

## **Three Paths for Tendai Nuns**

**by Myosei Midoridawa**

In this article, I will briefly introduce the topic of Buddhism in Japan and then turn to the origins of the Tendai sect of Japanese Buddhism—the sect in which I am a nun. There are three avenues of expression available to women in this tradition and I will explore them, as well as some of the other important issues that Japanese nuns face today.

### **Overview of Japanese Buddhism**

The teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha were first introduced to the imperial court of Japan in 538 C.E. These teachings survived through the practice, compassion, and enlightenment of countless virtuous people. The teachings of Mahayana came from India, by way of China and Korea, to Japan. The teachings melded with existing indigenous traditions such as Confucianism in China and Shinto, the religion of ancient Japan.

Through the efforts of Prince Shotoku in 594 C. E., Buddhism began to flourish in Japan. By 600 C. E., Japanese students and scholars were beginning to travel to China to study. Prince Shotoku translated and lectured on the Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra, the Lotus Sutra, and the Shurangama Sutra, a scripture perceived as especially practical for women.

During the early medieval period, various schools of thought developed, including Madhyamika, Vijnaptimatratra, Kegon, Tendai, and Shingon. In the later medieval period, from about 1100 to 1300 C. E., additional Buddhist traditions spread among the general populace. Most of the mainstream sects of Buddhism that exist in Japan today had developed by the 1600s. Since its introduction to Japan 1400 years ago, the lamp of Dharma has survived the waves of history and continues to be transmitted today.

### **Tendai Sect of Japanese Buddhism**

The Tendai sect of Japanese Buddhism is based on the Tiantai Lotus teachings of the Chinese master Chih-i. It was founded about 804 C.E. by the Japanese master Saicho, known as Dengyo Daishi. He unified the complete teachings, Zen, precepts, and esoteric teachings to form the Four Teachings of Tendai. The Tendai sect gave birth to many religious leaders and had a deep and lasting influence on Japanese culture.

Today there are 5600 male and 1500 female religious specialists registered in the Tendai sect. Roughly one third of the female specialists practice as nuns and fall into three general groups: (1) daughters of temple priests, (2) priests' wives, and (3) lay people who leave household life to become nuns.

#### **Daughters of the Temple**

With the exception of just a few temples, most Tendai temples are hereditary. A son

usually follows his father as abbot of the temple. Sons frequently take precepts when they are children. But, in cases where there are no sons, or where the son decides not to take over the temple, an unmarried daughter will sometimes take precepts and undergo training to receive certification as a Dharma teacher from the sect headquarters, then return to take over her father's temple.

Sometimes a married daughter will be called upon to take over a temple. I know of two such cases; both occurred as a result of ill health that forced the father to curtail his duties. One woman, a friend of mine, had graduated from college with a degree in Tendai studies, married, had children, and led the life of a housewife. Another, who also had no brothers, graduated from college with a degree in education and taught at a kindergarten. She married and raised a family. She is now a kindergarten teacher, a wife, a mother, and is referred to as a nun. The husbands of both of these abbesses are laymen. Both families hope that their sons will eventually take over the temples.

In some cases when a daughter is called upon to take over her father's temple, her lay husband opts to become a priest and then takes over the duties. In other cases, an unmarried woman may marry the son from another temple and have him take over her father's temple.

### **Temple Wives (Jiteifujin)**

The wives of temple priests are known as jiteifujin. The word "jiteifujin" did not appear until 1872 when the government repealed laws forbidding clerics to marry. Until that time, only a few sects had permitted clerical marriage. Today temple wives perform many critical roles in supporting the temples. These roles may include managing the temple, handling the finances, working as the abbot's secretary, greeting and interacting with parishioners, proselytizing, and seeing to the education of the temples' successors.

Another development is that temple wives have begun receiving training to become nuns to meet the growing demands of their temple roles. As mentioned above, the Tendai sect has no training centers for nuns. One friend of mine, a temple wife, entered this difficult training while in her mid-40s at a Soto Zen training temple, although in the past this sect generally only accepted women who had left household life. Upon completing her training, this woman continued her duties as temple wife, but now, in addition, she also performs ceremonies, memorial services, funerals, and works as a teacher of Buddhist hymns. There are also examples of jiteifujin who became nuns after their husbands fell ill or passed away, when their sons were too young to take over the temple, or when they had no sons.

### **Lay Women who Become Nuns**

The third category is lay women who leave household life to become nuns. I fall into this category. Without a training center, Tendai nuns usually must find a teacher, take precepts, undergo training, and earn their Dharma teacher certificate on their own. After this, they generally return to their teachers' temples. Some go on to attend a university or college of their sect. Some open their own temple or become active in various ways. For instance, a famous author became a

nun and then an abbess of a temple. She continues to write and is active in spreading the Dharma. She works to rebuild and preserve many old Buddhist structures.

Because the headquarters of Tendai at Mt. Hiei was closed to women for many centuries, many temples and practices are not open to women. In many cases today, if a nun decides to follow the Buddhist path, she ends up working as an assistant to male priests. I work at a comparatively large temple in the Tokyo area where I am the only nun among ten priests. The temple is a tourist spot that attracts many visitors. It also has many parishioners and is a prayer temple that draws the faithful. My work consists of helping the abbot and other senior priests, cleaning the temple grounds, and looking after parishioner's needs. Throughout the year, numerous ceremonies are held, so I am always busy. On many days, my work continues into the night. I also study Buddhist hymns and chanting, and study vegetarian cooking at a nearby Rinzai Zen temple.

### **Out of the Shadows**

With this understanding of the different categories of Tendai nuns, we can begin to consider some of the issues and needs of nuns in Japan today. First, we can see that, without a network of communication between these religious women, there is an absence of information about them. According to the Nihonshoki, which was written in 720 C.E., nuns played an active part in Japanese life for centuries, but exactly what that means has been lost over time. Research continues to focus on male priests and monks. The work of the nuns and temple wives remains in the shadows. In fact, knowledge about them appears to have become twisted and misunderstood over the centuries.

There is a need for more research, such as the work of Professor Emeritus Barbara Ruch of Columbia University, who has spent 30 years studying pre-modern Japanese history and culture, especially the history of nuns. She has worked tirelessly to see that traditions and cultural artifacts are preserved. For those of us now walking the path, the history of those who went before us is a treasure that shines brightly and can show us the way. It is important to bring these shadowy areas to light, so that we may understand what is of value and be able to pass it on to the next generation.

The old image of Japanese nuns as women who have fled to escape the unpleasantness of the world, who lead lives that are closed off, isolated, and of questionable social value, needs to be rethought. This archaic evaluation of nuns, steeped in ignorance, not only deprives us of valuable knowledge about religious women's history, but also threatens the existence of some temples that are run by nuns. We need to consider the manner of succession in caring for temples. Many temples with aging abbesses will be taken over by males if no other provisions are made. Without a clear understanding of the contributions of dedicated religious women, there will be no nuns to act as successors and the temples will be taken over by male priests.

Recently a special TV program aired that focused on Japanese imperial nunneries in the Kyoto area. This program covered the history of these nunneries and was the first time such material has been made public. A new image of nuns emerged. It was an image of nuns who had for centuries preserved such cultural artifacts as ritual instruments, Buddhist art, toys, and other objects of Japanese culture. Further, it was an image of women who had followed the Buddhist

teachings and led pure lives, supporting themselves. The importance and meaning of their lives was evident throughout the program and had a great impact on viewers. On the one hand, nuns were seen teaching ancient traditional arts such as flower arranging, tea ceremony, and calligraphy. On the other hand, they were shown keeping up with the times by managing kindergartens and student dorms. These images revealed nuns not only as people who lead lives immersed in Buddhist doctrine, but also as valuable preservers of traditional culture and active members of the community. We need to do more to deepen and expand this understanding, not only for our nuns but also for the public.

Finally, we must begin to reach out and expand the flow of understanding beyond our sister nuns and the Japanese people. We must reach out to the Buddhist community abroad and share this knowledge with others who hold similar perspectives. In today's society, where confusion seems to grow daily, we must join together with Buddhists everywhere to clear our hearts and minds, return to the source, be better people, and respect the precious gift of life. Sakyamuni said that our own human happiness is up to each one of us. It is in our hearts and we walk the path together.