

The Reforming Abbot Myonyo

by Rev. Dr. Alfred Bloom

In the last several years, we all have been considering Hongwanji's future in Hawaii and the world. Efforts to envision the future are important for the vitality of the movement at each period of its history. We recently celebrated the 500th anniversary of Rennyō's death and became more aware of his vision of Shin Buddhism as the Restorer of the sect that made it one of the major traditions in Japan.

In modern times there was a reform effort in the Nishi Hongwanji led by Abbot Myonyo (Kouson 1850-1903) during the Meiji period (1868-1911). This year marks the centennial of his death. Though he failed to bring thorough reform, we hear little of his achievements and efforts on behalf of the Hongwanji. He attempted to position Hongwanji to enter modern times.

In the pre-Restoration period, Myonyo strongly supported the forces working to bring about the restoration of Emperor Meiji in 1868, working with the Choshu, Tosa and Satsuma clans to overthrow the Shogunate and restore the Emperor. The Nishi Hongwanji provided considerable financial and human resources to this effort, while the Higashi Hongwanji was unfortunately allied with the Shogunate.

Myonyo devoted his life to the construction of a sangha in harmony with the development of the new Imperial government. The government implemented a policy of Imperial Absolutism and attempted to strengthen its hold on the people by establishing an office for teaching Shinto as the national ideology in 1872. This was known as the Daikyōin or Center (to promote) the Great Teaching, Shinto, focused on reverence for the Emperor and loyalty to the nation.

All Japanese religions, including Buddhist, Shinto and popular organizations, cooperated in its mission. Facing anti-Buddhist reactions in society following the official separation of Buddhism and Shinto by the Meiji government and the increased propagation of Christianity, Buddhist leaders realized that this institution undermined Buddhism through its stress on Shinto. Led by Hongwanji, under Myonyo, four Shin sects withdrew. After only two and a half years the institution was abolished in 1874. As a consequence there was more pressure to establish religious freedom in Japan.

Prior to the restoration of the Emperor there were demands among lower level clergy for reform of the Shin sect. During the time of Abbot Kounyō (Koutaku 1798-1871), Myonyo's father, calls for reform were sparked by the occasion of the 600th anniversary of the death of Shinran in 1862. At that time priests of subordinate temples clamored for reforms but they did not have a clear program. Later Abbot Myonyo proposed in a secret letter to Yuuishidō Tetsunen that they gather 50-100 like-minded people and within one or two years initiate a great reform in the Hongwanji. He embraced the dreams of the political priests from Chōshū. The Hongwanji, however, had several factions which included an Imperial government wing and a progressive government wing. From 1879 these groups leaned more to the left or progressive side.

When Myonyo became Abbot, he sent people abroad to study religious conditions in other countries. Based on their observations, he supported religious freedom and opposed government control of temples. He brought about the Hongwanji's resignation from the Daikyōin, mentioned above. He worked so hard that he took ill, but when he recovered, he singlemindedly devoted himself to revive scholarship and put energy into propagation.

Myonryo laid out sixteen points for reforming and reorganizing the Hongwanji. He ordered the reshuffling of the system of regulations and temple law. On the occasion of the raising of the ridgepole in the construction of the Tsukiji Betsuin, Myonryo by a simple order abolished several administrative offices in the Mother temple's organization.

He abolished the rigid hierarchy of branch temples by eliminating the ranks of subordinate temples and directly involving local temples throughout the country in governing the Hongwanji. A legislative assembly was established.

Myonryo completed the establishment of the fundamental administration of the sect. In addition, he stressed propagation, abolished the pictures of former Abbots from the five objects of worship which included the Amida image, Shinran's portrait, seven great teachers, Prince Shotoku and line of abbots. He eliminated the Hall bands (*han*) and at the same time made standard the black robe, black kesa and yellow kesa for students. All were to be equal. He proposed the consolidation of temples, changes in the Otani Mausoleum, while maintaining the hereditary lineage of the Otani family as caretakers of the Mausoleum. There were to be two co-heads of the sect, the chief Abbot (*kanchou*) and resident priest (*jushoku*) who were to be elected by all the subordinate temples. Their qualifications and candidacy were to be publicly chosen from ten of the most respected leaders.

The Honzan, head temple, was to be relocated to Tokyo. Determined amounts of funds were designated for Honzan finances, for schools and for propagation. Excluding Honzan wealth and treasures, other lands and resources were to be sold and the cash was to be used for the fixed finances. Except for the personal finances of the Abbot and various family treasures, everything was to be sold to help the transfer of the Honzan. Among the various betsuins, certain ones remain such as Nishiyama, Yamashina, Yoshizaki and Saginomori in Wakayama, while others were abolished and, like the other institutions, the resources were to be sold to expedite the move. What is outstanding in these efforts is Myonryo's efforts to democratize the sect, earlier than any other sect and to make the Honzan less opulent while using resources to further the sect's teaching.

In 1888, Myonryo set up a society to defend and support the Dharma (Gojikai, the same as our term for member) relying on it for sufficient funds for the teaching. He also built schools, orphanages and other social welfare facilities. In 1900 he established the Greater Japan Buddhist Welfare Society Foundation and solidified the basis for social welfare work. He encouraged other productive efforts, working for social reformation. Particularly, he paid attention to prison chaplaincy, propagation among the military and overseas missions. We should note that he supported the opening of the Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii and on the mainland, as well in other parts of Asia. It is to be noted that his daughter, Kujo Takeko, later carried on his social welfare activity, even undermining her own health.

Despite his modernizing efforts, very few of Myonryo's proposed changes took effect. The radicalism of some of the plans stirred strong opposition among the traditional hierarchy. As a result, Myonryo turned his attention to foreign propagation which resulted particularly in the establishment of Hongwanji in Hawai'i. Even though he was not successful in overcoming the entrenched status system of Hongwanji, he did further its modernization and provides an example of a new spirit in Hongwanji. He offers us a model for our considerations today.

Addendum

Myonryo had seven children, four boys and three daughters. Most outstanding was Kozui who succeeded him and is famous for the Otani archaeological expeditions to Asia. Kozui was a popular speaker and collections of his sermons are found in many of our temple

libraries. Myonyo's daughter Lady Takeko Kujo (1887-1928) is noted for her social work. She lived only 42 years but struggled on behalf of women. She founded the Fujinkai movement. During the Great Earthquake in 1923 she engaged in rescue efforts, building the Asoka Hospital as a representative of the spirit of King Asoka of ancient India. Her labors led to her early death.

Myonyo is also famous for his poetry, reaching 20,000 verses. On the seventh anniversary of his death, his son Kyuonyo-Kozui published a volume *Collection of Six Flowers* (Rokke shu). He also kept diaries.

SOURCES: *Hongwanji-shi*, vol. 3; *Nihon Bukkyo-shi*, vol. 3; Mori Ryukichi, *Hongwanji-shi*.