

The Untold History of the Fuji School: The Origins of the Temple Issue (7)

This series is based on The Dark History of the Fuji School: Revealing the Origin of the Nikken Sect (Ankoku no Fuji Shumonshi: Nikken Shu no Engen o Kiru) by Hajime Kawai, a vice senior advisor of the Soka Gakkai Study Department. The previous installment detailed the introduction of formalities and corruption resulting from the government-instituted parish system and the transfer of the office of high priest to priests of Yobo-ji temple, an unorthodox offshoot of the Fuji School.

Chapter 7: The Establishment of Shakyamuni's Statue As an Object of Devotion by the High Priest

(1) Seventeenth high priest, Nissei, enshrines Shakyamuni's statue at more than ten branch temples

THE seventeenth high priest of Nichiren Shoshu, Nissei, is known for two major doctrinal errors attributed to him that are contrary to the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin. One was the establishment of a statue of Shakyamuni as an object of worship, and the other was mandating that all twenty-eight chapters of the Lotus Sutra be recited for gongyo. Nissei originally came from a temple that splintered from the Fuji School, Yobo-ji. He became a disciple of Nichiju, the sixteenth high priest, who had also been a Yobo-ji priest. As mentioned in the previous installment, nine high priests came from outside the head temple, Taiseki-ji, from Yobo-ji. 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, 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 Edo¹ 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 in Shikoku Island.²

Nissei formed a close relationship with Kyodai'in, eight years his elder, considering her his "adopted mother." Kyodai'in built Hosho-ji in Edo in honor of her husband, who died in 1620. In 1623, through 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 as well as encouraging recitation of the entire Lotus Sutra. In 1633, one year after he became high priest, he wrote a thesis later known as "Zuigi Ron" in an attempt 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 of writing” (*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 had to move from one place to another constantly and that 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 and noted scholar and historian of the Fuji School, 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, Seiryu-ji, Myokyo-ji, Honjo-ji, Kujo-ji (in Akasaka, Tokyo), Choan-ji, Kujo-ji (in Izu) 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.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Nikko Shonin left Mount Minobu because of the doctrinal errors committed by Hakiri Sanenaga, the steward of the Minobu area, including Hakiri’s fundamental deviation of establishing Shakyamuni’s statue as an object of devotion. Nikko Shonin strongly criticized the five senior priests for encouraging him in this unorthodox practice. As the Daishonin taught, Nikko Shonin maintained that only the Gohonzon should be the object of devotion in the Daishonin’s Buddhism. 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” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 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.

(2) The high priest appointed by a powerful lay patron

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 just as fast when he later had a conflict 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. (Nichiei, the eighteenth high priest, left Taiseki-ji due to illness in 1637

Title: The Untold History of the Fuji School

Subject: Living Buddhism 09/98 v.2 n.9 p.18 LB9809p18

Author: Hajime Kawai

Keywords: Chap. enshrined Fuji History Issue Origins School Shakyamuni statues Story Temple Untold

and died in 1638. So Nissei returned to the head temple in 1637 to assume the office once again.) 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 [of 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. So 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)

With the strong support of Kyodai'in, Nisshun went to Taiseki-ji to assume the office of high priest in 1641. Put simply, this powerful lay patron in effect appointed the high priest. The head temple could then renew the deed to its property from the newly appointed third shogun, Tokugawa Iemitsu, and thus maintain its status as a head temple. If Taiseki-ji 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 because of 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 ed., 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 Hosho-ji in Edo, who recommended Nisshun to Kyodai'in, sent to the parish leader the following letter:

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 unlearned—is a living person of Shakyamuni and Nichiren. Only through 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, Nikko Shonin], 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 Daishonin. 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 different 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, however, Yobo-ji's influence continued to be felt in the Fuji School until Nichikan, the twenty-sixth high priest, thoroughly refuted its erroneous teachings.

To be continued

1. Present-day Tokyo.
2. Present-day Tokushima.