

Nichiren Shu News

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RETURN OF THE DRAGON

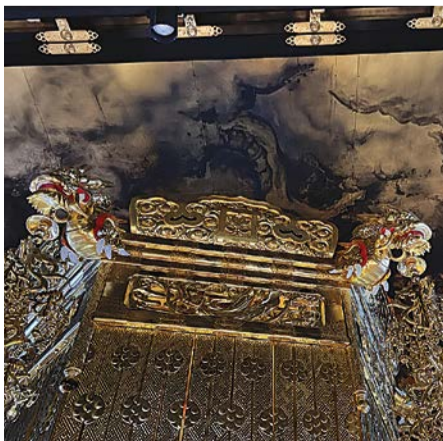
Text and Images by Kanjo Bassett

It was a very tough winter for the priests working at Keishin-in Temple on the top of Shichimensan. There was so much heavy snow that it snapped utility poles. Repairs couldn't be done until the spring. Chief Priest Kochi Uchino described the scene: "We were without power and pumps for running water. All we could do was scoop up the snow and melt it over a wood fire. We had never experienced anything like it."

Nothing in recent memory prepared them for an endless string of natural calamities: unusually heavy snow, multiple typhoons passing directly over the mountain, and torrential rains washing out huge swaths of the upper trail, the main path to Keishin-in for pilgrims and supplies. Shichimensan is a holy mountain for Nichiren Buddhists with a long history dating back more than 800 years and also has roots as a holy place of practice for wandering Shugendo mystics.

It seemed like cruel irony, all this after the Edo-period Keishin-in main hall had undergone a long restoration. 100 years of grime and soot were carefully removed with new gold leaf applied so that the main altar enshrining a statue of the protective goddess Shichimen glittered again in the dim light. There was also a magnificent new painted ceiling. The old soot-covered painted ceiling with its protective Dragon, dating from 1802, was carefully removed. Each four-meter-long board was wrapped and taken down the mountain to a safe warehouse in the Kuonji Temple compound in Minobu, where plans would be made to do something with it eventually.

The calamities continued. The popular Monk's Race Trail Run was canceled due to the washed out roads, then washed out trails, then nearly undone again by the COVID pandemic. But the faithful pilgrims who continued to climb Shichimensan told Rev. Uchino, "You should not have removed the old Dragon ceiling, it was a 'kekkaï' protecting the mountain."



The new Dragon ceiling is situated directly above the Chief Priest's seat in Keishin-in's main hall.



Rev. Yuji Komatsu, the current Chief Priest of Keishin-in Temple, stands with the returning Dragon image.

Kekkaï is a tricky word to translate from Japanese into English. It originally comes from Shinto, as do all esoteric Japanese Buddhist practices from Shingon to Tendai. Some of the Tendai esoteric lineage can still be seen in Nichiren Shu practices. It's a kind of spiritual barrier, to protect or keep 'bad things' out, or sometimes keep humans out. The definition of what constitutes a bad thing also varies, because it depends on how humans define bad, in their very limited and selfish ways, at any given moment. Protective deities see things differently. Nevertheless, the old Dragon ceiling was not only protecting the pilgrims and priests, it was also protecting Shichimensan.

A simpler explanation came much later from a friend who was raised in a Shinto household, "You mean to tell me the priests of Keishin-in didn't know that? I guess the ignorance of Buddhist priests knows no bounds. The Japanese dragon is

a completely different creature from the Chinese dragon, far back in Shinto lore. Priests used to know these things."

With no relief from endless calamities, Rev. Uchino thought about asking for the old ceiling back but didn't know how to take up the subject with Kuonji, the most important temple in Nichiren Shu. Maybe they had already made plans. Then a terrible electrical storm hit.

"It was the worst, most intense lightning storm I've ever experienced," Rev. Uchino said. "Cloud to ground, bolt after bolt, dirt flying in the air. That's when I made up my mind to call Kuonji. I was just about to dial when the phone rang. It was Kuonji calling. They wanted to return the old ceiling." The carefully wrapped Dragon ceiling boards were taken out of storage and carried back up Shichimensan, half-way up on a small wire lift, and then carried by hand the rest of the way.



Shichimensan is famous for its sunrise view of Mt. Fuji. Practitioners chant the Odaimoku as each day begins.

But there was no way to put the old ceiling back in its original place, as the new ceiling was in place. Rev. Uchino consulted with the Miya-daiku. Miya-daiku are a special breed of Japanese carpenters, shrine carpenters, known for the nobility of their craft. Only they know how to construct wooden shrine and temple buildings in the traditional manner, without nails or other modern techniques. As chance would have it, the Miya-daiku had re-hung the big new main hall re-dedication sign, moving it from the left wall to the front. "The sign was mostly hidden by the big paper lanterns hanging from the ceiling on that side of the temple. We decided to move it to the front, but it was a difficult job and just barely fit.

"As luck would have it, when the old ceiling boards came back the Miya-daiku pointed to the now-vacant left wall and said, 'It will fit there.'" And it did, a perfect fit. As Rev. Uchino explained, "the moment they finished installing the old ceiling, the weather returned to peace and quiet like somebody had pressed a button." The kekkaï Dragon ceiling was back on the job, completing a mysterious chain of events.

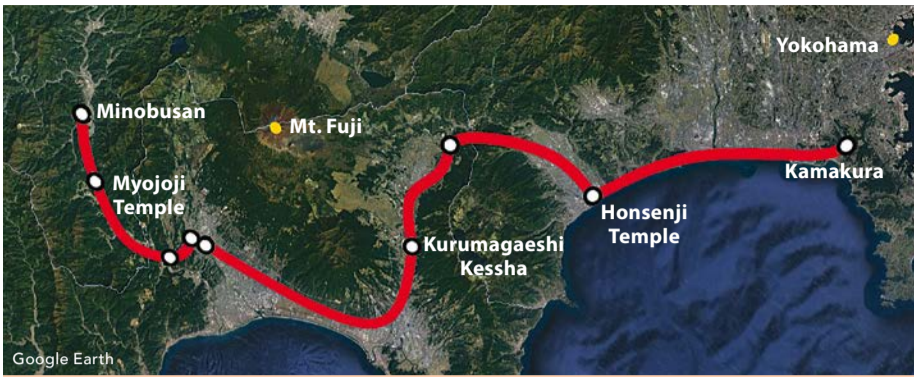
After it was all over, having served a longer term than usual, nearly four years instead of the normal three years, Rev. Uchino reflected on the adventure. "I don't want to criticize the former Chief Priest, but there wasn't any thought given to preserving the classic art of Keishin-in's main hall when repainting the ceiling."

It is a very nice story, just like a lot of Nichiren Shonin legends, but they are important beyond being true or not. It's not superstition either. Nichiren Shonin put enormous energy into teaching the power of belief. Belief in the Dharma, belief in the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, belief that Eternal Buddha is always with us and in us. I think it's the power of belief, belief in the Dharma, belief that there is a Buddha in you, that brings people to Shichimensan, where they are watched over by the Goddess Shichimen and protected by the powerful Dragon of the Dharma.



Rev. Kochi Uchino was responsible for restoring the Edo-era Dragon ceiling to Keishin-in's main hall.

FOLLOWING NICHIREN'S JOURNEY TO MINOBUSAN



Nichiren Shonin took a southern route to Minobusan as there was considerable political instability in the Kofu area to the north. This route had more followers and a stone bridge for crossing the Fuji River.



Many of the Kokusai Fukuyoshi (Overseas Ministers) gathered on May 15 at the Head Office of Nichiren Shu to discuss their missionary work before following our Founder's journey from Kamakura to Minobusan.



Etsuko Kobayashi takes care of Kurumagaeshi Kessha. It enshrines an Edo-era statue of Nichiren that was originally enshrined at the peak of Mt. Fuji.



Myojoji was the first temple in the Minobu area (Koshu) to convert to Nichiren Shonin's teachings.



Prof. Shincho Mochizuki led the tour to Minobusan.



Hosenji Temple was built on the site of the first place Nichiren Shonin and his entourage stayed overnight on their journey to Minobusan.

By Rev. Kosei Uchida

The Kokusai Fukuyoshi (Overseas Ministers) Conference was held on May 15-17.

On the first day, Head Office updated the present situations regarding the various international missions. This was followed by a lecture titled "Following the Footsteps of Nichiren Shonin" given by Prof. Shincho Mochizuki of Minobusan University so that the priests could learn about the route Nichiren Shonin took from Kamakura to Minobusan.

The next day, May 16, everyone got on a bus to trace Nichiren's footsteps to Minobusan and to attend the memorial service for the 750th anniversary of our Founder entering Minobusan. The first place they visited was Hosenji Temple in Sakawa, Odawara City.

On May 12, 1274, walking 40 km from Kamakura, Nichiren Shonin with his disciples arrived at Sakawa (Odawara City in Kanagawa Prefecture). They found the Sakawa River swollen so much that it would be impossible to cross. They were totally exhausted and at a loss as to what to do. Then an old man came out of a house and beckoned them to come inside. Following him, they entered the house, but inside there was just a stone statue of Jizo (Ksitigarbha) in the house. They stayed overnight and safely crossed the river the following day. People say that Jizo must have transformed into an old man to guide them to a place for rest. The Guide Jizo is enshrined in Hosenji Temple.

The next stop was Kurumagaeshi Kessha at Susono City in Shizuoka Prefecture, where Nichiren Shonin stayed on May 14, 1274. No priest resides here. Mrs. Etsuko Kobayashi, a local resident, has preserved this special place with great care. Next to the hall is a stone monument with the Odaimoku carved in it that says, "Our Founder stayed here on May 14, 1274 on the way to Minobusan from Kamakura. His disciples and followers stayed here on October 23, 1282, when they carried the ashes of their master, Nichiren Shonin to Minobusan."

The final stop was Myojoji Temple at Nambu Town in Yamanashi Prefecture, where Nichiren Shonin stayed on May 16, 1274. This temple was previously a Shingon temple, Myorakuji Temple. However, after a lively debate with the temple's head priest, Nichiren was able to convert him to the Lotus Sutra, later changing the temple name to Myojoji. There is also a special well here called, "Hanatsurube Well." It is said that Nichiren placed a flower stem in a bucket, offered prayer, and wrote a talisman with the special water for a pregnant woman who was sick. As a result, she was cured and delivered a healthy baby girl.

The Kokusai Fukuyoshi stayed overnight at Hinosawa-bo, a temple lodge in Minobusan. Niko Shonin, one of the Six Senior Disciples, established Hinosawa-bo for his accommodation so that he could take care of Nichiren Shonin's grave. Niko Shonin became the second chief priest of Minobusan Kuonji Temple in 1285.

On May 17, 2023, before attending the memorial service for the 750th anniversary of our Founder entering Minobusan, the Kokusai Fukuyoshi paid a visit to the Gobyosho (memorial to Nichiren Shonin) and to a monument erected to honor all of the former overseas missionaries.

The Gohonzon, Most Venerable One, which Nichiren Shonin wrote two months after he entered Minobusan and is now kept at Sogenji Temple in Chiba Prefecture, was hung out for this special service. After the service, everyone had an opportunity to see Nichiren Shonin's writing, "A Letter to Lord Toki" in a treasure house of the basement of the Main Hall of Kuonji Temple. Nichiren Shonin wrote this to Lord Toki Jonin on May 17, 1274, "I left Kamakura on the 12th day of the fifth month and arrived at Sakawa on the same day, Takenoshita on the 13th, Kurumagaeshi on the 14th, Omiya on the 15th, Nambu on the 16th, and arrived at Minobu on the 17th today. I have not yet decided whether or not to live in Minobu, but the atmosphere of the mountain is on the whole comforting to me, so I intend to stay here for a while."

In following his journey, the Kokusai Fukuyoshi were reminded that they are commissioned to realize Nichiren Shonin's greatest vow to spread the Wonderful Dharma far and wide all over the world.

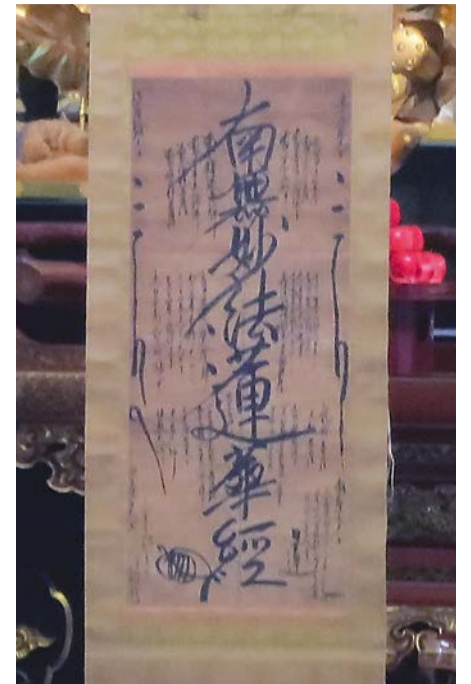


Bishop Shokai Kanai spoke to all of the Kokusai Fukuyoshi at the Gobyosho, memorial to Nichiren.

CELEBRATING THE 750TH ANNIVERSARY OF NICHIREN'S ENTRANCE INTO MINOBUSAN

By Rev. Shoda Kanai

The Kokusai Fukyoshi (Overseas Ministers), were invited to attend a special occasion to mark the 750th anniversary of when Nichiren Shonin first entered Minobusan on May 17. The day before was spent visiting three distinct locations where Nichiren stayed on his five-day journey from the capital city of



Kamakura to Minobusan. The highlight of the trip was the special service to commemorate the day when Nichiren first entered Minobusan.

The special day started with a visit to pay our respects towards Nichiren at his memorial, the Gobyosho. There Bishop Shokai Kanai shared a story about how he came to hear the Odaimoku and Lotus Sutra. Many years ago, after praying at the Gobyosho and walking through the trees and river, he imagined that he could have been here once at the time of Nichiren lodging at Minobusan. It was said that there were many monkeys in the trees at that time. Maybe he was one of those monkeys listening to Nichiren chant the Odaimoku. He recalled that when he was little, he had features and acted like a monkey according to his older brother and sister. Because of being able to hear the Odaimoku, now is the time to be reborn and help spread the Dharma to others.

Next, we all moved to pay our respects to the memorial honoring all the deceased Kokusai Fukyoshi. Again, Bishop Kanai relayed a story about how he was recruited to become an Overseas Minister with the caveat of being willing to leave his ashes in a foreign land. That amount of dedication was required. Yearning to return to Japan was not conducive for propagation. After all these years, just like Nichiren found that his spirit resided at Minobusan, maybe this dedication of completely staying overseas is not ideal. Maybe returning to Minobusan, just like Nichiren did upon his passing, is a quandary that he has yet to resolve.

As the time for the service to start quickly approached, we all walked up to the main hall, Kuonji Temple. We arrived just as the Nichiren Shu Youth Association members started to gather in front of the main hall. They were enthusiastically hitting their *uchiwa daiko* (hand drums) to the chanting of Odaimoku. As more and more members arrived, the sound of their chanting began to reverberate off the surrounding buildings and mountains.

252 Nichiren Shu Youth Association members walked the same route from Kamakura to Minobusan all the while chanting and beating their drums. The



journey took five days. Upon entering Minobu town, they walked through the Sanmon Gate, and then proceeded to climb the 287 steps known as *Bodaitei*. The day was becoming hot, but the exhausted members continued to chant Odaimoku vigorously.

After finding our seats in preparation of the start of the main service, a special *Gohonzon* was un-scrolled for everyone to see. This *Gohonzon* is known as the *Muryo Sekai* (World) *Gohonzon*, which was on loan from Sogenji Temple in Chiba Prefecture. It is said that this *Gohonzon* was not for the purpose of teaching but as a "Permanent *Gohonzon* for Minobusan."

This special service was conducted by Archbishop of Nichiren Shu Nissho Kanno and attended by various priests and representatives from around Japan. Once the service commenced, we could feel the reverence of why Nichiren picked Minobusan as his final resting place. One could feel the serenity of the surrounding mountains and rivers



during the service. Then during *Shodai* (Odaimoku chanting) the Nichiren Shu Youth Association members who sat along the side of the hall, began hitting their drums in unison. The power from the chanting and drums reverberated throughout my body. I was in awe that the sound from chanting Odaimoku could create such a wonderful and impactful experience. I am sure the other Kokusai Fukyoshi felt the same way.

With service complete, we had the opportunity to view the special *Gohonzon* closely, but we could not due to time constraints. I was able to meet some of my fellow priest friends from the Youth Association and from my time in Aragyodo. It was nice to be able to

visit with them even for a short while. To see their smiling faces brought joy to my heart.

The celebration of Nichiren's entrance into Minobusan does not end at this service. It is said that after arriving on May 17, it took another month to prepare a proper lodging for him. So, another grand ceremony is scheduled for June 17, this time with the focus on lay supporters rather than just priests. A couple of overseas pilgrimages are scheduled to attend this second service.

If you have yet to visit Minobusan, please do so when you can. You will find that it is a special place which will help deepen your faith and connect with our founder, Nichiren Shonin.

LOTUS JEWELS

It is said that a sage is not affected by the eight winds: profit, loss, slander, fame, praise, censure, pain and pleasure. This means that a sage neither takes delight in his crowning hour nor grieves during depths of despair. Those who are unaffected by the eight winds are protected by the heavenly deities without fail, but not so for those who carry an irrational grudge against their lord, no matter how hard they pray.

—Nichiren Shonin, A Reply to Lord Shijo Kingo, Shijo Kingo-dono Gohenji (ST 245)

We are often distracted by the seemingly random disturbances in the world we share with other beings. Nichiren reminds us that by cultivating minds of respect and sincere intentions for the benefit of all beings, especially those who oppress us, we will find help and protection from unexpected sources.

—Rev. Shinkyō Warner

TEMPLE EVENTS

Kannon Temple of Nevada Rev. Shoda Kanai Desert Wildflowers

This past winter has been very wet here. There were many rainy days with storms coming through the valley almost on a weekly basis.

Because of all this rain, some areas of Nevada are no longer in drought condition, with other areas at a reduced risk. Plus, the snowmelt from the Rocky Mountains feeding into Lake Mead, from which Las Vegas gets 90 percent of its water, is set to raise the lake's water level by 22 feet (6.7 meters) by the end of September!

With this abundance of rain, the desert is blooming. Dormant wildflower seeds that had laid waiting over the past couple of years are now ready to blossom. This transformation is a spectacular site to see. This once barren land is now full of color! I have ventured out to see for myself. I need to see this once-in-a-few-years event.



Keep in mind that everyone you meet has their own Buddha seed. And just like those dormant desert wildflowers, that Buddha seed will bloom when the time is right. Let us all pay homage to everyone so that their Buddha seed will blossom soon.

Buffalo Enkyoji Temple Mamiko Cederman

Cherry Blossom Festival

On April 29 and 30, our temple had a booth at the Buffalo Cherry Blossom Festival at the Buffalo Museum in New York. The cherry blossoms in the Japanese Garden behind the museum were in full bloom. These cherry trees were donated by Kanazawa City, Ishikawa prefecture, Japan, which is the sister city of Buffalo.

Members from our temple helped manage the booth where Omamori (amulets), tea ceremony, and Aikido were introduced. Many of the visitors were interested in Buddhism and Japanese



culture. It was a great opportunity to propagate Nichiren Shu Buddhism and introduce our temple.

Myohosan Rengeji Temple (Jakarta) Rev. Ervinna Myoufu

Southeast Asia Pilgrimage

Twenty people, including 17 members from Malaysia and Sri Lanka, accompanied by three priests, Revs. Kangyo Noda, Yuon Ito and I, went on a pilgrimage to Japan. Our trip started from Kyoto on June 12 where we stayed at my master's temple, Myokenji. The following day, we visited Enryakuji Temple and Jokoin Temple, both in Hieizan, where our Founder had studied for 12 years. On June 14, we headed to Nagoya to attend the installation ceremony of Rev. Yuon Ito as head priest of Nagoya Kuonji Temple. This was the first time many of our members were able to see a Japanese Nichiren Shu priest's installation ceremony and banquet. Everyone was amazed and cherished this experience.

On our way to Minobusan, we dropped by to see Rev. Myosho Obata, a former Kokusai Fukuyoshi, at Chotokuji Temple in Okazaki City. We joined the grand ceremony at Minobusan Kuonji Temple on June 18, commemorating Nichiren's entrance into Minobusan. The attendees



were awed at the grandeur of Kuonji and felt a deeper connection with Nichiren Shonin. The following days, June 19 and 20, we all hiked to the top of Shichimensan. Although many were anxious about the physical challenge, we all made it up and down without any injuries. This was a true blessing from Nichiren Shonin! Through this trip, the members' faith seemed to grow stronger by seeing, touching, and feeling the atmosphere and environment of Minobusan!

Renkoji Temple, Italy Rev. Shoryo Tarabini

Arrival of a Statue of Nichiren Shonin in Italy

In 2014, we began a campaign to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the birth of Nichiren Shonin, by presenting the first 100 of 800 cherry trees to the city of Cereseto, which hosts Renkoji Temple. Today, we have planted 660 cherry trees and have a little more to go to reach our goal. However, as we planted trees, I began to feel that to truly celebrate these 800 years and honor Nichiren Shonin, we should erect a statue of him in our town. In this way, people will learn about Nichiren Shonin, his teachings and Nichiren Shu. It seemed an impossible dream, but I prayed every day to somehow make it come true.

While on a pilgrimage to Minobusan in 2019, I attended morning services together with some members from Italy. Venerable Nichiyu Mochida, the Chief Administrator of the Head Temple who was leading the service that morning, saw me and asked us to come to his office afterwards. During the meeting, we were surprised and overjoyed to hear that Rev. Mochida wished to offer us a resin model of a two-meter-high statue of Nichiren Shonin. We were overwhelmed with emotion and gratitude. All we would have to do was cast a bronze version from it. We shared the wonderful news with our congregation. Little by little, it seemed as though our dreams of erecting the first statue of Nichiren Shonin in Italy (and all of Europe), were coming true!

When the statue arrived months later, we were even more surprised to find out that the resin statue that we had been waiting for was instead sent in bronze! This rare gift was made possible by generous donations made by Rev. Mochida and other Nichiren Shu priests in Japan.

We began preparations for making a base to erect the statue. However, a couple of months later in 2020, the pandemic began in full force in Italy (the first of the western nations to be affected by it), and everything came to a grinding halt. Restrictions lasted for nearly two and a half years. But as soon as they were lifted, we resumed preparations for erecting the statue. The first place we planned for it

was deemed too susceptible to vandalism. Realizing our first responsibility was to protect this image of our founder, we decided to place it in front of our temple in the temple garden.

Some of our temple members are expert builders and assisted in making the base to support the two-meter-high (6 feet, 7 inches), 600-kilogram (1,325-pound) bronze statue. It took three months to complete. We made it of reinforced concrete faced with Sardinian marble. The words "Rissho Ankoku" (A peaceful and stable country through the establishment of the True Dharma), were copied from Nichiren Shonin's handwriting (from the *Rissho Ankoku Ron*) and carved into black marble inserted in the front of the base. The statue was placed on its base on April 29. As you enter the temple, you are now greeted by Nichiren Shonin himself together with his own words and dreams to create a stable, peaceful and harmonious world. After the statue was erected, another miracle occurred, the 750th anniversary ceremony commemorating our Founder first entering Minobusan was held on May 17, and it was announced that our statue would be considered one of the official events of the 750th anniversary. On September 10, Rev. Mochida along with other prominent Nichiren Shu priests will come to perform the Eye-Opening Ceremony. This is a blessing not only for our temple, but for all Nichiren Shu believers and followers of Nichiren Shonin throughout Italy and Europe. We feel immense gratitude. This statue will mark a profound turning point in the propagation of Nichiren Shu in Italy and all of Europe, establishing more temples, clergy and believers throughout the continent in the future.



Calendar for August–September 2023

AUG 13-16 Obon (Traditional Lunar Calendar)

AUG 15 Memorial Ceremony for Victims and Unknown War Dead and Prayer for World Peace at Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery, Sponsored by Nichiren Shu

AUG 27 Matsubagayatsu Persecution Memorial Day

SEP 3 Memorial for Niko Shonin

SEP 12 Tatsunokuchi Persecution Memorial Day

SEP 17 Memorial for Nisshin Shonin

SEP 18-19 Grand Ceremony at Shichimensan

SEP 20-26 Autumn Higan (Equinox) Week

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