that Nichiren called himself a great sage, citing a passage from “A Sage Perceives

the Three Existences of Life,” which states, “I, Nichiren, am the foremost sage in Jambudvipa” (WND, 642).

Nichikan criticizes those who refer to Nichiren in a way that fails to indicate the importance of his enlightenment. He states: “Why does everyone in the other schools refer to Nichiren as the ‘Great Bodhisattva’? This is because of an imperial edict.... They rely on the decree of an emperor of the secular world. But we rely on the decree of the Lord of the Law from the enlightened world” (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 3, pp. 306–07). Here Nichikan refutes those who profess to be followers of Nichiren for basing their understanding of their founder on the interpretation of political authority. Nichikan explains that Nichiren’s title *Daishonin* expresses the religious significance of his life. Thus, it must be treated as a doctrinal issue and decided based on his writings, not on secular authority.

Like the title “Great Bodhisattva,” the title “Great Teacher” in Japan had been bestowed by the emperor upon founders and eminent priests of various Buddhist schools. For example, Kukai, the founder of the True Word School, received from the emperor the title of Great Teacher Kobo; Shinran, the founder of the True Pure Land School, Great Teacher Kenshin; Honen, the founder of the Pure Land School, Great Teacher Enko; and Dogen, the founder of the Soto branch of the Zen School, Great Teacher Shoyo. To request such a title from political authority on behalf of the Daishonin reflected the ignorance of these priests concerning his identity and his life’s work. It was an act contrary to the Daishonin’s defiant spirit toward political authority and his commitment to the spiritual freedom and empowerment of the people. High Priest Nissho’s acceptance of the imperial title for the Daishonin is testimony to the priesthood’s ignorance of its founder’s teaching.

Cooperation among various Nichiren schools, as evidenced in their joint petition for the imperial title of “Great Teacher,” actively began in the twentieth century. In November 1914, at Ikegami Honmon-ji, a temple of the Minobu Nichiren School, a conference was held to discuss the unification of Nichiren Buddhism. The high priests of various Nichiren schools attended the conference including: the Minobu Nichiren School, the Kenpon Hokke School, the Hon’mon School, the Hon-Myoho-Hokke School, the Hokke School, and the Hon’mon Hokke School. On behalf of Nichiren Shoshu, High Priest Nissho attended the conference, accompanied by Houn Abe, who was later to become the sixtieth high priest, Nichikai, and was also the father of the current high priest Nikken Abe.

Conference participants discussed the unification of the various Nichiren denominations, setting up intercommunication, the establishment of educational institutions and the election of members of a committee to negotiate the process. Making no attempt to point out the errors of the other Nichiren schools, who failed to view the Daishonin as the original Buddha, Nissho joined the conference and posed for a group photo afterward. Nissho and the rest of the priesthood at Taiseki-ji, who looked up to the high priest as a master, grew forgetful of the Daishonin’s admonition: “Both teacher and followers will surely fall into the hell of incessant suffering if they see enemies of the Lotus Sutra but disregard them and fail to reproach them” (WND, 747).

At this point, Nichiren Shoshu had distanced itself from the Daishonin’s teaching until there was no clear distinction in terms of behavior between Nichiren Shoshu and other Nichiren schools. The unification of Nichiren schools never materialized, but the movement created a momentum leading

to the joint petition for the imperial title of “Great Teacher.”

Nichiren Shoshu’s doctrinal compromise with other Nichiren schools did not end with its petition for the imperial title. In April 1931, Nikki Okada, chief priest of Kuon-ji, the head temple of the Nichiren School at Mount Minobu, submitted a petition to the Ministry of Education, the government agency responsible for religious organizations, requesting that the emperor present Kuon-ji with his calligraphy of the word *Rissho* to commemorate the 650th anniversary of the Daishonin’s passing. In response, the ministry asked the Mount Minobu-based Nichiren School to obtain consent from other Nichiren-related schools. A memorandum was circulated among the schools acknowledging that Nichiren’s tomb exists at Kuon-ji at Mount Minobu—heads of each school signed the memorandum, thus consenting to the emperor’s bestowal of his calligraphy upon the head temple of the Nichiren School at Minobu. Nichikai Abe, the sixtieth high priest of Taiseki-ji, was among those who signed the memorandum.

On October 1, 1931, the emperor’s calligraphy was bestowed on Kuon-ji, and it was displayed at a memorial hall on the temple grounds. Based on its claim that Nichiren’s tomb exists at Minobu, the Nichiren School attempted to unify the other Nichiren schools around it by taking advantage of imperial authority. Taiseki-ji’s acknowledgement of the Daishonin’s alleged tomb at Kuon-ji, however, contradicts the intent of Nikko Shonin, who left Mount Minobu with the Dai-Gohonzon and the Daishonin’s ashes due to the slanderous acts of the province steward. By yielding to Kuon-ji’s claim, Taiseki-ji compromised once again its doctrinal integrity as a school descended from Nikko Shonin.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Taiseki-ji was plagued by fierce factional struggles for the seat of high

***Factional Infighting
for the Position
of High Priest***

priest. To resolve disputes over who should succeed to the post, elections were held. But fraudulence and corruption interfered with elections for high priest, eventually prompting government intervention, both by the police and the Ministry of Education.

On August 18, 1923, Nissho, the fifty-seventh high priest, died at Okitsu, Shizuoka Prefecture, where he had been convalescing from an illness. Before his death, however, he did not directly transfer the highest office of Nichiren Shoshu to his successor, Nitchu, grand study master, the position then stipulated by the school's rules to be filled by the candidate for the office of high priest. Instead, Nissho invited two lay believers to Okitsu where he was staying and entrusted them, as temporary custodians, with the heritage of the Law, the formal lineage of the Fuji School. Later these two lay believers transferred the heritage to Nitchu at Renge-ji, a branch temple in Osaka.

The reason behind this unusual method of transferring the office of high priest was that Houn Abe, who later became the sixtieth high priest Nichikai, was trying to interfere with the appointment of Nitchu as the next high priest at all costs. Houn Abe, then leading a faction against Nissho within the priesthood, schemed to keep Nitchu away from Nissho so that the former might not receive the heritage. He also applied various forms of pressure to Nitchu, attempting to force his resignation from the position of grand study master. After his attempt failed and Nitchu became high

priest, Houn Abe schemed to force him out of office.

On November 18, 1925, Nichiren Shoshu held a council meeting at Taiseki-ji. Originally, they met to discuss their stance toward the Nichiren School at Mount Minobu. But two days later, the council suddenly passed a resolution calling for the impeachment of Nitchu. Following the resolution, the council issued a recommendation to the high priest that he resign. Prior to their meeting, the majority of council members had entered into a secret agreement to impeach Nitchu, a plan masterminded by Houn Abe.

Abe's scheming was chiefly motivated by his personal grudge against the high priest and his own ambition for the school's highest office. Four months before the council met, Nitchu had demoted Abe from the position of secretary general, as well as from his executive standing within the priesthood, for the errors he had made in an article critical of the Nichiren School at Minobu. Abe's article, published in *Dai-Nichiren*, the priesthood's official magazine, was intended to refute the tenets of the Nichiren School but instead became an object of ridicule in religious circles for its elemental mistakes.

In accord with its plan, the council successfully coerced Nitchu into writing a letter of resignation and reported to the Ministry of Education that the next high priest would be Nichiko Hori. However, leading parish members of Taiseki-ji started to campaign on behalf of the deposed high priest and decided to stop their financial contributions to those priests who supported Nitchu's impeachment. The two factions fought bitterly.

The bureau of religious affairs within the Ministry of Education, which exercised enormous control over religious organizations, saw no possibility of arbitration in the dispute and instructed Nichiren Shoshu to hold an election to

determine the high priest. At that time, there were about ninety priests qualified to vote under the school's rules and regulations. On February 17, 1926, ballots were taken. Supported by the leading faction and widely respected for his character and scholarship, Nichiko Hori won a landslide victory. Nitchu received only three out of eighty-seven votes. Before the election, Nitchu declared that he would not transfer the office of high priest to anyone, no matter who was elected. Despite his threat, he received only two votes besides his own.

After the election, however, some parish members lodged a complaint with the local police department that the leading faction, led by Houn Abe, had coerced Nitchu into writing his letter of resignation. Many priests were summoned to the police station for questioning. The turmoil was finally settled on March 8 when Nitchu transferred the high office to Nichiko.

Nichiko, who was more respected for his scholarship and integrity than Abe, had been persuaded by Abe's faction to run against Nitchu. As soon as Nichiko assumed that office, however, Abe began working to isolate Nichiko and force him out.

While in office, High Priest Nichiko tried to revise the school's rules and regulations to eliminate the rampant infighting characteristic of that time. But the committee overseeing the revisions, the council and the staff of the administrative office successfully sabotaged Nichiko's efforts. Lacking any support, Nichiko chose to retire and did so in November 1927, little more than a year after taking office. Upon his retirement, Nichiko expressed his desire to work on a compilation of the complete works of the Daishonin and of the Fuji School. Besides being disappointed at the

subterfuge he had faced from other high-ranking priests, Nichiko was also dissatisfied with the contents of what was known as the heritage of the Law—the supposedly secret transmission passed from one high priest to the next—which he had received from Nitchu. After becoming high priest, Nichiko met with the two lay believers who had received the transmission of the heritage from Nissho to reconfirm its contents.

Upon Nichiko's resignation, another election for high priest was held. Two candidates, Houn Abe and Koga Arimoto, ran for the office. The ballots were counted on December 18, 1927, with Abe receiving fifty-one votes, and Arimoto, thirty-eight. Abe had defeated his opponent by a margin of thirteen votes. This election, however, was tainted by corruption. Charges of fraud, including extortion, bribery and obstruction of votes, were brought by Arimoto's supporters. Furthermore, after the election, Abe was investigated by police and charged with embezzlement. He allegedly had cut down trees on the head temple grounds and illegally used the profits from their sale to fund his election campaign.

Because so many allegations were made concerning the election and its results, Nichiren Shoshu had no choice but to seek help from the bureau of religious affairs in the Ministry of Education. In June 1928, after six months of arbitration, the ministry finally acknowledged the election result, and Houn Abe, now called Nichikai, became the sixtieth high priest of Nichiren Shoshu. Meanwhile, the faction led by Koga Arimoto continued to attack Nichikai, accusing him of election fraud, lack of scholarship and sexual misconduct. (Houn Abe, when he was assigned to Josen-ji in Tokyo, had an illicit affair with Suma Hikosaka, a young servant, and had a son out of wedlock. Five years later Abe legally recognized his son. That

son, Shinno Abe, went on to become Nikken, the sixty-seventh high priest.) In an open letter dated March 13, 1928, Arimoto's supporters declared that Nichikai's appointment as high priest would be "an ignominy of the priesthood."

The factional infighting in the early 1900s also attracted much attention from the media. The March 16, 1926, edition of the local paper, *Shizuoka Minyu Shimbun*, reports: "Nichiren Shoshu Taiseki-ji continues its ugly infighting. Priests and parish members have abandoned their proud tradition of the transmission of the heritage of the Law handed down from the founder seven hundred years ago and are fighting one another over the election of a high priest, causing public embarrassment to their school."

If what was known as the heritage possessed by the high priest had been sacred and absolute, the factional infighting and elections for the office of high priest would have been regarded as grave sacrilege. In reality, however, many priests did not recognize it as such and thus caused a drawn-out internal conflict over the seat of high priest. This is further evidence from the history of the Fuji School, which makes clear that the doctrine of the infallibility of the high priest is no more than a makeshift dogma. It is a position conveniently invoked by the priesthood to silence criticism toward the high priest.

The corruption within the temple administration spread throughout the priesthood during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the late nineteenth century, some priests who were residents at Taiseki-ji deceived Nippu, the fifty-fifth high priest, and replaced the copper roofing of the Five-Storied Pagoda on the head temple grounds with much cheaper tin roofing. They sold off the expensive original roofing and embezzled the profit, most of which was spent on entertainment.

In April 1941, it was discovered that eight valuable swords had been stolen from the head temple's treasury. One of them was a famous sword that had been forged by the renowned swordsmith Sanjo Kokaji Munechika and given to the Daishonin by Hojo Yagenta. This sword was one of the most treasured articles belonging to the Daishonin kept at Taiseki-ji. It was suspected the theft was an inside job—committed by someone within the priesthood. But the temple administration neither reported the incident to the police nor did it launch an internal investigation. No suspect was identified, and the crime remained an unresolved mystery.

During the seventeenth century, Kyodai-in, an influential patron of Taiseki-ji, cautioned the temple officials in a letter: “Many of the high priests have sold off the treasures [of Taiseki-ji] for their own selfish gain, though some have tried to repair items so that no inconvenience will result from their being damaged” (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 8, p. 59). Despite her warning, misuse and theft of temple property by priests continued well into the twentieth century.