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History of Nichiren Shū

By Rev. Chishin Hirai
General Manager
Nichiren Buddhist International Center



What is Nichiren Shū?

The religious organization we belong to is Nichiren Shū. Nichiren Shū was founded by Nichiren Shōnin when he chanted the Odaimoku on the top of Asahigamori at Seichōji temple on April 28, 1253. 750 years have passed since then. Now we are a religious organization consisting of about 5,000 temples, 8,000 ministers and 3.8 million members world wide. As you might remember, we celebrated the 750th Anniversary of the Establishment in the year 2002. It is uncommon for a religious organization to survive for over 750 years.

Thousands of millions of religious organizations were founded but they could not survive because of communities, cultures, ages and other difficult conditions. Only few of them could do that. And, one of them is us, Nichiren Shū.

Nichiren Shōnin didn't found a new school and didn't name it. However, he and his followers came to be known as the Hokke Shū which means Lotus school, Nichiren Hokke Shū which means Nichiren Lotus School or the Nichiren Shū. It was in 1876 that Nichiren Shū became our formal name. Let me explain about our history after Nichiren Shōnin.

Nichiren Shōnin's Nirvana and Major Disciples

Nichiren Shōnin passed away about 8:00 am on October 13, 1282. Before he passed away, he appointed his 6 disciples as Hondeshi which means major disciples, and ordered Kyōichimaro to propagate in Kyōto. They were Nisshō, Nichirō, Nikkō, Nikō, Nicchō and Nichiji. Why did he appoint 6 major disciples? I can say that there were many superior disciples. And there were many places where propagations were going on. Nichiren Shōnin wanted the group of 6 to take care of everything after

he passed away. We also call those 6 disciples the Rokurōsō which means 6 senior disciples.

It was expected, but unfortunate that their first job was a funeral service for their master. The record of the funeral service was taken by Nikkō. The record named “Gosenge kiroku” describes the service in detail. This is the text that tells us about the 6 major disciples as well. The text also said that there was no seniority among the 6 disciples.

Rinban Program

Nichiren Shōnin’s tombstone was erected and they held his 100 days memorial service in January, 1283. They set up the Kuonji Rinban Program at that time. The Rinban program was to take care of their master’s grave every month by turns. Why did they have to make the Rinban program? As you know, Nichiren Shōnin had to face many persecutions. He was still facing some danger even after his death. They were afraid that someone might destroy their master’s grave. So, they had to set up this program in order to watch and protect their master’s grave.

We don’t know how they took care of his grave. There is no record about it. I think that they cleaned it and offered flowers and chanted the Lotus Sutra in front of it. And, Of course, they had to take care of Minobusan Kuonji. As you might know, we have a different Rinban program today. Not only ministers but also lay members can be volunteers to take care of Nichiren Shōnin’s grave. If we are true Nichiren Buddhists, we have to be volunteers to clean our master’s grave at least once in our life time.

It was so sad that the original Rinban program broke down by September, 1283. The fact that the Rinban program had broken down could mean that their propagation was showing fruit and that the danger to Nichiren Shōnin’s grave was less. Now, we are going to look at how those disciples propagated and how such propagation continues to today.

Nisshō – Hama-monryū

Nisshō was a key disciple after Nichiren Shōnin. He stayed at Kamakura, the government center of the Shogunate, and tried to propagate the teachings as much as possible. Actually, his life story is not clear. It was said that he was one year older than Nichiren Shōnin and was born in 1221. It was in 1253 that he visited Nichiren Shōnin at Kamakura, and then became a disciple. He was given a new name Ben Ajari Nisshō. Ajari means a kind of professor. Nisshō always stayed at Kamakura and was a leader of the school. Nisshō founded Hokkeji temple and propagated from the temple. The temple’s location was at Hamado. That’s why his lineage was called the Hama-monryū, which means Hama lineage.

Nichirō – Hikigayatsu-monryū

Nichirō became Nichiren Shōnin’s disciple directly although we don’t know when he became a disciple. He was given the name of Daikoku Ajari Nichirō and trusted by Nichiren Shōnin. We can say that Nichirō was recognized as a leader at that time. It is said that Nisshō was his uncle and the Ikegami brothers were his cousins.

The major temples of the Nichirō lineage were Myōhonji temple where Hiki

Yoshimoto, one of the major believers of Nichiren Shōnin used to live, Ikegami Honmonji temple where Ikegami family used to live and Hondoji temple where Hiraga family used to live. Those 3 temples were very important propagation points. This lineage is called Hikigayatsu-monryū because Myōhonji was located at Hikigayatsu.

Nikkō – Fuji-monryū

It is said that Nikkō became Nichiren Shōnin’s disciple when Nichiren Shōnin was doing research in order to write ‘*Risshō Ankoku Ron*’ at Iwamoto Jissōji temple in 1257. He was very sincere, studied hard and given the name Byakuren Ajari Nikkō. He always followed his master wherever the master went and served the master. After consulting with Hakiri Sanenaga, the lord of Minobu manor, he moved to Mount Minobu in September, 1285. Some lineages insist that Nikkō became Sōkaju, the general abbot of Mt. Minobu. However, there was never such a position at Mt. Minobu from the beginning until today. The head monk of Mt. Minobu was called Bettō or Hossu. A document by a direct disciple of Nikkō didn’t say that Nikkō stayed at Minobusan for 6 or 7 years but only for a few years. So, we can definitely say that Nikkō never became Sōkanju as some claim. Incidentally, the present chief abbot of Minobusan Kuonji is Archbishop Nissō Uchino who is a descendant of Hakiri Sanenaga.

Nikkō left Minobusan in December, 1288 and founded Taisekiji temple in 1290. He founded another temple, Kitayama Honmonji at Omosu in 1298. He devoted himself to propagation and training disciples at Kitayama Honmonji for 36 years until he passed away there in 1333. After Nikkō, we call his disciples the Fuji lineage.

Nikō – Minobu-monryū

It is said that Nikō became Nichiren Shōnin's disciple at the age of 13 when Nichiren Shōnin went back to his home town in order to visit his sick mother. Nikō always stayed with, served, and practiced with his master. Nichiren Shōnin wrote many letters and that was one of his ways of propagation. However, there was no post office at that time. Somebody had to take Nichiren Shōnin's letters to members and bring replies back to him. Nikō delivered those letters many times. Nichiren Shōnin sometimes mentioned in his letter that a receiver should ask Nikō who delivered that letter about details. As I said, he always stayed with his master. He must have understood his master's feeling and thinking very well. That's why Nichiren Shōnin sent Nikō to Kiyosumi when Dōzenbō, Nichiren Shōnin's master passed away and let him read *Hōon jō* in front of Dōzonbō's grave. Nikō was appointed one of the 6 major disciples as Sado Ajari Nikō.

After Nichiren Shōnin passed away, Nikō went back to his hometown, Mobarā and propagated there. He moved to Mt. Minobu to help Nikkō and watch their master's grave around 1287. It is said that Nikō was gentle and calm. He had been staying there for 26 years until 1313 and then went back to his hometown. He devoted himself to his master's grave and Minobusan Kuonji as the head monk there. He passed away at his hometown in the following year. Nikō's lineage is named the Minobu lineage.

Nicchō & Nichiji

Nicchō was born in Omosu, Shizuoka and adopted by Toki Jōnin who was a major follower of Nichiren Shōnin. He was ordained at Mama Gubōji that belonged to the Tendai Shū at that time and then became Nichiren Shōnin's disciple. He was very talented and his master often praised him. Nichiren Shōnin appointed him, Iyo Ajari Nicchō as one of the 6 major disciples and he propagated at Mama Gubōji where Toki Jōnin converted. We don't know why the relationship between he and Toki Jōnin broke down later but he left Gubōji. It is said that he returned his hometown, Omosu, became a teacher at Kitayama Honmonji and passed away there.

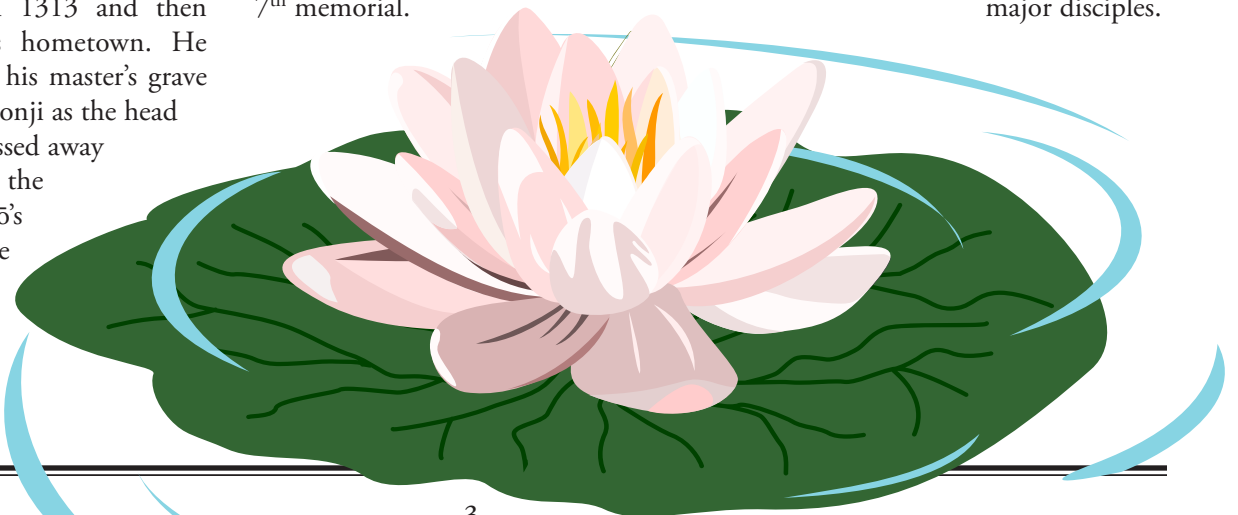
Nichiji was born in the same Shizuoka as Nicchō, ordained at age of 15 and entered Iwamoto Jissōji. He met Nikkō there and became his disciple first. Then, Nikkō took him to Nichiren Shōnin at the age of 21 in 1270 and he became Nichiren Shōnin's direct disciple. He was appointed as one of the 6 major disciples and named Renge Ajari Nichiji.

What we have to know about Nichiji is that he and another monk were initiators for making a statue of Nichiren Shōnin at Nichiren Shōnin's 7th memorial.

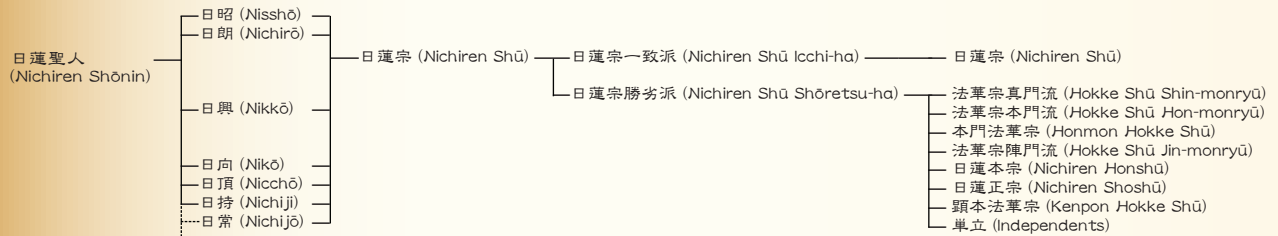
This is the first and oldest statue of Nichiren Shōnin. It has been designated as an important treasure of Japan and preserved at Ikegami Honmonji.

We also have to know about his international mission. He held his master's 13th memorial one month earlier on September 13, 1294 and went to Mt. Minobu on his memorial day, October 13th in order to say good-bye to his master's grave. He left to do international missionary work by himself on New Year's Day in 1295. Many of his own disciples wanted to go with him but he refused to let them do so. We are not sure where he went. It is said that he went north. He went to Hokkaidō and crossed the ocean to China. He was 46 years old at that time. This was not only the first international mission of Nichiren Shū but also the first overseas mission of any schools of Japanese Buddhism. We hold memorial services for him on the day he left. As you know, we propagate our teachings all over the world because Nichiji showed us his precious example. Let me express my deepest gratitude for him. A temple connected to Nichiji is Mimatsu Ren'eiji.

What we know about Nicchō and Nichiji is that they did not leave any lineages. Toki Jōnin established his own lineage instead of these two major disciples.



日蓮宗の歴史略図 • The Simple Genealogy of Nichiren Buddhism



Toki Jōnin – Nakayama-monryū

Toki Tsunenobu was one of the earliest followers of Nichiren Shōnin. He was a general secretary for the Chiba family, a feudal lord. He became a laymonk and changed his name to Jōnin about the time when Nichiren Shōnin founded the new faith in 1253. He must have been a follower who received the most letters from Nichiren Shōnin. The most wonderful achievement he accomplished was to preserve those letters and other documents, and he ordered his disciples to continue to collect and preserve them. 31 letters from Nichiren Shōnin to Toki Jōnin are still preserved today. We can see many of Nichiren Shōnin's hand-written documents today because of him. Those documents are very precious from the religious and historical points of view.

After Nichiren Shōnin passed away, he changed his name to Jōshūin Nichijō and started to propagate. He converted his house into a temple. His lineage is named the Nakayama lineage and the main temple is Nakayama Hokekyōji, which is very famous for the Kitō blessing that is taught there to ministers who undergo the 100 days Aragyō ascetic training held every winter.

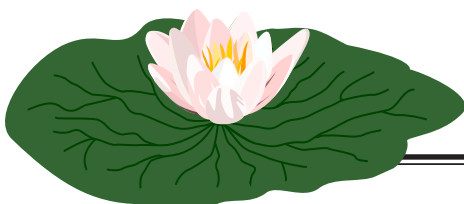
Development before Modern Age

When Nichiren Shōnin was born, it was an era wherein the Shogunate was established for the first time in the history of Japan. The Shogunate continued from the 13th century through the 15th although the Muromachi Shogunate took over the Kamakura Shogunate in the 14th century. At the end of the Muromachi Shogunate, we went into a chaotic time of war for 100 years. After that, Tokugawa Ieyasu came into power and his regime, the Tokugawa Shogunate, survived for about 300 years. Before his government, all Buddhist schools could propagate freely. However, the government tried to control the Buddhist schools. Actually, the government ordered everybody to register at their nearest temple in order to prohibit Christianity. They used Buddhist temples like branch town offices or a census bureau. And if the number of the temples increased or decreased, it would have been difficult to control. So, the government did not like it and prohibited the founding of new temples. As Buddhist schools heard that information, they founded many temples in cooperation with people who needed places to register. Many of present temples in Japan are founded this time, early in the 17th century. The temples were secured but it became difficult to propagate anymore.

Organizing Nichiren Shū

As I said earlier, disciples of Nichiren Shōnin established 5 major lineages, competed with each other and did their best to propagate the teachings. They had branch lineages within the major lineages and communicated with each other. They were not completely different denominations. They were all part of the lineage of Nichiren Shōnin.

By the way, there were many debates about Nichiren Buddhism. One of the big issues was about Honja Shōretsu. It was about how we understand the relationship between the Shakumon, the first half and the Honmon, the last half of the Lotus Sutra. One group insisted that, although the Honmon was more important in teaching, both halves were important and we had to treat the entire Lotus Sutra as one. Another group said that Honmon was much more important than Shakumon. So, we didn't have to pay attention to the Shakumon as much. The first group was called Icchi-ha which means the "unity" group and the second group was called Shōretsu-ha which means those insisting on the "superiority of the Honmon and the inferiority of the Shakumon." It was a major controversy. Some groups seceded from some lineages and became independents. However, the Shōretsu-ha was a small minor group in comparison to the Icchi-ha even today.



The Tokugawa Shogunate collapsed and the Meiji Imperial government came into power in 1868. The Meiji government wanted Shintoism to be the national religion and oppressed Buddhism. The first policy for Buddhism was that the government ordered Buddhist schools to unite into only 7 schools. The many lineages of Nichiren Buddhism united into one and founded Nichiren Shū in 1872. However, they had just joined into one and they didn't establish a united doctrine or systems. All 7 denominations had the same big problems internally. It was a reckless policy. The government took notice and allowed them to be divided into some more groups. So, some temples joined together, left Nichiren Shū and became independent in 1874. They became the Nichiren Shū Shōretsu-ha. The majority of temples remained and became the Nichiren Shū Icchi-ha. They later worried that the term "Icchi-ha" would confuse people, as they didn't understand which school was the original and main lineage of Nichiren Buddhism. The name was changed back again to Nichiren Shū in 1876. This was the actual start of Nichiren Shū. They made up a temple tree system with Minobusan Kuonji, as the mother temple, 7 great

major temples, 57 major temples and other branch temples. On the other hand, Nichiren Shū Shōretsu-ha later divided into 5 groups of Kōmon-ha, Myōmanji-ha, Honjōji-ha, Happon-ha and Honryūji-ha. Myōmanji-ha joined into Nichiren Shū with Kōmon-ha in 1941, but became independent in 1947 and changed its name to Kenpon Hokke Shū. Honjōji-ha united into one with Happon-ha and Honryūji-ha in 1898 and created Hokke Shū, but became independent again in 1951 as Hokke Shū Jinmonryū. Happon-ha became Hokke Shū Honmonryū in 1951 after breaking away from the Honjōji-ha and Honryūji-ha. Myōrenji became the Honmon Hokke Shū after breaking away from Hokke Shū Honmonryū in 1951. Honryūji-ha became the Hokke Shū Shinmonryū in 1951 after breaking away from the Happon-ha and Honjōji-ha. The last one is the Kōmon-ha. This is the most complicated lineage. The Kōmon-ha became Nichiren Honmon Shū in 1899. Taisekiji and Shimojō Myōrenji became independent as Nichiren Shū Fuji-ha in 1900 and changed their name to Nichiren Shōshū in 1912. Other temples such as Kitayama Honmonji, Koizumi Kuonji, Yanase Jitsujōji, Hoda Myōhonji, Nishiyama

Honmonji and Kyōto Yōbōji joined Nichiren Shū in 1941. Kitayama Honmonji, Koizumi Kuonji and Yanase Jitsujōji are still Nichiren Shū temples now. Hoda Myōhonji left Nichiren Shū and joined Nichiren Shōshū in 1957, but became independent in 1995. Nishiyama Honmonji left Nichiren Shū and became independent in 1957. Kyōto Yōbōji also left Nichiren Shū and became Nichiren Honshū in 1950.

Conclusion

That was a brief survey of the history of Nichiren Shū. As you understand, the present organization of Nichiren Shū was not founded directly by Nichiren Shōnin. It was not easy to get to where we are and the process was very complex. However, this was a history of many disciples who tried their best to believe, practice, and get closer to Nichiren Shōnin. We must not disparage them. We have to cherish the results of their precious efforts as the rich history of our Nichiren Shū. We must be proud of it. The most important thing is that we should make every effort to create the next stage of Nichiren Shū history.

NEW BOOKS



Study Series of Nichiren Shōnin's Writings - No. 4 – Urabon Goshō is published

Nichiren Buddhist International Center has published No. 4 of The Study Series of Nichiren Shōnin's Writings, Urabon Goshō.

Honoring one's ancestors is a common tradition among many cultures around the world. In Japan, honoring the ancestors has long been observed through two traditional services: *Urabon* and *Segaki* to serve the Hungry Ghosts known as Gaki, or unfulfilled or unsatisfied beings, and are usually held together during summer months.

The origins of both *Urabon* and *Segaki* are based on the stories of two of Śākyamuni's Ten Great Disciples: Maudgalyāyana and Ananda, respectively. Maudgalyāyana was famous for his supernatural powers. This *Urabon Goshō* is about a world where he could not use his power.

Nichiren Shōnin shares Maudgalyāyana's story in his *Urabon Goshō*; however, this is not just a story revealing how Maudgalyāyana saved his mother. We hope that you read this goshō and consider how service to others can become an important part of your own life and practice.

Please ask your local Nichiren Buddhist temple, church or sangha to get your copy, or check NBIC website at www.nichiren-shu.org and click books & supplies.