

Chapter 4: Taiseki-ji Sold Off by High-ranking Priests

(1) Nichiu's restoration of the sect after the protracted land dispute

AS a result of its seventy-two-year long land dispute with Nichigo and his followers, Taiseki-ji declined considerably. The land dispute exhausted the head temple's financial and human resources. The number of student priests studying at the temple decreased, and the temple lost many branch temples as well due to a lack of capable priests at Taiseki-ji. There is an account of Nichiei, the eighth high priest (1352—1419), having to transfer the heritage of the Law to a lay believer. *The Accounts of the Fuji School* (Jp. Fuji Monkachu Kenbun) states: "High Priest Nichiei commented to other priests: 'It is my sadness and lament that there is no opportunity to transmit the heritage of the Law.' At last, in the twenty-sixth year of O'ei [1419], when he fell ill, he bestowed the heritage of the Law upon Aburano Joren" (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 5, p. 255).

If this account is true, the ninth high priest, Nichiu (1402—82), presumably received the transmission from the lay person Aburano Joren at the age of seventeen. He was from the respected Nanjo family and became known as a restorer of the Fuji school because he contributed to the maintenance and repair of buildings at the head temple, the development of student priests and the restoration of branch temples. Nichiu's scholarship was well known and many student priests visited him at Taiseki-ji.

While managing Taiseki-ji, Nichiu traveled extensively to spread the Daishonin's Buddhism. He went east to Oshu, the northeastern region of Japan's main island, and west to Kyoto, the seat of the imperial government. He also visited Echigo Province in the north and further on to Sado Island. In 1432, he submitted a letter of remonstrance to the Ashikaga shogunate government in Kyoto. Many of the old temples of the Fuji School in the northeastern region of the main island are said to have been founded by Nichiu.

In "The Accounts of Teacher Nichiu," compiled by Nichi'in, the thirty-first high priest recounts this incident: Once while Nichiu was away from Taiseki-ji, the three high-ranking priests appointed by him to protect

Taiseki-ji during his absence changed the ownership of the head temple and sold it off:

[Teacher Nichiu] appointed three priests as his deputies during his absence. But who knows what they had in mind? These deputies abandoned this temple [Taiseki-ji], so for six years, it was a place slanderous of the Law. But when the elder priest [Nichiu] returned, he restored the life [spirit] of the sage, the respectable founder [Nichiren Daishonin]. Although it had become a place of slander, he purchased Taiseki-ji back from Lord Okutsu for twenty *kan* of coins, thereby restoring the life of the sage, the respectable founder. (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 1, pp. 185—86).

Regarding this incident, Nichiko Hori, the fifty-ninth high priest and noted authority of the history of the Fuji school, commented:

Put simply, he [High Priest Nichiu] appointed three deputies. But the three of them sold off Taiseki-ji according to other documents. Then High Priest Nichiu, it is recorded, returned and banished them. Those three or four deputies were all high-ranking priests because they had the title of *Ajari*... We do not know who purchased it [Taiseki-ji] or under whose name it was registered. Probably the deputies changed the ownership to their own names. If someone respectable had bought it, I do not think that he would have given it up so easily. So I think that the deputies changed the ownership into their names (From "On the History of the Fuji School: An Interview with High Priest Nichiko," November 1956 *The Daibyakurenge*)

This incident attests to the condition of the priesthood during the late fifteenth century. While Nichiu was traveling far and wide to spread the Daishonin's teachings, corrupt high-ranking priests at Taiseki-ji were concerned only about their own interests. Having to deal with the corruption within his own priesthood is another reason Nichiu is known as a restorer of the Fuji school.

(2) Nichiu's attempt to restore the Daishonin's spirit in the priesthood

To fight against the spiritual decay in the priesthood, Nichiu strictly reminded his disciples of the Daishonin's earnest desire to spread his teachings, stating:

According to the words of the respectable founder [Nichiren Daishonin], we should continue to spread [the Law] widely even under stupas or bridges so long as the king and his subjects do not take faith in it. We should not be idle in our dwellings even for a moment. We should not be seeking wealth nor high status. (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 1, p. 208)

He also writes:

Since our age is already into the Latter Day of the Law, this school, influenced by the conditions of society, entered the Latter Day as well. This is because our faith has become weaker than in the past. Furthermore, we have become extremely lax in terms of rebuking the sins of slandering the Law. In short, I think, now is the Latter Day of this school, which I find most difficult (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 2, pp. 139–40)

Nichiu's statement indicates that about 100 years after Nikko Shonin's death, priests' faith and spirit to preserve the integrity of the Daishonin's teaching had already weakened considerably. In his attempt to revive the Daishonin's teaching, Nichiu exerted himself in propagation and study. Despite his efforts, however, many priests lost faith and became corrupt.

The Daishonin himself was a reformer who revived faith in the Lotus Sutra. Because he realized that the Lotus Sutra was the correct teaching for the time, he was especially strict toward the Tendai sect. That sect claimed to be an orthodox school of the Lotus Sutra while distorting its teachings and combining it with the Shingon esotericism. The Daishonin criticized the Tendai sect more than 200 times in about sixty writings. In his criticism of the Tendai sect, he did not mince words, referring to the sect as "a thief of the Law" (GZ, 1004), "the foremost slanderers of the Law" (GZ, 1067) and "the beginning of our country's ruin" (WND, 812).

He condemns priests Jikaku, Annen and Eshin of the Tendai sect by describing them as “the three worms who devoured the lion-body of the Lotus Sutra and the Great Teacher Dengyo” (WND, 578).

The reformist spirit to revive the humanistic ideals of the Lotus Sutra is at the core of the Daishonin’s Buddhism. Unless this commitment is widely shared among believers, the stream of his teaching will become corrupt and eventually run dry as demonstrated by the history of Taiseki-ji.

(3) Nichiu’s understanding of the heritage of the Law

Nanjo Nichiju, one of Nichiu’s disciples, compiled many of Nichiu’s instructions on the teachings and traditions of the Fuji school in “On the Formalities of True Buddhism” (Jp. Kegi Sho). In this writing, Nichiu confirms some of the fundamental aspects of the Daishonin’s teaching. For example, he states: “The object of worship in this school shall be limited to that of Sage Nichiren” (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 1, p. 65). He also states: “In the Hokke sect [i.e., the Fuji school], we must not regard [the images] of the Buddhas and the bodhisattvas such as Kannon [Skt. Avalokiteshvara] or Myoon [Skt. Gadgadasvara] as objects of worship no matter how artfully they are painted. We shall make use only of the object of worship in which Sage Nichiren inscribed the ten worlds” (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 1, p. 70). These statements by Nichiu suggest that there was confusion about the object of worship within the Fuji school.

Regarding the concept of the heritage of the Law, Nichiu states:

Faith, the heritage of the Law and the pure flow of the Law are identical. Continuous faith indicates the unbroken lineage and thus the correctly transmitted heritage of the Law and the uninterrupted pure flow of the Law. As a person shall not contradict his or her parents in the secular world, we in the religious world shall not go astray from what is in the heart of our teacher in order to receive the correct heritage and pure flow of the Law. When our faith does not differ from that of the noble founder, our body and mind manifest as the body and mind of Myoho-renge-kyo. When our faith differs [from that of the noble founder],

however, we are ordinary mortals in body and mind. Then we do not possess the heritage of the Law that allows us to attain Buddhahood in our present forms.” (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 1, p. 64)

The Japanese term for the heritage of the Law is *kechimyaku*, which literally means “bloodstream,” indicating how a Buddhist teaching is transmitted flawlessly from teacher to disciple just as the flow of blood in the human body. Nichiko Hori, the fifty-ninth high priest and noted Buddhist scholar, comments on the above passage by Nichiu:

When we do not go astray in the slightest from the faith of the great teachers of Buddhism, that is, Great Sage Nichiren, the noble founder, and Nikko Shonin, the founder [of Taiseki-ji], we as their followers shall transform our evil and defiled minds into the body and mind of Myoho-renge-kyo, which is true, good and pure. Such a transformation of body and mind depends upon sincere faith and earnest practice. If we do not reverently uphold these essentials, our faith becomes unsound, impure, evil and confused, thus contradicting the Buddha’s intent. Then we will obstruct the passage of the pure flow of the Law, so we will manifest our intrinsic self as deluded ordinary mortals in body and mind. Thus we will destroy our qualification to inherit the heritage of the Law that allows us to attain Buddhahood in our present form. This is unfortunate.” (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 1, p. 176)

It is through faith as taught by the Daishonin that we inherit the heritage of the Law and reveal ourselves as entities of the Mystic Law, as Buddhas.

The lifeline of the Daishonin’s Buddhism lies in faith. If believers lose faith, there can be no prospect for their enlightenment. Even the high priest will not receive the heritage of the Law if he loses faith. As high priest, his betrayal of people’s trust and expectations in his office becomes a function as what Buddhism terms “the devil of the sixth heaven,” or life’s negative workings to obscure one’s innate Buddhahood. Quoting from the Nirvana sutra, the Daishonin refers to those who assume a saintly appearance yet obstruct the spread of the Lotus Sutra

after the Buddha's passing as "devils in the guise of a Buddha" (GZ, 76). As the Daishonin cautions us, we must be aware of such negative potential lurking in religious authority.

If the heritage of the Law is faith, something shared by all believers, then what does the priesthood's' interpretation of "the transmission of the heritage of the Law from one high priest to another" mean? We can see the prototype of this transmission in the transfer of the office of high priest from Nikko Shonin to the third high priest Nichimoku. The following is the entire translation of the document titled "Articles Regarding the Succession of Nikko" (Jp. Nikko Ato Jojo no Koto) dated November 10, 1330:

When Hon'mon-ji ["the Temple of True Buddhism"] is built, Niidakyo Ajari Nichimoku shall become its chief priest. In Japan and the rest of the entire world, half the temples shall be administered by Nichimoku's successors, and the other half by other priests.

Nikko shall bestow upon Nichimoku the Dai-Gohonzon inscribed in the second year of Koan [1279] as well as the documents drawn up in the fifth year of Koan [1282].

Nichimoku shall conduct gongyo and await the time of kosen-rufu while administering and repairing the temple at Oishi [Taiseki-ji]—both its halls and cemetery. The aforementioned Nichimoku, at the age of fifteen, met Nikko and took faith in the Lotus Sutra. Since then until now at age seventy-three, he has not committed an error. At the age of seventeen, he visited Sage Nichiren's dwelling at Mount Minobu in Kai Province and stayed there for seven years constantly at his service. Since his passing, through the eighth year of Koan [1285] till the second year of Gentoku [1330], for fifty years, the merits in his remonstrance with the sovereign have been distinguished from those of others. Thus I set down so that this may serve as proof for posterity. (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 8, p. 18)

From this document it is clear that the transfer of the heritage of the Law from one high priest to another boils down to the transfer of the administrative responsibilities associated with the office. These

responsibilities include the management of Taiseki-ji and its branch temples and the safekeeping of the Dai-Gohonzon and some documents. It should be also noted that Nikko Shonin's appointment was not arbitrary. He states in the transfer document that Nichimoku is qualified to be his successor because of his outstanding faith and practice from the ages of fifteen to seventy-three. Nichimoku was appointed because of his courage to remonstrate with the sovereign as well as of his passion to seek instructions from the Daishonin at Mount Minobu. The transfer document "Articles Regarding the Succession of Nikko" explains that the transfer of the heritage of the Law from one high priest to another is the transfer of the administrative responsibilities of that office, and the essential qualification for the office of high priest lies in faith and practice.

The priesthood explains that Nichimoku "directly inherited the living essence from Nikko Shonin" (*The Liturgy of Nichiren Shoshu*, Nichiren Shoshu Head Temple Taiseki-ji ed., English version, p. 35). This "living essence," which is also referred to as "the entity of the heritage of the Law," has been passed down from one high priest to another for more than seven hundred years, according to the priesthood. Despite the priesthood's efforts to mystify this "living essence" or "the entity of the heritage of the Law" possessed only by the high priest, Nikko Shonin clearly indicates in his transfer document to Nichimoku that it is nothing other than the Dai-Gohonzon.

In this regard, Nichio, the fifty-sixth high priest, states: "The entity of the Law specifically entrusted [to the successive high priests] is the Dai-Gohonzon of the High Sanctuary of true Buddhism kept in secrecy at our temple" (*Bennaku Kanjin Sho*, p. 212). What the priesthood calls the transfer of "living essence" from one high priest to another is essentially the transfer of the high priest's administrative responsibility to protect the Dai-Gohonzon. Needless to say, with this responsibility must come the high priest's faith and practice for the widespread propagation of the Daishonin's Buddhism as Nikko Shonin saw in his successor, Nichimoku.

By describing the transfer of the office of high priest with terms like "the living essence of the True Buddha," the priesthood tries to create a myth that there is some secret teaching that only the high priest knows. All the transfer documents from the Daishonin to Nikko Shonin are, in one sense, explanations of the Gohonzon. For example, some documents

discuss the Daishonin's Buddhism implicit in the "Life Span" chapter of the Lotus Sutra or others discuss the doctrinal comparison between the Daishonin's Buddhism and Shakyamuni's Buddhism. These teachings were not widely known nor accepted in the early days of the Fuji school; therefore, they were considered "secret."

However, all the so-called transfer documents or secret traditions of the Fuji school have already been published. There is no important doctrinal document accessible only by the high priest. Nichiko Hori, the fifty-ninth high priest, who is well known for his scholarship, compiled all the major documents of the Fuji school and published them as the *Complete Works of the Fuji School*. From this work, Nichiko Hori selected important documents and published them as the *Essential Writings of the Fuji School*. In the first volume of this collection, he published the eight transfer documents. Furthermore, in 1952, at the request of President Toda, *Nichiren Daishonin Goshō Zenshū* (The Collected Writings of Nichiren Daishonin) was published under the editorial supervision of Nichiko Hori. This collection of the Daishonin's writings also includes major documents transferred from the Daishonin to Nikko Shonin.

In the eighteenth century, the twenty-sixth high priest, Nichikan, systematized the Daishonin's teachings and made a clear distinction between the Daishonin's Buddhism and that of Shakyamuni in writings such as his *Six-volume Writings* and various commentaries. In the past, before the appearance of the Soka Gakkai, Nichikan's writings were considered "secret traditions" and were held in importance next to the transfer documents. So they were available only to a handful of people. President Toda, however, in his efforts to promote Buddhist study, made Nichikan's writings available and encouraged people to study them. He said, "In terms of Buddhist study, we must return to the time of High Priest Nichikan."

Ultimately, there is no special significant teaching that only priests know, for the Daishonin makes it clear that there is no secret teaching. To assert that only the high priest knows a certain secret teaching or that only through the high priest can one correctly practice the Daishonin's teaching absolutely contradicts the Daishonin's teaching and intent.

As Nittatsu Hosoi, the sixty-sixth high priest, states:

Nichiren Daishonin's writings are based upon the Lotus Sutra. His writings give life to the sutra and present guidelines for its spread. They open the way for kosen-rufu. The Daishonin appeared in the Latter Day of the Law and revealed himself to be a Buddha. So he is the Buddha of the Latter Day. His teachings are contained in his writings. This is why we must imbue our hearts and minds with the Daishonin's writings." (From a speech delivered on July 27, 1974)

As long as SGI members continue to develop firm faith in the Gohonzon and practice for kosen-rufu in accord with the Daishonin's writings, the heritage of the Daishonin's Buddhism that enables us to reveal our innate Buddhahood will continue to flow in their lives.

The priesthood likes to emphasize the ceremonial formalities regarding the transfer of the office of high priest. It asserts that "the specific lifeblood of the entity of the Law received by only a single person" has been handed down within the priesthood through "bequeathing the Golden Utterance to the direct successors" (*Refuting the Soka Gakkai's "Counterfeit Object of Worship"—100 Questions and Answers*, comp. by the Nichiren Shoshu Doctrinal Research Committee, p. 24). The records of the Fuji school, however, do not indicate that "bequeathing the Golden Utterance" has been conducted without fail from one high priest to the next throughout its history. For example, in the early seventeenth century, Nichiju, the sixteenth high priest, could not be with Nissho, the fifteenth high priest, at the time of his death, so the latter transferred the heritage of high priest to his deputy, Rikyobo Nichigi, as a temporary custodian of the heritage. Nichigi later transferred it to Nichiju.

In response to criticism that the transmission was severed because a proper ceremony was not conducted between the two high priests, Nichiko Hori, the fifty-ninth high priest, states:

The issue may arise regarding whether the transmission of the lineage of high priest lies in the formality of bequeathing the golden utterance to the direct successors or in the person of the recipient. If the appropriate authority resides in the recipient, the transfer ceremony is merely a formality to establish his authority, and the

case of Teacher Nichiju does not present any inconvenience resulting from the severance of the lineage or the interruption of the flow of the Law. But if the authority [of high priest] derives only from the formalities and the recipient may be anyone, then the aforementioned case would be an unfortunate instance in the secession of the heritage. (From "The Rebuttal to and the Historical Examination of the Severance of the Lineage of High Priest," *Dai-Nichiren*)

The believers of the Fuji school have been told that the lineage of high priest has been handed down orally from one high priest to the next. If so, however, such a tradition requires that the recipient stay by the current high priest to receive the lineage before he dies. In the past when there was much difficulty with transportation and communication, it was only natural that sometimes the recipient could not do so. In those cases, a third person would receive the lineage of high priest for the time being and then transfer it to the next high priest.

As mentioned before, what has been transferred from one high priest to the next (or what the priesthood refers to as "the specific lifeblood of the entity of the Law received by only a single person") is nothing other than the responsibility for safekeeping of the Dai-Gohonzon along with other administrative functions. So the transfer ceremony was a formality to make it known among other priests and believers that the transfer of the office of high priest was conducted between the high priest and a certain recipient. If the transfer ceremony were vital to the transmission of some secret oral teachings, then the lineage of high priest and its secret traditions would have become extinct a long time ago.

Besides the case of the fifteenth high priest, Nissho, there are instances where the high priests died without conducting a transfer ceremony or appointing a successor: In 1830, Nisso, the forty-ninth high priest; in 1836, Nichijo, the fiftieth high priest. In 1865, following a great fire at Taiseki-ji, Nichijo, the fifty-third high priest, vanished from the head temple without appointing his successor, and his whereabouts were unknown for some time. In those cases, retired high priests are said to have appointed the next high priest. Historical records prove that a "mystical" transfer ceremony of the office of high priest was never an absolute.

Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism explains that people can reveal their innate Buddhahood through embracing the Gohonzon. In "The Real Aspect of the Gohonzon," the Daishonin writes: "The most important thing is to chant only Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and attain enlightenment" (WND, 832). The current priesthood describes the simple transfer of the administrative responsibilities of high priest as "the specific lifeblood of the entity of the Law received by only a single person," thereby suggesting that there is a secret teaching known only to the high priest or that only the high priest possesses "the living essence of the True Buddha"—some kind of a mysterious spiritual entity. In the Daishonin's Buddhism, however, the heritage of the Law needed to attain Buddhahood lies only in our earnest faith and practice. To say otherwise amounts to the denial of the Daishonin's teaching and intent.