DO WE NEED PRIESTS?
A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE EARLY BUDDHIST ORDER
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I. Introduction

Someone interested in Buddhism recently asked me the following question: "So where's your temple?" "We don't have either temples or priests. We're a *lay* Buddhist group," was my reply.

"Oh really? . . ."

Sensing this person's befuddlement, I explained the circumstances surrounding the 1991 excommunication of the SGI by the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood. This conversation reminded me that when people hear about Buddhism, their mental associations typically go from the Buddha (imagined as a grinning man with a big belly and long earlobes) to temples and tonsured men in robes attending to rituals or absorbed in quiet contemplation.

Though the SGI members are doing better than ever since our split with the priesthood, many still ponder the question: "Do we need priests? Are we missing something because we lack a formal priesthood?" Through my experiences over the past nine years, I do not feel that I am missing anything. When I attend SGI discussion meetings and other activities, I feel encouraged and nourished-inspired to further develop my personal practice.

But we should not depend solely on subjective experiences and feelings to reach this conclusion. For this reason, it might be helpful for us to reexamine the relationship between the priesthood and laity and investigate the historical development of the Buddhist priesthood.

II. The Tension and Anxiety Between Priesthood and Laity

It is not unusual to associate the concept of religion with the hierarchy of 1) a supreme power or deity, 2) priests and 3) the masses. This triad in which the saving force and the saved are connected by religious intermediaries has been a familiar concept in human history. For example, the word *hierarchy*1 derives from the Latin *hierarchia*, which means the power or rule of episcopate. Throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the word primarily meant each of the three divisions of angels who were considered a link between God and people.

In the history of religion, tension and anxiety, rather than accord and unity, have more often permeated this triad. The priestly class wants to retain its role as intermediaries between the saving power or deity and the people. However, the priest class is keenly aware that its status completely depends upon the laity's acknowledgement of its supposed authority in this role. In a political or behavioral sense, the power of priesthood derives not from God or the Buddha, but from the very lay believers who deem the priests to be their spiritual superiors. This inherent paradox in the nature of the clergy's authority is a fundamental cause of their anxiety. Lay believers also have cause for their own tension in the triad. They are often caught between their desire to establish direct and unrestricted communion with the sacred on one hand, and the sense of security that comes from assigning responsibility for spiritual matters to the clergy on the other. Since both priesthood and laity have reasons for tension and anxiety in this triad, it is ultimately an unstable and

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Subject: Living Buddhism 10/99 v.99 n.10 p.5 LB9910p05
Author: Shin Yatomi
Keywords: Buddhist Early Historical Need Order Perspective Priesthood Priests Shin Study Yatomi

dynamic relationship in which the status of each element is constantly evolving.

No religion is immune to the tensions and conflicts arising from this triad. (Even a religion that has rejected the role of priesthood still has to deal with the absence of priesthood.) The Protestant Reformation and the counter-Reformation of Catholicism may be one of the most well-known examples. Against the doctrines expounded by the Church, Martin Luther (1483-1546) advocated the priesthood of all believers. He wrote: "We are all consecrated priests through baptism... A priest in Christiandom is nothing else but an officeholder... If we are all priests... and all have one faith, one gospel, one sacrament, why should we not also have the power to test and judge what is right or wrong in matters of faith?"2 He also expounded on the sufficiency of the Bible: "Unless I am convicted by the testimony of Scripture or plain reason (for I believe neither in Pope nor councils alone, since it is agreed that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God."3 In response to Protestantism, the Church at the Council of Trent in 1563 defended its basic position that the priesthood "consists in the power of consecrating and offering the Body and Blood of the Lord, and of remitting and of retaining sins."4 The Church reaffirmed that the priestly orders "do not depend on the call or consent of the people, nor the secular power."5 According to the Church, the powers of priests to interpret and preach the teaching of Christ as well as to forgive sins derive from Christ himself.6

The rift between the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood and the SGI similarly presents the tension and anxiety inherent in the triad of the saving influence (the Gohonzon, or Nichiren Daishonin's enlightenment), the priesthood and lay believers. Ultimately, the priesthood under the leadership of Nikken, the current high priest, was unable to withstand that tension. The solution it sought was to sever ties with one corner of the triad-the members of the SGI-and replace it with something less a source of tension. That was a laity largely of disaffected members of the SGI who were fewer in number and less apt to question the priesthood's exercise of authority over them.

Shortly after the SGI's announcement in 1993 that it would be conferring Gohonzon to its members, the Nichiren Shoshu Bureau of Religious Affairs stated: "The Soka Gakkai is a group that has been excommunicated by Nichiren Shoshu, and has absolutely no relationship with Nichiren Shoshu. Therefore, no matter what actions the Soka Gakkai may take, Nichiren Shoshu has no connection with those actions whatsoever."7 But with this resolute denial of any ties with their former lay believers came the rather emotional plea: "Nichiren Shoshu believers who are still members of the Soka Gakkai! At least one last time, reconsider the path you are taking! Once you have crossed the line and accepted the ultimate heresy-the counterfeit object of worship-you will have crossed over to the wrong side of the river that separates enlightenment from extremely long imprisonment in the evil paths."8

In fact, the priesthood's "one last time" was not really the last; it has continued to attempt to win back its excommunicated lay believers even until today. The priesthood's obsession with its former lay believers most eloquently illustrates its anxiety stemming from the paradox of its source of authority mentioned above. To assert its supposed spiritual superiority, the priesthood had to strike at the basis of its own priestly authority by excommunicating the majority of its lay believers.

The priests of Nichiren Shoshu are not the only ones who have experienced tension and anxiety due to the triad of spiritual interdependency. The SGI, in one sense, traded its problems with the priesthood for another challenge. Having been excommunicated, the

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Author: Shin Yatomi
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SGI can no longer rely on the priesthood as support for a sense of orthodoxy. Today the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood stresses believers' obedience to the high priest as an absolute necessity for their enlightenment: "If one has correct faith following the guidance of the High Priest, then benefit will result. However, even if one possesses a traditional Gohonzon, if the person worshipping it slanders the High Priest of the conferral of the lifeblood of the Law, . . . there will be no benefit."9 According to the priesthood's doctrine as indicated here, what is more important than believing in the Gohonzon is to follow the high priest. According to the priesthood, only the high priest, by the virtue of his assumed mystical lineage from Nichiren Daishonin, can correctly interpret the founder's teaching and guide lay believers toward salvation. The priesthood claims: "The Nichiren Shoshu faith consists of following the lifeblood received by only a single person [i.e., the high priest]."10

The priesthood's idea of Buddhist practice provides a sense of comfort and security to some people in that they need not struggle to find and establish a direct and intimate connection with the ultimate reality—their own Buddha nature. Their faith is validated by a third party. Simply put, their only responsibility is to defer to their local priest, through whom they commune with the high priest, who communes with the Mystic Law on their behalf. Those of us who have chosen to practice the Daishonin's Buddhism without the priesthood, however, must accept the struggle to perceive and manifest our inherent Buddhahood as the Daishonin urges us: "Therefore, when you chant the Mystic Law and recite the Lotus Sutra, you must summon up deep conviction that Myoho-renge-kyo is your life itself."11 In this case, it is a practitioner's responsibility to define and establish his or her relationship with the Buddha nature.

This internal challenge of ours, furthermore, is often made more difficult by the popular notion that Buddhism is the domain of monks or priests. Even in modern times, the image of an Asian man in robes, sans hair, is the image of Buddhism to many. The idea that ordinary lay people can develop a mastery of Buddhist thought and practice seems out of synch with people's impression of traditional Buddhism.

The history surrounding the development and evolution of the Buddhist order, however, tells us that a institutionalized priesthood is not an absolute element in Buddhist tradition. History enables us to view the role of the Buddhist priesthood as something constantly evolving and dynamic in its forms. In the following, I would like to briefly trace the history of the Buddhist priesthood and their relationship to the laity.

III. The Early Buddhist Order

Why Did Shakyamuni Become Homeless?

To better understand the nature of the early Buddhist Order, it is important to know why Shakyamuni left the secular world to pursue a religious life. Being a monk or priest at that time in India meant to be homeless and lead the life of a wandering mendicant. It was a role fundamentally different from that of Buddhist priests in Japan today, the majority of whom are married, have families, and thus are virtually indistinguishable from the laity except for ceremonial robes and shaved heads. In Shakyamuni's India, it was customary for those aspiring to a religious life to leave their families. Professor Hajime Nakamura describes the nature of Shakyamuni's decision to leave home as follows: "In a modern sense it corresponds to leaving the family and going to the city or abroad for study or to obtain certain skills."12 The option to become a monk, however, was limited to the affluent because the initiates had to leave enough resources behind to provide for their familes.13 Indeed, Shakyamuni himself came

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from an affluent royal family.

There were two types of religious practitioners during Shakyamuni's time: the *brahmanas* and the *sramanas*. The *brahmanas* were the priests of Brahmanism (the ancient form of Hinduism), considered the highest caste of Indian society, even above those of the ruling *ksatriya* class. 14 In his youth, a brahmana left home to study the Vedas under a teacher. After completing his study, he returned to his family to marry and raise a family. He would then officiate at various sacrificial rituals for the Hindu gods. When his sons returned from their intitial studies and became old enough to assume responsibility for the household, the *brahmana* would leave home again to embark on a life of wandering.

The *sramanas* were a newer type of religious practitioner. They would enter a life of wandering and begging while young, and engage in various ascetic practices in their quest for the absolute.15 But they never again returned to secular life. For both types of religious practitioner, however, a life of wandering and begging was considered the norm in their religious discipline.

When Shakyamuni set out to seek a solution for people's suffering, he chose the life style of a wandering monk, according to the social customs of his day. If he were alive today in America, we can easily assume that the form of his initial religious role would have been different. Even an enlightened person intent on spiritual reform would be unlikely to begin as a wandering monk today. Shakyamuni's choice to become a monk or priest in no way implies the absolute value of the priestly class in Buddhism; it simply indicates his adoption of the social customs of his day in achieving his aims.

Against Class Discrimination

After Shakyamuni attained enlightenment, he began to preach his teaching (the Dharma) to all people, regardless of their caste, race, sex or economic status. He first converted the five monks with whom he had initially practiced austerities.16 He then converted Yasas, the son of a wealthy elder of Benares, and Yasas' parents and wife became Buddhist laymen (*upasaka*) and laywomen (*upasika*).17 Through Shakyamuni's preaching, his order grew to include people from all walks of life-for example, rulers such as King Bimbisara of Magadha;18 non-Aryan slave women such as Punnika;19 artisans such as the blacksmith Cunda20; wealthy merchants such as Sudatta,21 the sick, such as Suppabuddha, who was a leper described as "a poor, miserable, wretched creature"22; and even criminals such as Angulimala,23 who was a vicious bandit; and the list goes on.

Regarding Shakyamuni's preaching career, Professor Hajime Nakamura comments:

> It was unheard of in Gotama's contemporary India to preach one's teaching to all the people. This is obvious when we compare his situation with the various philosophers of the *Upanisads*, who limited their audiences and often confined themselves to preaching to their own children, or distinguished individuals whom they deemed were qualified to receive instruction. Gotama Buddha broke this traditional restriction and doing so must have required considerable determination and courage.24

Judging from Shakyamuni's disregard of social or economic distinctions in choosing his audience, the early Buddhist order must have been a dynamic movement open to all people. The Buddhist movement at its beginning was opposed to any form of class discrimination.25

The Origin of the Samgha

The Buddhist order was called *samgha* (also spelled as *sangha*). During Shakyamuni's

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time, the same term described a number of political groups and trade guilds; it was also applied to religious groups.26 The general notion of the *samgha* included the four groups of Buddhists: monks (*bhiksu*), nuns (*bhiksuni*), laymen (*upasaka*) and laywomen (*upasika*).27 When it is used in early Buddhist texts, however, the term usually refers to the two orders of priesthood: the order of monks (*bhiksu-sangha*) and the order of nuns (*bhiksuni-sangha*).28 The Buddhist Order was often called *samagra-sangha* or "harmonious order." It was thought that members of the *samgha* should practice in harmony since they share the same goal of attaining enlightenment.29

A distinction was made between the two types of Buddhist order. The first type was called *sammukhibhuta-sangha* or the "present order," meaning a Buddhist order that existed at a certain time and place.30 During Shakyamuni's time, many orders were formed in various locations. Those orders were governed by rules called *vinaya*. But a Buddhist scripture on monastic discipline records that Shakyamuni did not initially set forth priestly rules: "For the five years immediately following Sakyamuni's Enlightenment, the *sangha* of *bhikkhu* was completely pure but after that they gradually committed errors. As a result, the Buddha established regulations as the need arose . . ."31 The second type of *samgha* was more of a conceptual expression of the Buddhist order called *caturdisa-samgha* (the "universal order" or "the order of the four quarters"), which included all the Buddha's disciples of the past, present and future and was expressed as monastic rules applicable to all the present orders.32 No present order could claim the possession of monasteries and other buildings; all the properties were considered to belong to the universal order.33

All the Buddhist priests during Shakyamuni's time led a life of wandering and begging except for three or four months of the rainy season when they took shelter in one place and engaged in intensive study and meditation.34 According to the early Buddhist texts, priests were allowed to possess six items: three robes, a begging bowl, a cloth to sit upon, and a water strainer.35 Their lives were austere and entirely devoted to their religious practice. It is interesting to note that soon after Shakyamuni's death, which various scholars estimate to have been around the end of the fifth or fourth century BCE,36 Buddhist priests renounced the life of wandering and started to settle down.37 This transition from wandering to settlement marked the beginning of the Buddhist priests' lives at temples and monasteries.38 In this regard, it must be pointed out that Shakyamuni never had a temple or monastery if it refers to a priest's permanent residence or *home*. He remained homeless to the end; his entire life as a religious practitioner was spent in travelling and preaching his Dharma to all people.

The Three Treasures

The three treasures, which is also translated as the three refuges or the three gems, are the Buddha, the Dharma (i.e., his Law or teaching), and the *samgha* (the Buddhist order or community). It is an old Buddhist tradition that practitioners pay respect to those three fundamental elements of Buddhism. *Sutta-Nipata*, one of the early Buddhist scriptures, explains that the Buddha is worthy of respect because he expounded the truth that benefits all people;39 Shakyamuni's Dharma is worthy of respect because it enables all people to attain peace and overcome death.40 Lastly, the *samgha* is worthy of respect because it consists of the Buddha's "faithful followers" who have "steadfast hearts."41

The Buddha and his teaching are obviously important because without them there could be no Buddhism. In fact, during the earliest period of Buddhism, homage was paid only to the Buddha and the Dharma. Paying homage to all the three treasures is considered to be a

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Author: Shin Yatomi
Keywords: Buddhist Early Historical Need Order Perspective Priesthood Priests Shin Study Yatomi

later tradition.42 Professor Hermann Oldenberg suggests that the idea of the three treasures began in a period after Shakyamuni's death when the Buddhist order "stood as the sole visible exponent of the idea hitherto embodied in Buddha, as the sole possessor of delivering truth."43 In other words, it is the significance of the *samgha* that the Buddha's faithful disciples spread his teaching, especially after his passing. Put simply, the essential role of the *samgha* lies in propagation activities. This is consistent with Shakyamuni's emphasis to widely spread the Dharma. In one of the early texts, Shakyamuni tells his priestly disciples:

> Go out and preach, monks, out of compassion for sentient beings, and out of concern for the world. Bring benefits, happiness, and caring to gods and men. No two of you should go to the same place. Preach the Dharma with reason and eloquence so that it will be good at the beginning, middle, and end.44

The *samgha* becomes worthy of respect only when its members are correctly spreading the Buddha's teaching. Put another way, the true *samgha* is nothing other than a group of Buddhist practitioners dedicated to the propagation of Buddhism.

Spiritual Equality and Self-reliance

Other notable characteristics of the *samgha* include its spiritual equality. It was thought that Shakyamuni's disciples were fully capable of attaining the same enlightened state as their teacher. This idea is reflected in one of the eight analogies of the *samgha* comparing it to the ocean. In one of the early texts called *Udana*, Shakyamuni states: "Just as, monks, the mighty ocean is of one flavour, the flavour of salt, even so, monks, this dhamma is of one flavour, the flavour of release."45 Through the Buddha's teaching, all people can savor exactly the same state of enlightenment as the Buddha. Just like water in the great ocean has the same salty taste everywhere, there is no distinction in the spiritual state people may attain through the Buddha's teaching.

This spiritual equality of early Buddhism is documented elsewhere as well. For example, the spiritual state attained by the five monks who were the first Buddhist converts is depicted as being exactly identical as Shakyamuni's enlightenment. In this regard, Professor Hajime Nakamura states: "The notion that the Buddha's disciples could never reach the same goal that he attained since he was super-human, is a product of later imagination promulgated by the pompous theologians of subsequent eras, and a distortion of historical fact."46 Any Buddhist who declares that he has obtained a spiritual status that cannot be attained by other practitioners is making a claim that even Shakyamuni did not make and thereby promoting a non-Buddhist perspective.

Spiritual equality acknowledged in the *samgha* had some implications in terms of its organizational characteristics. Although priests' seniority in length of practice was respected, there was no hierarchical character in the early *samgha.* Some priests had some administrative duties such as caretaker of sleeping quarters and council chambers or as distributors of food and other necessities.47 But they had no greater political influence than others within the order. Professor Hermann Oldenberg points out: "Unanimity was necessary as a general rule in most of the resolutions of the Order."48 The early *samgha* was democratic in its nature and structure.

Furthermore, the *samgha* did not have a specific person or high priest who would interpret the Buddha's teaching for the rest of the Buddhist community. In fact, the *samgha* did not claim to have any authority to institute new rules or interpret the Buddha's teaching. Although new rules were introduced into the *samgha* after Shakyamuni's death in response

Title: Do We Need Priests?
Subject: Living Buddhism 10/99 v.99 n.10 p.5 LB9910p05
Author: Shin Yatomi
Keywords: Buddhist Early Historical Need Order Perspective Priesthood Priests Shin Study Yatomi

to changing circumstances, the monks made sure to attribute those changes to the Buddha himself.49 This attitude of the early *samgha* indicates that in addition to the spread of Buddhism, the preservation of the Buddha's teaching was considered an important function of the Buddhist order.

In other words, faithfulness to the founder was an essential prerequisite for the Buddhist order. No arbitrary legislation or interpretation contradicting Shakyamuni's teaching was tolerated within the Buddhist order. Consequently the *samgha* did not choose to have a leader who would legislate rules and interpret doctrines. The faithful observance of the Buddha's teaching was viewed as paramount.

Although every Buddhist was thought capable of attaining the same enlightenment as Shakyamuni, the *samgha* refused to acknowledge any specific person to succeed their teacher immediately after the founder's death. One of the early Pali texts called *Majjhima Nikaya* records the discourse between Ananda (one of Shakyamuni's ten major disciples) and a certain Brahmin, which took place soon after Shakyamuni's death. Parts of this dialogue reveal an important aspect of the *samgha*:

> **Brahmin:** "Is there a single Almsman who in every respect and in every particular possesses all the qualities that were possessed by the reverend Gotama, the Arahat all-enlightened [the Buddha]?"
> **Ananda:** "No, Brahmin. For the Lord made a Path where path there was none, traced out a Path where path there was none, and revealed a Path till then unrevealed... Today his disciples follow him in the Path which has come to them from him. ..."
> **Brahmin:** "Is there any particular Almsman, Ananda, who was designated by the reverend Gotama to be at his decease your alternative refuge, and to whom, in his place, you might have recourse today?"
> **Ananda:** "No."
> Brahmin: "Is there any such Almsman chosen for this purpose by the Confraternity and designated as such by Elders and Almsmen?"
> **Ananda:** "No."
> **Brahmin:** "Having no such alternative refuge, how come you to be in such unison?"
> **Ananda:** "We lack not an alternative refuge, Brahmin; we have one in the Doctrine. . . ."
> **Brahmin:** "Is there any one particular Almsman who today you respect and revere, to whom you show honour and worship and to whom you look up with respect and reverence?
> **Ananada:** "Yes."
> **Brahmin:** "In answer to my previous questions, you have already told me that Gotama designated no Almsman as an alternative to himself as your refuge at his death, and that the Confraternity has designated no one since; but now you tell me there is an Almsman whom you revere and in dependence on whom you live in respect and reverence. What can your words mean?"50

At this point, Ananda starts to explain ten various qualities that would make a person worthy of respect.51 In other words, anyone who develops virtuous character and abilities should be respected. As we can see in Ananda's discourse, the *samgha* did not place anyone in a position of spiritual superiority above the rest; at the same time it encouraged honor and respect for anyone virtuous as a result of practice based on Shakyamuni's Dharma.

Title: Do We Need Priests?
Subject: Living Buddhism 10/99 v.99 n.10 p.5 LB9910p05
Author: Shin Yatomi
Keywords: Buddhist Early Historical Need Order Perspective Priesthood Priests Shin Study Yatomi

Originally neither the Dharma nor the *samgha* allowed for any intermediary to stand between a practitioner and his or her enlightenment. Individual practitioners are responsible for their salvation through their own efforts to practice the Buddha's teaching. After all, self-reliance is a cornerstone of Buddhism. Shakyamuni instructed Ananda on his deathbed: "Therefore, Ananda, in this world be an island to yourself, be a refuge to yourself and take refuge in no other. Make the Dharma your island, the Dharma your refuge and no other."52

No Excommunication of Lay Believers

The Order of early Buddhism did not reject a priest unless he committed a serious violation of the rules of monastic conduct, such as a transgression of the four great prohibitions: sexual intercourse, stealing, killing and lying.53 At the same time, if priests wanted to return to their secular lives and continue to practice as lay believers, they were always free to do so. It was generally thought that no one should be bound to the priestly order or the Buddhist community as a whole by external powers.

Consequently there was no notion of excommunication of laity in early Buddhism. In this regard, Professor Hermann Oldenberg comments: "A formal excommunication of unbelieving, unworthy, or scandalously-living lay-brothers there was not, and, as a result of circumstances, there could not be."54 If there were a lay believer disruptive to the Buddhist community, the members of the priestly order would simply refrain from receiving alms from such a person.55 This was as far as the priestly order went in applying sanctions to lay believers for transgressions.

What Defines a Priest?

So far we have examined the nature and characteristics of the early Buddhist Order. But it may also be helpful to examine how Shakyamuni himself defined who is a priest. First of all, Shakyamuni taught that no form of social distinction-neither class, race, gender nor wealth-should be given any consideration in the priestly order. In his well-known sermon about the eight properties of the oceans, Shakyamuni instructs his priestly disciples:

> Just as, monks, whatsoever great rivers there are-namely, Ganga, Yamuna, Aciravati, Sarabhu, Mahi-these, on reaching the mighty ocean, abandon their former names and lineage, and henceforth go by the name of just "mighty ocean," even so, monks, the four castes-namely, the nobles, the brahmins, the merchants and the serfs-on going forth from home to the homeless in the dhamma-discipline proclaimed by the Wayfarer, abandon their former names and lineage and go by the name of just "recluses who are Sakya sons."56

Judging from the openness with which Shakyamuni accepted anyone into his teaching, the total disregard of social distinction or status no doubt permeated the entire community of Buddhists, including lay believers.

Blind to social distinctions or status, Shakyamuni attempted to define priests in terms of their spirituality, their character and their action. This was radically different from the traditions of the priestly class of brahmins, who had to be born into that class. Shakyamuni's position regarding the definition of priesthood is clear from many passages of the early Buddhist texts. For example, in the *Dhammapada*, Shakyamuni teaches: "Not by the tonsure, a shaven head, does a man become a samana, a monk. How can a man be a samana if he forgets his religious vows, if he speaks what is not true, if he still has desire and greed?"57 In *Sutta-Nipata*, Shakyamuni also teaches: "Birth neither Brahmin, nor

Title: Do We Need Priests?
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Author: Shin Yatomi
Keywords: Buddhist Early Historical Need Order Perspective Priesthood Priests Shin Study Yatomi

non-Brahmin, makes; / 'tis life and conduct moulds the Brahmin true."58 In light of those passages, to define who is a priest based solely on that person's position, status or appearance does not accord with the original spirit of Buddhism.

Finally it should be noted that Shakyamuni strongly urged lay believers to distinguish bad priests from good ones. In *Sutta-Nipata*, Shakyamuni explains to the blacksmith Cunda the importance of discerning the true nature of a monk based on his character and action. He classifies monks or priests into four categories: "Way-conqueror," "Way-herald," "Wayfarer," and "fraud-of-Way."59 Shakyamuni describes the last category as a priest "Who, cloaked in piety, / Is froward, boaster, cheat / Of clansmen, unrestrained, / A babbler, masked in mode."60 Shakyamuni then exhorts Cunda as follows: "And the shrewd householder, / Wise Ariyan listener, / Perceiveth them, knows all / As such; and seeing this / His faith wanes not: for how / Could he confound no fraud / With fraud, cleansed with unclean?"61

Here Shakyamuni encourages his lay followers to develop the wisdom and perception to observe the true nature of crooked monks so that they may protect their faith. Nothing could be further from Shakyamuni's intent than laity bound up in blind, unquestioning obedience to a priesthood.

The Mistranslation of Samgha into Chinese and Japanese

Although the scope of my discussion has been limited to early Buddhism in India, I would like to note one important detail about the translation of the term *samgha* into Chinese and then into Japanese. *Samgha* was translated into Chinese as *seng-chia*. (To be precise, this was a transliteration of the term.) *Seng*, the Chinese abbreviation of *seng-chia*, however, came to be used to indicate an individual monk although in India *samgha* never carried this meaning. As I mentioned earlier, in India, an individual monk was referred to as *bhikkhu* or *bhiksu*. In the Buddhist texts, the usage of the term *samgha* was strictly distinguished from that of *bhikkhu* or *bhiksu*. The *samgha* was considered one of the three treasures of Buddhism, but an individual monk was never considered an object of veneration as an element of the three treasures.

I-Ching (635-713), a Chinese Buddhist scholar, after paying visits to many Buddhist sites in India, pointed out to Chinese Buddhists this misapplication of the term *samgha* to individuals.62 Many scholars acknowledged the error, but they insisted on continuing to use the term to refer to an individual priest or monk. This misuse of the term was simply accepted by the Japanese when Buddhsim took root in Japan, as well. The Japanese term *so*, the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese *seng* of *seng-chia*, came to signify an individual priest. As a result, this mistranslation significantly altered the concept of the three treasures in China and Japan. Particularly in Japan, the term was misused to promote reverence toward an individual priest. It is this misinterpretation that Nichiren Shoshu has been leaning on to dogmatically define its high priest as being part of the three treasures.63 As I discussed earlier, the treasure of the *samgha* originally referred to the Buddhist Order, which, in the broadest sense, included all Buddhists, both priests and lay believers. The *samgha* was revered especially after Shakyamuni's death precisely because the Buddhist community as a whole fulfilled the important role of preserving and spreading the Buddha's teaching.

In light of those historical facts, as a translator, I personally feel the components of the three treasures would best be translated as the Buddha, the Dharma and the *Samgha* in order to maintain the original meaning and intent of the concept. (The "Law" or the "Teaching" for the Dharma, and the "Order" or "Community" for the *samgha* may be per-

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Keywords: Buddhist Early Historical Need Order Perspective Priesthood Priests Shin Study Yatomi

missible if English terms are preferred for understanding.) But translating the treasure of the *Samgha* as "the treasure of the priesthood" would be, I feel, a gross diminution of the original term, and "the Treasure of the Priest"64 an outright distortion.

IV. The Buddhist Order in Mahayana Buddhism

Stupa Worship and the Rise of Mahayana Buddhism

Shortly before his passing, Shakyamuni prohibited his monks from being involved in his funeral rite. Rather, he encouraged his priestly disciples to focus on their religious practice.65 In his mind, officiating a funeral service had nothing to do with Buddhism. In Shakyamuni's India, funerals were held by brahmins or Hindu priests, and early Buddhist leaders often held in contempt the magical incantations recited by brahmins.66 It is an ironic reversal of the Buddha's intent that funerals and memorial services have become the primary focus of Buddhism in Japan. The Japanese Buddhist establishment would not exist today without funerals and memorial services-rites that are virtually unrelated to the original intent of Buddhism. This is why Buddhism in Japan is often referred to as "funeral Buddhism."

Shakyamuni died in Kusinagara, and the people who lived there conducted his funeral. His cremated remains were then divided among eight tribes in central India, who constructed *stupas* (memorial mounds) to house the Buddha's remains.67 Since lay believers were unable to spend their whole life in scholarship and meditation as were the monks, they soon began to gather around those *stupas* and worship them, hoping somehow to commune with the Buddha's spirit. This *stupa* worship was a simple expression of the laity's sincere devotion to the Buddha, who was symbolically represented by the *stupas*. This lay movement eventually evolved into Mahayana Buddhism.

Mahayana scriptures began appearing around the first century BCE,68 but the origin of the Mahayana movement, that is, worship before the *stupa*, dates back much earlier. For example, according to one Buddhist text, King Ashoka (r.c. 268-232 BCE) opened the original eight *stupas* and removed and further divided the Buddha's relics to build many *stupas* throughout the country.69 Professor Akira Hirakawa suggests that the king was simply responding to the growing popularity of *stupa* worship.70

Bodhisattva-samgha: The Lay Buddhist Order of Mahayana Buddhism

The term Mahayana means "a greater vehicle." The Mahayana Buddhists called Nikaya71 or Sectarian Buddhism "Hinayana" or "a smaller vehicle." It is not clear if the Mahayana Buddhists applied the term Hinayana to the whole of Nikaya Buddhism, or only to some of its branches such as the Theravada school. But it should be noted that no school of Buddhism referred to itself as Hinayana.

Mahayana Buddhism was essentially a lay movement. It encouraged its practitioners to seek their enlightenment through teaching and helping others. Because of their altruistic orientation, the Mahayana Buddhists referred to themselves as "bodhisattvas" (those who seek supreme enlightenment), their teaching as "*bodhisattvayana*" (the bodhisattva vehicle), and their lay Buddhist order as "*bodhisattva-samgha*" or "*bodhisattva-gana*" (group or community of bodhisattvas).72 On the other hand, Nikaya Buddhism was a teaching for monks who would devote themselves to study and meditation for their own salvation. While monks attempted to discipline themselves by following a set of rules or precepts, the Mahayana bodhisattvas sought to cultivate wisdom and faith in their own potential to

Title: Do We Need Priests?
Subject: Living Buddhism 10/99 v.99 n.10 p.5 LB9910p05
Author: Shin Yatomi
Keywords: Buddhist Early Historical Need Order Perspective Priesthood Priests Shin Study Yatomi

become Buddhas. Those who realized that they have such potential were called bodhisattvas.73 The Mahayana bodhisattvas, therefore, aspired to be equal to the Buddha while monks were content to remain as disciples of the Buddha, rather than striving to achieve the same enlightenment as the Buddha. For this reason, the Mahayana practitioners called the monastic tradition "Buddhism for disciples."74 Put simply, Mahayana Buddhism appealed to ordinary people and their lives, while Nikaya Buddhism was monastic and therefore withdrawn from the everyday world.

One reason why the Mahayana Buddhists were able to develop and maintain the characteristics of a lay movement was that *stupas*, that is, the places they gathered for worship and practice, were managed by lay believers. According to the monastic rules, the property and assets of monastic orders were strictly distinguished from those of *stupas*.75 If monks were to benefit from the land and assets of the *stupas*, or offerings made to the *stupas*, they would be accused of stealing-one of the four great prohibitions.76 Since *stupas* were strictly beyond the control of the monastic orders, the doctrines of lay Mahayana Buddhism were developed, spread widely and transmitted to younger generations without monastic influences. Since the stupas were not controlled by monks, people were free to perform music and dance there in honor of the Buddha. (Any form of entertainment was strictly prohibited in the monastic orders.) People also decorated the grounds of a *stupa* with various art works carved on gates, pillars and railings.77 The Mahayana movement, in this sense, was also a great cultural and artistic movement based on Buddhist ideals. As *stupa* worship grew more popular, however, the members of monastic orders became hostile toward the Mahayana movement. According to some later Buddhist texts, some monks claimed that contributions for the monastic orders produced much more benefit than those made to *stupas*.78 The growing popularity of *stupa* worship also attracted the envy of the adherents of Brahmanism, who called a stupa "*eduka*," which meant a structure of rubbish.79

The Development of the Mahayana Priesthood and Esotericism

Only in its later stage did Mahayana Buddhism became a religion in which a priesthood played a central role.80 Since the *stupas* included land and structures, people had to manage them. The caretaker of the *stupa* gradually came to be viewed as a sort of religious specialist who was neither a lay believer nor a priest. He would tell stories of the Buddha's life or past lives to the pilgrims who visited the *stupa* and manage lodgings for them.81 But eventually a priestly order began to emerge from among those people.82 Meanwhile, by the beginning of the Common Era, *stupas* were being built on the grounds of monasteries and temples.83 Because of its continued popularity, stupa worship was gradually incorporated into monastic Buddhism as well. The absorption of the *stupa* worship into monastic orders, despite their initial hostility, undoubtedly had the effect of increasing their income from pilgrims' offerings.

Since Mahayana Buddhism emphasized believers' devotion to the Buddha, the concept of the Buddha became highly idealized and mystified over time. While the Mahayana practitioners taught the cultivation of wisdom and encouraged people to realize their own potential of Buddhahood, they also started to emphasize the saving powers of imagined Buddhas and bodhisattvas. In one sense, the essential Buddhist ideal of self-reliance began to be obscured by people's dependency on external deities. Many Mahayana scriptures expounded the blessings to be derived from magical incantations called *dharani*. Over the centuries, more magical elements were incorporated into Mahayana Buddhism.

Title: Do We Need Priests?
Subject: Living Buddhism 10/99 v.99 n.10 p.5 LB9910p05
Author: Shin Yatomi
Keywords: Buddhist Early Historical Need Order Perspective Priesthood Priests Shin Study Yatomi

Furthermore, with the emergence of a priesthood from within, Mahayana Buddhism eventually leaned toward esotericism. Esoteric Buddhism emphasized rituals over doctrine. It thus became indistinguishable from Hinduism and was finally assimilated into Hinduism.84 With the assimilation of esoteric Buddhism into Hinduism and the Muslim invasion of India, Buddhism in India virtually disappeared by the end of the twelfth century.85 (Usually the end of Indian Buddhism is marked by the destruction of the Vikramasila Monastery by Muslim troops at the end of the twelfth century.) However, the fact that Hinduism remained strong even after the Muslim invasion suggests that the decline of Buddhism in India could be attributed more to internal causes than to a foreign enemy.

The decline of Buddhism in India is instructive precisely because it was mainly self-caused. When Shakyamuni came to be deified and other imaginary Buddhas and bodhisattvas were invented, Buddhist practitioners began to depend more on priests as intermediaries to enjoy their supposed powers of salvation. Rituals conducted by priests became more central than their own efforts to practice for themselves and others. On one hand, Mahayana Buddhism revived the original spirit of Buddhism by emphasizing compassion for others. Its practitioners, however, eventually succumbed to their yearning for a transcendent deity while ignoring the greatness of the human Shakyamuni. They sought to commune with this transcendent Buddha-deity through priests as intermediaries. The disappearance of Buddhism in India was caused in no small part by believers' lack of self-reliant practice-as the Buddha, on his deathbed, had admonished them to develop. It was not hostile "Hinayana" monks nor invading Muslims who brought about the decline of Mahayana and eventually all of Indian Buddhism. Ironically it was Mahayana priests who sapped the vigor of the popular Buddhist movement by inserting themselves between believers and a Buddha who had turned from a living example into an inaccessible god. Ultimately, however, it was the laity who came to yearn for external saviors and invited priests to bridge the gap between them. They had completely forgotten Shakyamuni's admonition of self-reliance: "Only a man himself can be the master of himself: who else from outside could be his master?"86

V. Conclusion

In the "Preface" of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* published in 1855, Walt Whitman (1819-1892) speaks to the future of priesthood:

> There will soon be no more priests. Their work is done. They may wait awhile . . perhaps a generation or two . . dropping off by degree. A superior breed shall take their place . . . . the gangs of kosmos and prophets en masse shall take their place. A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest. . . . They shall arise in America and be responded to from the remainder of the earth.87

With the publication of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman attempted to break a new ground in American literature. He challenged the traditions of the New England literary establishment with his new poetic form, subject and vision. Whitman saw himself as a poet of democracy who inspires people to seek their own communion with the universe and the divine. In this sense, he refused to be a poet who, as an intermediary, interprets the message of Mother Nature for the people. His theology was aptly expressed in such lines from "Song of Myself" as: "Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touched from" or "In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the

Title: Do We Need Priests?
Subject: Living Buddhism 10/99 v.99 n.10 p.5 LB9910p05
Author: Shin Yatomi
Keywords: Buddhist Early Historical Need Order Perspective Priesthood Priests Shin Study Yatomi

glass."88 What he stood for in his poetry echoes important Mahayana ideals such as the universality of Buddhahood. And his rejection of priests as intermediaries between people and their own inherent divinity accords with the original Buddhist ideal of self-reliance. In this sense, Whitman's remarks about priests contain an invaluable insight.

So do priests play a necessary role in Buddhism? I believe the answer depends on what we mean by the word priest. Whitman replaced one kind of priest with another, more universal kind of role that any of us can fulfill. I think we can conclude that Buddhist priests who do not fulfill their originally intended function—to protect and spread the teachings of Buddhism—are not really priests. Nor are priests who are concerned with their own status—who deify the Buddha and insert themselves between the Buddha and the people to elevate that status—of use to anyone but themselves. On the other hand, I can find no reason to reject a priest who, in accord with the original role of the samgha, dedicates him or herself to protecting and spreading Buddhism, and to serving its believers.

As we observed in the historical development of the samgha, the form of a Buddhist movement changes according to the circumstances while the essential teaching of Buddhism should not change. What Shakyamuni thought of as priests in his day is virtually an extinct species today. Particularly in Japan, Buddhist priests marry, own homes and live in relative comfort; they accumulate wealth, and conduct funerals and memorial services as a source of income. They are not Buddhist priests in any sense of the original meaning. They simply, over the centuries, invented themselves. As the form of priesthood changes, it would be foolish to be attached to a preconceived notion of priesthood.

Rather than being preoccupied with the form of priesthood, we must look at the original spirit and functions of priesthood in Buddhism and try to fulfill those functions in a manner best suited to the time and place. What priesthood must do is protect and spread Buddhism. As I think of how best we as a community of Buddhists fulfill those functions in contemporary American society, I cannot help but think that shaved heads and robes would hamper rather than help us in our endeavor. "Protecting" Buddhism means to correct any misconception or distortion of Buddhism and proclaim its truth among practitioners or in society at large. "Spreading" Buddhism means to communicate the joy and benefit of Buddhist practice to those unaware. Both functions of the samgha require a considerable degree of commitment in terms of social engagement. I do not think that priests who would lock themselves up in a temple or monastery are suited to fulfill those functions today. (In this regard, Professor Harvey Cox discusses the worker-priest movement of Catholic priests in his essay "Priesthood in the Post-modern World." See page 16.)

Early Mahayana Buddhists proudly called themselves the "*bodhisattva-samgha*," that is, a group of ordinary people who saw their innate Buddhahood and strove to manifest it while helping others do the same. Free from the influences of monks, they inspired people's lives with art and culture rooted in the rich spirituality of Buddhism. Centuries after Shakyamuni's death, they revived the original Buddhist spirit of compassion in the lives of ordinary people. I believe that this is exactly what the SGI is doing. Like Walt Whitman, we have become our own priests. ❑

1. The etymology of the word is indicated in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.
2. Martin Luther. *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*. Quoted in *Classical and Christian Ideas in English Renaissance Poetry*. Isabel Rivers. 2nd Ed. London: Routledge, 1994. p. 96.
3. Martin Luther. "Answer before the Emperor and the Diet of Worms." Ibid., p. 96.

Title: Do We Need Priests?
Subject: Living Buddhism 10/99 v.99 n.10 p.5 LB9910p05
Author: Shin Yatomi
Keywords: Buddhist Early Historical Need Order Perspective Priesthood Priests Shin Study Yatomi

4. John A. Hardson. *Pocket Catholic Catechism.* New York: Image Books, 1989. p. 186.
5. Ibid., p. 186.
6. Ibid., p. 191.
7. Nichiren Shoshu Temple. *Soka Gakkai Announces Issuance of Counterfeit Gohonzons: The Circumstances and Correct Doctrinal Perspective From Nichiren Shoshu, NST News (Special Issue).* 1993. p. 1.
8. Ibid., p. 5.
9. The Nichiren Shoshu Doctrinal Research Committee. *Refuting the Soka Gakkai's "Counterfeit Object of Worship": 100 Questions and Answers.* West Hollywood, Calif.: Nichiren Shoshu Temple, 1996. p. 15.
10. Ibid., p. 16.
11. Nichiren. *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin.* Vol. 1. Tokyo: NSIC, 1979. p. 4.
12. Hajime Nakamura. *Gotama Buddha.* Los Angeles: Buddhist Books International, 1987. p. 26.
13. Ibid., p. 27.
14. Akira Hirakawa. *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Sakyamuni to Early Mahayana.* Translated and edited by Paul Groner. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998. p. 14.
15. Ibid., p. 16.
16. Ibid., p. 31.
17. Ibid., p. 32.
18. Ibid., p. 32.
19. Susan Murcott. *The First Buddhist Women: Translations and Commentary on the Therigatha.* Berkeley, Calif: Parallax Press, 1991. pp. 174-75.
20. Akira Hirakawa. *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Sakyamuni to Early Mahayana.* Translated and edited by Paul Groner. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998. p. 36.
21. Hajime Nakamura. *Gotama Buddha.* Los Angeles: Buddhist Books International, 1987. p. 91.
22. *Udana (Verses of Uplift) and Itivuttaka (As It was Said).* Translated by F. L. Woodward. London: Oxford University Press, 1948. pp. 57-58.
23. Hajime Nakamura. *Gotama Buddha.* Los Angeles: Buddhist Books International, 1987. p. 93.
24. Ibid., p. 69.
25. Hajime Nakamura. *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India, China, Tibet and Japan.* Edited by Philip P. Wiener. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1964. p. 69.
26. Akira Hirakawa. *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Sakyamuni to Early Mahayana.* Translated and edited by Paul Groner. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998. p. 62.
27. Ibid., p. 62.
28. Ibid., p. 62.
29. Ibid., p. 60.
30. Ibid., p. 63.
31. Hajime Nakamura. *Gotama Buddha.* Los Angeles: Buddhist Books International, 1987. p. 80.
32. Akira Hirakawa. *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Sakyamuni to Early Mahayana.* Translated and edited by Paul Groner. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998. p. 64.
33. Ibid., p. 64.
34. Hajime Nakamura. *Gotama Buddha.* Los Angeles: Buddhist Books International, 1987. p. 80. The practices of early Buddhist priests are also discussed by Akira Hirakawa. *A*

Title: Do We Need Priests?
Subject: Living Buddhism 10/99 v.99 n.10 p.5 LB9910p05
Author: Shin Yatomi
Keywords: Buddhist Early Historical Need Order Perspective Priesthood Priests Shin Study Yatomi

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35. Akira Hirakawa. *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Sakyamuni to Early Mahayana*. Translated and edited by Paul Groner. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998. p. 68.
36. The various dates estimated for Shakyamuni's lifetime are discussed by Hajime Nakamura. *Gotama Buddha*. Los Angeles: Buddhist Books International, 1987. p. 12-14.
37. Sukumar Dutt. *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India: Their History and Their Contribution to Indian Culture*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988. p. 57.
38. Ibid., p. 57.
39. *Buddha's Teachings Being the Sutta-Nipata or Discourse-Collection*. Translated by Lord Chalmers. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997. p. 55. Verse 224.
40. Ibid., pp. 55-56. Verses 225-26.
41. Ibid., pp. 55-56. Verses 227-28.
42. Hajime Nakamura. *Gotama Buddha*. Los Angeles: Buddhist Books International, 1987. p. 68.
43. Hermann Oldenberg. *Buddha: His Life, His Doctrine, His Order*. Translated by William Hoey. Motilal Banarsidass, 1997. pp. 338-39.
44. Akira Hirakawa. *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Sakyamuni to Early Mahayana*. Translated and edited by Paul Groner. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998. p. 32.
45. *Udana (Verses of Uplift) and Itivuttaka (As It was Said)*. Translated by F. L. Woodward. London: Oxford University Press, 1948. p. 67.
46. Hajime Nakamura. *Gotama Buddha*. Los Angeles: Buddhist Books International, 1987. p. 78.
47. Hermann Oldenberg. *Buddha: His Life, His Doctrine, His Order*. Translated by William Hoey. Motilal Banarsidass, 1997. pp. 365-66.
48. Ibid., p. 366.
49. Hajime Nakamura. *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India, China, Tibet and Japan*. Edited by Philip P. Wiener. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1964. p. 112.
50. *Further Dialogues of the Buddha: The Majjhima Nikaya*. Translated by Lord Chalmers. Vol. 2. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1988. pp. 159-60.
51. Ibid., p. 160-62.
52. Hajime Nakamura. *Gotama Buddha*. Los Angeles: Buddhist Books International, 1987. pp. 113-14. Another similar passage reads: "Therefore, O Ananda, be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be ye a refuge to yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast to the Truth as a lamp. Hold fast as a refuge to the Truth. Look not refuge to any one besides yourselves." *Dialogue of the Buddha (The Digha Niyakya)*.Trans. by T.W. and C.A.F. Rhys Davids. The 5th edition. London: Luzac and Co., 1971, p. 108.
53. Hermann Oldenberg. *Buddha: His Life, His Doctrine, His Order*. Translated by William Hoey. Motilal Banarsidass, 1997. p. 353.
54. Ibid., p. 383.
55. Ibid., p. 384.
56. *Udana (Verses of Uplift) and Itivuttaka (As It was Said)*. Translated by F. L. Woodward. London: Oxford University Press, 1948. p. 66.
57. *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*. Translated by Juan Mascaro. London: Penguin Books, 1973. p. 73.
58. *Buddha's Teachings Being the Sutta-Nipata or Discourse-Collection*. Translated by Lord

Title: Do We Need Priests?
Subject: Living Buddhism 10/99 v.99 n.10 p.5 LB9910p05
Author: Shin Yatomi
Keywords: Buddhist Early Historical Need Order Perspective Priesthood Priests Shin Study Yatomi

Chalmers. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997. p. 155. Verse 650.

59. *Woven Cadences of Early Buddhists: Sutta-Nipata.* Translated E. M. Hare. London: Oxford University Press, 1947. p. 15. Verses 86-89.
60. Ibid., p. 15. Verse 89.
61. Ibid., p. 16. Verse 90.
62. Hajime Nakamura. *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India, China, Tibet and Japan.* Edited by Philip P. Wiener. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1964. p. 259.
63. The Nichiren Shoshu promotes the absolute obedience to the high priest, using the concept of the three treasures. For example, "The Treasure of the Priest (s) was first received by Nikko Shonin through the Bestowal of the Living Essence of the Law by the Daishonin, and after that, the Pure Law was passed down to each successive High Priest in the lineage of the Heritage, spanning the generations up until the present day. . . . In short, with perfectly sincere faith and self-imposed, strict obedience, we should hold the High Priest's instruction in deepest reverence . . ." Quoted from *Dai-Nichiren (Special Edition): On the Soka Gakkai Problem-The Correct Way of Faith in Nichiren Shoshu*, published by the Nichiren Shoshu Bureau of Religious Affairs, pp. 13-14.
64. In Nichiren Shoshu, the treasure of the *samgha* is translated as "the Treasure of the Priest." See, for example, *Dai-Nichiren (Special Edition): On the Soka Gakkai Problem-The Correct Way of Faith in Nichiren Shoshu*, published by the Nichiren Shoshu Bureau of Religious Affairs, pp. 10-16.
65. Akira Hirakawa. *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Sakyamuni to Early Mahayana.* Translated and edited by Paul Groner. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998. pp. 36-37.
66. Hajime Nakamura. *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India, China, Tibet and Japan.* Edited by Philip P. Wiener. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1964. p. 585.
67. Akira Hirakawa. *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Sakyamuni to Early Mahayana.* Translated and edited by Paul Groner. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998. p. 37.
68. Ibid., p. 252.
69. Ibid., p. 105.
70. Ibid., p. 105.
71. *Nikayas* are collections of Buddhist texts that are discourses attributed directly to the Buddha. The word also means a school or sect. "Nikaya Buddhism," therefore, refers to the various early Buddhist schools that were based on these canonical texts.
72. Ibid.,p. 8, p. 274, p. 311.
73. Ibid., p. 259.
74. Ibid., p. 259.
75. Ibid., p. 272.
76. Ibid., p. 272.
77. Hajime Nakamura. *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India, China, Tibet and Japan.* Edited by Philip P. Wiener. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1964. p. 165.
78. Akira Hirakawa. *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Sakyamuni to Early Mahayana.* Translated and edited by Paul Groner. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998. p. 272.
79. Sukumar Dutt. *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India: Their History and Their Contribution to Indian Culture.* Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988. p. 186.
80. Akira Hirakawa. *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Sakyamuni to Early Mahayana.* Translated and edited by Paul Groner. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998. p. 270.
81. Ibid., pp. 273-74.
82. Ibid., p. 273.

Title: Do We Need Priests?
Subject: Living Buddhism 10/99 v.99 n.10 p.5 LB9910p05
Author: Shin Yatomi
Keywords: Buddhist Early Historical Need Order Perspective Priesthood Priests Shin Study Yatomi

83. Ibid., p. 271.
84. Ibid., p. 4.
85. Ibid., p. 5.
86. *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*. Translated by Juan Mascaro. London: Penguin Books, 1973. p. 58.
87. Walt Whitman. "Preface" from *Leaves of Grass* (1855). *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*. New York: The Library of America, 1982. pp. 24-5.
88. Ibid., "Song of Myself" from *Leaves of Grass* (1855). p. 51, p. 85.

Title: Do We Need Priests?
Subject: Living Buddhism 10/99 v.99 n.10 p.5 LB9910p05
Author: Shin Yatomi
Keywords: Buddhist Early Historical Need Order Perspective Priesthood Priests Shin Study Yatomi