

## PUBLISHER'S COMMENTARY THE TRUE IMAGE OF BUDDHISM

The other day, I was thumbing through a magazine about Buddhism I found on the newsstand. The images it contained were of mostly Asian men in robes with shaved heads—monks or priests of various Buddhist groups. This, I reminded myself, is the image that most Americans have of Buddhism.

Buddhism is essentially a teaching of equality that is open to all people. Shakyamuni of India broke social convention by inviting into his religious order members of all classes of society. Under the Indian caste system, where people were strictly bound to the social class of their ancestors, the highest class was that of the Brahmans or Hindu priests. The lowest were the outcastes, the "untouchables," who did society's dirty work and were shunned.

Shakyamuni invited all people—from outcastes to the Brahman nobility—to gather with him and practice the way to enlightenment. The sutras make it clear that he discriminated not in the least within his order as to the class or function of his followers. Brahmans who had embraced the Buddha's teachings were no more capable or qualified to attain Buddhahood than were those of any social rank.

Buddhism thus began not as a religious institution of monks and temples, but as a movement of all kinds of people. It was at once a religious order and a lay movement. Shakyamuni himself never resided permanently in a temple, nor declared a successor or specified a lineage of priests to succeed him. Shortly before his death he simply admonished all his followers to work diligently together toward their salvation. He was constantly on the move, reaching out to and talking with the people. Only India's intense rainy season kept him inside.

Even in the sutras, lay practitioners are lauded for their wisdom and sincerity. The Vimalakirti Sutra depicts a lay person who is so wise and venerable, even Shakyamuni's most senior disciples hesitated to engage him. The message here is that sincerity, practice, faith and wisdom are what make one a Buddhist, not title or specific role within the Buddhist community or even mastery of Buddhist theory. The rise of monks and temples to central authority in Buddhism happened only after Shakyamuni's death, with monastic Buddhism becoming institutionalized in India, China and elsewhere many centuries later.

In thirteenth-century Japan, only those who became priests had access to education. Hungry for knowledge, Nichiren Daishonin became tonsured at a very young age. In the reality of his time, only by becoming a priest could he expose himself to the Buddhist writings by which he explained the core of his teachings. But unlike other priests of his day, he readily shared those teachings in great detail with ordinary lay practitioners.

In the course of his studies, the Daishonin perceived that what existed in Japan in his day was a formalized, ritualized or authoritarian remnant of what Buddhism was supposed to be. Priests, like the Brahmans of Shakyamuni's time, were a venerated class in Japanese society. The Daishonin roundly criticized the most respected of his contemporary priests for their arrogance, doctrinal error and dishonesty. As a result, he was persecuted not only by those priests, but by the authorities who patronized them.

The Daishonin entrusted the future of his movement not only to his priest disciples but to lay followers. In his letter "The Property of Rice," he tells Takahashi Nyudo, a lay believer, "I entrust you with the propagation of Buddhism in your province" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 5, p. 151). And to Abutsu-bo, who lived on Sado Island,

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he writes: "Abutsu-bo, you deserve to be called a leader of this northern province. Could it be that Bodhisattva Jyogyo was reborn into this world as Abutsu-bo and visited me? How marvelous! It is beyond my power to understand why you have such pure faith!" (MW-1, 31). In addition, he left many of his most important writings to Toki Jonin, a lay believer who worked diligently to preserve them for posterity.

Among the six senior priests to whom the Daishonin left his teachings, only Nikko maintained his faith and exerted himself as his master had wished. The other five, seeking acceptance from the religious establishment and the government, downplayed their ties with the Daishonin. They even went so far as to destroy some of the letters he had addressed to his followers, feeling them uncomplimentary due to the common language they contained.

Nikko and his successor, Nichimoku, lived out their lives practicing and carrying on the Daishonin's spirit and teachings. Yet after them, squabbles over who was in authority broke out at the head temple and persisted for many decades. Over the centuries, while reformers such as Nichiu (the 9th high priest) and Nichikan (the 26th high priest) appeared, the Daishonin's spirit all but disappeared from the head temple.

By the time Tsunesaburo Makiguchi encountered the Daishonin's Buddhism in the early 20th century Nichiren Shoshu had become one of the smallest and poorest of Buddhist denominations in Japan. Makiguchi was a humanistic educator who feared nothing. He had already experienced government repression for his educational policies, which challenged those of the militarist regime. Studying the Daishonin's writings, his heart and mind resonated with the courage and compassion of the Daishonin. And when the high priest of Nichiren Shoshu ordered Makiguchi to instruct members of the fledgling Soka Gakkai to support Japan's war effort—to enshrine an amulet to the Shinto Sun Goddess—he refused. Though a lay practitioner, he directly challenged the views of the high priest, as well as the military authorities, regarding Buddhism. His stance led to his arrest and imprisonment and eventually to his death in prison as a martyr to his convictions. Nichiren Shoshu, on the other hand, sought to distance itself from Makiguchi and Toda to avoid government oppression.

Thus, even in this century, it was a lay person who, as the Daishonin's Buddhism was threatened, acted as the Daishonin himself would have: absolutely unafraid to lay down his life when it came to protecting Buddhism and thus the right to happiness of ordinary people. And it was Makiguchi's lay successors Josei Toda and Daisaku Ikeda who were the first to spare no effort or energy in spreading the Daishonin's teachings throughout Japan and the world. Both of weak health, they literally risked their lives to do so.

The significance of a lay religious movement is not foreign to America. The spirit of equality, democracy, self-determination and free enterprise upon which our country is founded has its roots in an essentially lay religious revolution—the Protestant Reformation. The energy of this reform was directed against the authoritarianism of the medieval Church, its hierarchy of priests and the inhumane tyranny of monarchs who concluded in its power. Fighting this battle, both in the religious and secular realms, helped root the spirit of freedom and the institution of democracy in the soil of Europe. Many of those who settled in America had been engaged in this struggle in England and inherited its spirit, and this contributed in no small way to the founding of our nation.

As the Protestant reformers sought to rekindle the original spirit of Christianity, we of the SGI seek to reestablish the original supremely humanistic spirit of Buddhism. To do this, we must work to change the commonly held image of Buddhism from that of a religion that can be mastered only by monks and priests to a vital and dynamic philosophy whose full benefit is accessible to everyone.

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In fact, society is beginning to recognize that we have been doing just that. Recently a number of books about Buddhism in America have appeared that attest to the important role we as a lay movement play, not only in sharing the teachings of Buddhism, but in contributing to the important goals of peace and education. In commenting on our movement, for example, religious scholar Jane Hurst, in a chapter she contributed to the book *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (University of California Press, 1998) writes: "This is a creative and dynamic time for the Soka Gakkai as it enters its most productive years for putting faith in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism into practice by working for peace, culture and education. As they have long taught, SGI members see this as a personal challenge that has global effects."

In Chinese, the term for a Buddhist priest or monk literally means "one who has left home." The term for a lay practitioner means "one who remains home." In other words, the original image of a monk is one who has severed family ties and renounced a normal livelihood to devote him- or herself to the study and practice of Buddhism and to the salvation of others. Such personal sacrifice at one time earned monks a degree of respect. Lay persons retained their family and work responsibilities while applying the principles of Buddhism to and within their daily reality.

Today, however, in Japan in particular, priests of most Japanese Buddhist denominations marry and have children. And in many schools, including Nichiren Shoshu, there are no restrictions on diet or the consumption of alcohol. Moreover, unlike in the past or in other Buddhist countries, most Buddhist priests in Japan are relatively prosperous in terms of personal income. Few distinctions remain between the lifestyles of priests and lay persons. Yet today it is the members of the Soka Gakkai and the SGI who constantly "leave the home" to engage in activities to promote kosen-rufu and to encourage and support others in their efforts to become happy.

We of the SGI, witnessing the behavior of the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood under Nikken these past nearly nine years, have had a unique opportunity, I feel. We have seen and experienced the power of Buddhism as a movement by and for lay persons. We have come to learn that the essence of what it means to be a Buddhist lies neither in title nor job description nor dress nor education. It has little to do with our specific role or assignment in the Buddhist community. It is rather in our sincerity and behavior, exactly as Nichiren Daishonin taught when he wrote: "What does Bodhisattva Fukyo's [Bodhisattva Never Disparaging's] profound respect for people signify? The real meaning of Shakyamuni Buddha's appearance in this world lay in his behavior as a human being. How profound!" (MW-2, 281) It is now up to us to create, through our own behavior, a clear and accurate image of what it means to be a Buddhist in the hearts and minds of all who know us.

In a sense, transforming the popular misperception of Buddhism into this essential image is one of the most important tasks we face. Only by winning in this endeavor can we ensure that our movement does not lapse into formalism or lose its "profound respect for people."

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