The Untold History of the Fuji School: The Origins of the Temple Issue (6)

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 last installment explained the appointment of children as high priests and Sakyo Nikkyo's new doctrine of the infallibility of the high priest to silence criticism of such appointments.*

Chapter 6: The Establishment of the Parish System and the Rise of Funeral Buddhism

(1) Nine high priests came from an unorthodox offshoot of the Fuji School

IN September 1596, Nisshu, the fourteenth high priest, transferred his office to Nissho, the fifteenth high priest. Nissho came to Taiseki-ji from Yobo-ji in Kyoto, a temple of an unorthodox offshoot of the Fuji School. Since this time, nine successive high priests from Nissho to Nikkei, the twenty-third, came from Yobo-ji.

In 1336, Nichizon, a disciple of Nikko Shonin, established a temple called Jogyo-in in Kyoto, which later became known as Yobo-ji. It was originally a temple of the Fuji School. But it gradually started to adopt practices such as worshiping Shakyamuni's statue and reciting the entire twenty-eight chapters of the Lotus Sutra. As a result, Taiseki-ji refused to have a relationship with Yobo-ji. (See *Living Buddhism*, May 1998, pp. 40–43, for more details about Nichizon and Yobo-ji.)

Nissho entered the priesthood at Yobo-ji when he was 7. There he received instruction from Nisshin, the nineteenth chief priest of Yobo-ji. After studying at a seminary in Shimosa Province [present-day Chiba Prefecture], he came to Taiseki-ji in August 1594. Only two years later, in September 1596, he was appointed the fifteenth high priest. For nearly one hundred years, from 1596 until 1692 when Nikkei transferred his office to Nichiei, the twenty-fourth high priest, Yobo-ji priests headed Taiseki-ji. This demonstrates both Taiseki-ji's lack of its own source of capable priests as well as its lenient attitude in maintaining doctrinal orthodoxy. Those Yobo-ji priests brought such unorthodox practices to Taiseki-ji to where it eventually allowed its branch temples to enshrine Shakyamuni's statue as an object of devotion. In this respect, Nichiko Hori, fifty-ninth high priest and noted scholar of the history of the Fuji School, comments: "Nine high priests of Taiseki-ji—from Nissho to Nikkei—came from Yobo-ji in Kyoto, and they imported some new formalities" (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 9, p. 59).

Importation of its high priests from Yobo-ji invited long-lasting criticism and ridicule toward Taiseki-ji. In October 1877, when some members of a Yobo-ji branch temple converted to a Taiseki-ji branch temple, they debated with a Yobo-

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ji priest through correspondence. In one response, the Yobo-ji priest writes:

> Within the sect founded by Nikko Shonin, some temples, lacking in candidates for their chief priests, were compelled to ensure their succession by inviting priests from other branch schools. Naturally, as a result, those temples brought the traditions from other branch schools into their own. Yobo-ji of Kyoto, however, has not brought over priests of other branch schools in order to ensure its succession; it is the school of the true lineage from teacher to disciple, that is, Nichiren to Nikko, Nichimoku and Nichizon.…
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> Since Taiseki-ji did not have candidates for its chief priest, upon its request, Yobo-ji dispatched the following nine to become its chief priest: Nissho, the fifteenth chief priest of Taiseki-ji; Nichiju, the sixteenth; Nissei, the seventeenth; Nichiei, the eighteenth; Nisshun, the nineteenth; Nitten, the twentieth; Nichinin, the twenty-first; Nisshun, the twenty-second; and Nikkei, the twenty-third.
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> A pig may cost fifty yen, so nine would be 450 yen. But here we are talking about humans. At the request of Taiseki-ji, Yobo-ji sent full-fledged disciples trained under High Priest Nisshin, who was a student of High Priest Nichizon, to Taiseki-ji as its successors so that they might be helpful. Oblivious to this, Taiseki-ji speaks ill of Yobo-ji; it is like an animal that does not know how to repay a debt of gratitude" (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 7, p. 13).

(2) The Fuji School and funeral Buddhism

IN February 1602, when Nissho, the fifteenth high priest, was in office, Tokugawa Ieyasu established a shogunate government in Edo (i.e., present-day Tokyo). Around 1635, to solidify its control on the populace as well as to prevent the spread of Christianity, the Tokugawa government instituted a new Buddhist temple parish system. The system was established nationwide by 1638 when the Christian revolt in Shimabara was quelled. Under the parish system, people had to be registered with a Buddhist temple in their area in order to prove that they were not Christians. Unless they had a permit issued by their Buddhist temple, people were unable to work or travel. As people's lives essentially depended upon a temple permit, the authority of a chief priest grew stronger. Even a parish leader, if he did not visit his temple on an appointed day, had his name deleted from the register and reported to the government. Put simply, under the parish system, Buddhist temples functioned as a government census bureau to control people.

The Tokugawa shogunate government also prohibited religious debate. No religious sect could publicly praise itself and criticize others. This government ordinance became effective around 1615. It prevented any overt religious propagation. Since the parish system made it extremely difficult for people to leave their parishes, their desire to improve their spiritual lives was greatly stifled and Buddhism in Japan became increasingly conservative and ritualistic.

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Since the government discouraged religious propagation, Buddhist temples started conducting more rituals to entice parish members to frequent their temples, thus generating income. Many temples, regardless of their sects, promoted rituals and formalities related to death—such as funerals; posthumous Buddhist names; memorial services; Buddhist tablets for the dead; thrice-yearly tomb visits in spring, summer and fall; and so on. For this reason, some critics, after the establishment of the parish system, refer to Japanese Buddhism as "funeral Buddhism."

The parish system also required priests to see their parish members when they died. Upon confirming that the deceased were in fact in his parish and not Christians, he would bestow upon them posthumous Buddhist names and recite prayers for their repose. So people always had to invite priests to funerals. If they did not, they would run the risk of being labeled Christians and thus executed.

It should also be noted that most of the Buddhist formalities surrounding funerals and memorial services were introduced into the general public during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These formalities included the necessity of family tombs, memorial books, memorial tablets, Buddhist altars and so on. Parish members were required to make offerings to a priest at every service they attended. Furthermore, they were often asked to finance renovation and construction projects for their temples. People's discontent with the Buddhist clergy grew, and many sayings from the Edo period attest to the corruption of priests at that time: "All profit for priests." "If you hate a priest, you hate even his robe." "A priest recites a sutra only for what he is paid." "A priest snatches an offering without reciting a sutra." "Money talks even in hell." Even today it is customary to invite a priest to a funeral in Japan. This tradition, however, has nothing to do with any original Buddhist teaching or with one's enlightenment. It is a remnant of the parish system established by the Tokugawa shogunate government in the seventeenth century.

In June 1641, Nisshun, the nineteenth high priest, received from the newly appointed third shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu a deed reauthorizing Taiseki-ji's property and its status as a head temple. At this time, Taiseki-ji also started to register its parish members and vouch for their non-Christian status. Following the trend of the Buddhist community, Taiseki-ji stopped its propagation efforts and started to promote rituals and formalities such as funerals and memorial services. As a result, Taiseki-ji's parish members grew dependent on their priests and became negligent in their own personal practice such as sutra recitation or gongyo. Instead of doing gongyo, they would go to the temple and ask their priests to pray on their behalf. This priest-based faith has since become the norm within the school headed by Taiseki-ji, which later became known as Nichiren Shoshu. Today Nichiren Shoshu priests still offer various prayer services for lay believers: "prayer for health," "prayer for traffic safety," "prayer for warding off evils," "prayer for good grades" and so on.

Believers' dependency on priests is the antithesis of the self-reliant faith the Daishonin strongly advocates. He states: "Muster your faith and pray to this Gohonzon. Then what is there that cannot be achieved?" (MW-1, 120). "The fact that Nichigen-nyo's prayers have gone unanswered is like a strong bow with a weak

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bowstring or a fine sword in the hands of a coward. It is in no sense the fault of the Lotus Sutra" (MW-3, 73). "No matter how earnestly Nichiren prays for you, if you lack faith, it will be like trying to set fire to wet tinder. Spur yourself to muster the power of faith" (MW-1, 246). And "Whether or not your prayer is answered depends upon your faith; [if it is not,] the fault in no way lies with me, Nichiren" (MW-5, 305). In light of these passages, it becomes evident that having a priest pray for one's happiness or enlightenment is contrary to the Daishonin's intent.

The government-instituted parish system encouraged the further corruption in Japan's Buddhist community. Under the strict government control and protection, the majority of Buddhist priests became oblivious to their role as spiritual teachers to their parish members and increasingly became consumed with the pursuit of worldly fame and material gain. This is in exact accord with the Daishonin's premonition:

> The Buddha stated that during the Latter Day of the Law, priests and nuns with the hearts of dogs would be as numerous as the grains of sand in the Ganges. By this he meant that the priests and nuns of that day would run like dogs after fame and fortune. Because they wear robes and surplices, they look like ordinary priests and nuns. But in their hearts, they wield a sword of evil, hastening here and there among their patrons and filling them full of countless lies so as to keep them away from other priests or nuns. Thus they strive to keep their patrons to themselves and prevent other priests or nuns from coming near them, like a dog who goes to a house to be fed but who growls and springs to attack the moment another dog approaches. Each and every one of these priests and nuns is certain to fall into the evil paths. (MW-3, 206)

The parish system also helped the Buddhist clergy develop their sense of superiority over lay believers. Since priests essentially acted as government agents who held sway over people's lives, they viewed their relationship with their parish members as that between lord and serf. The Buddhist clergy's feudalistic view and people's acceptance of their spiritual serfdom persisted in Japan long after the priesthood's political influence disappeared with the demise of the Tokugawa shogunate government in the late nineteenth century.

To be continued

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