

## The Mokushi-e Ceremony

Nichimoku Shonin, the Third High Priest of Nichiren Shoshu, was born to Niida Shigetsuna in Izu Province in 1260, the same year Nichiren Daishonin presented the "Rissho Ankoku Ron" to remonstrate with the Kamakura government. He was originally named Torao-maru and was the fifth of six sons.

In September 1272, at the age of twelve, he entered Enzo-bo Temple at Mount Soto (also called Mount Izu) near his home in order to study. In 1274, he witnessed a debate between Nikko Shonin, who was propagating Nichiren Daishonin's teachings in that area, and Shikibusozu, an influential priest of Enzo-bo Temple and master of the Shingon sect. As a result of the latter's sound defeat, Torao-maru converted to Nichiren Daishonin's teachings. Two years later, after studying under Nikko Shonin, Torao-maru was ordained at Mount Minobu. He was given the name Kunaikyo-no-Kimi, which was later changed to Nichimoku.

Nichimoku Shonin sincerely served the Daishonin while learning the profundities of his teachings. Legend has it that in his devoted service to Nichiren Daishonin, he carried buckets of water on his head from a stream to the temple at Mount Minobu several times a day. As a result, a permanent impression marked the spot on his head where the buckets had rested. Incidentally, this indentation appears on his painted image as a testimony to his devoted service.

Nichimoku Shonin, the Third High Priest of Nichiren Shoshu, was a strong man and a skilled debater, and there is a famous story regarding his excellent ability.

During the time Nichiren Daishonin stayed at Ikegami Munenaka's home on the way to Hitachi, a student priest at Mount Hiei named Nikaido-Ise Hoin came to see Nichiren Daishonin. Disregarding Nichiren Daishonin's poor health, Hoin challenged the Daishonin to a debate. Hoin, the son of a Kamakura government official, and hiding behind his father's authority, showed complete disrespect to Nichiren Daishonin. All of the disciples were surprised at Nikaido-Ise's lack of etiquette, but Nichiren Daishonin firmly replied: "It is an easy task for Nichimoku. Let him do it."

The debate lasted ten rounds and covered ten crucial points. In each round, Nichimoku Shonin reduced Hoin to submission on all points. Witnesses to the debate were astonished and deeply impressed. When Nichiren Daishonin heard the report, he smiled and said, "He has done well. It has happened just as I told you."

After Nichiren Daishonin's death, Nichimoku Shonin served Nikko Shonin as he had Nichiren Daishonin. In 1289, the Second High Priest left Mount Minobu because of a conflict with the major land owner of that area, Hagiri Sanenaga, who had committed four slanderous acts against the Daishonin's teachings. Nichimoku Shonin accompanied him to Mount Fuji, where the Head Temple Taisekiji now stands.

Nikko Shonin recognized the superiority of Nichimoku Shonin over the other priests, some of whom were Nichimoku Shonin's seniors, and appointed him the first of his six main disciples. After the completion of the Head Temple, Nikko Shonin bestowed the Ozagawari Gohonzon upon him. It is presently enshrined in the Grand Reception Hall at Taisekiji.

This special Gohonzon indicated the transfer of Nichiren Daishonin's teachings from Nikko Shonin to Nichimoku Shonin.

After it was presented, Nikko Shonin retired to the Omosu area and Nichimoku Shonin built Renzo-bo Temple at Taisekiji, which served as a place of worship as well as his residence. He protected the Head Temple as its chief until he officially became High Priest, in 1332, at which time Nikko Shonin transferred to him all of the treasures of that office, including the Dai-Gohonzon.

Today, Nichimoku Shonin is remembered for his spirit to practice and propagate True Buddhism even at the risk of his own life. According to one account, Nichimoku Shonin remonstrated more than forty-two times with the Kamakura government and the imperial court at Kyoto on behalf of Nichiren Daishonin and Nikko Shonin. In the entire history of Nichiren Shoshu, he was the first to exhort the imperial court.

In 1333, the Kamakura shogunate collapsed and imperial rule was restored. Nichimoku Shonin was seventy-four at the time and tried once again to accomplish the Kosen-rufu of Japan by exhorting the imperial court to take faith in True Buddhism, knowing that if it did, the entire country would follow suit.

In spite of his advanced age and the bad weather, he prepared to remonstrate with the imperial court. Then, in October, Nichimoku Shonin transferred all of Nichiren Daishonin's teachings to Nichido Shonin in case of his death.

He started for Kyoto in the mid-November snow. The journey and task proved too much for him and he fell seriously ill. He was taken through the icy cold and cutting wind to an inn at Tarui in Mino Province. Nichimoku Shonin died calmly, on November 15, 1333, while chanting Daimoku.

We observe Nichimoku Shonin's memorial to remind ourselves to wholeheartedly propagate Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism with every word and deed.

Because it was thought that November 15 was a particularly auspicious day, it was selected as a celebration of childhood as well. The Shichi-go-san, or Children's Ceremony, has been celebrated on November 15 in Japan since the seventeenth century. Originally, children aged three, five, and seven celebrated on their birthdays, but later this tradition was changed to November 15.

In Nichiren Shoshu, this children's ceremony has deep significance. Because children are the treasure of their parents and society, it is most important that they establish their connection to the Gohonzon of the Three Great Secret Laws. The children of Nichiren Shoshu believers must continue the heritage of their parents' faith in order to propagate the Daishonin's Buddhism worldwide. All children aged seven and under are invited to participate as attending parents join with the priest to pray for the prosperity and happiness of each child.

It is said that when the time for Kosen-rufu approaches, Nichimoku Shonin will appear to finish the task. Although his tenure as High Priest was very short, no one has matched his spirit in successfully challenging erroneous beliefs,

whether held by those in authority or everyday people.

This ceremony conveys our gratitude for his unparalleled effort in fourteenth-century Japan, and also carries with it our hopes for the children of tomorrow, that they may grow to be as skilled in Buddhism and as strong in faith, wisdom, and knowledge as Nichimoku Shonin when they assume the leadership in the future.