



Refuting the Erroneous Teachings of Nichiren Shoshu

Background

Learning about the authoritarian nature of religious clergy as seen in the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood and refuting them on the basis of Nichiren Daishonin's writings will give us an excellent opportunity to deepen our correct understanding of Nichiren Buddhism and reaffirm the importance of the SGI community in widespread propagation. The following essay outlines the background and key points of the priesthood's recent aberrant behavior. The SGI-USA Study Department recommends that this material be discussed at a district- or chapter-level meeting before the Buddhist Learning Review in October.

Nichiren Shoshu is a school of Nichiren Buddhism based in Shizuoka, Japan, with six branch temples in the United States. The Soka Gakkai International was affiliated with Nichiren Shoshu until it was excommunicated in 1991.


The Soka Gakkai, since its inception, had been dedicated to protecting the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood. Since the end of World War II, the Soka Gakkai had supported the impoverished priesthood and donated more than 350 temples.

Although there was friction at times between the Soka Gakkai, a community of Nichiren Buddhists dedicated to widespread propagation, and the priesthood, whose chief concern was to maintain its clerical authority, the Soka Gakkai strove to maintain and develop a harmonious unity between laity and priesthood. In the late 1970s, some priests

started to openly denounce the Soka Gakkai, encouraging Gakkai members to join the temple parish, but through the Soka Gakkai's efforts, the relationship was later restored.

In 1990, however, Nikken Abe, then the high priest of Nichiren Shoshu, implemented a plan to disband the Soka Gakkai and control its membership. In December of that year, the priesthood revised its regulations so as to justify dismissing Soka Gakkai leaders, including SGI President Ikeda, from lay leadership positions in the temple parish. The Soka Gakkai sought to resolve this conflict through dialogue, but the priesthood refused.

In 1991, the priesthood stopped conferring Gohonzon—the object of devotion in Nichiren Buddhism—to new Soka Gakkai members. In November of the same year, the priesthood unilaterally excommunicated the Soka Gakkai.



In 1993, the Soka Gakkai decided to confer upon its members worldwide Gohonzon derived from a Gohonzon transcribed by Nichikan, an eighteenth-century restorer of Nichiren Buddhism. This decision reaffirmed the Soka Gakkai's commitment to widespread propagation as a community of practitioners directly linked to Nichiren Daishonin. Since then, the SGI has been furthering a global spread of Nichiren Buddhism. The accomplishment of such widespread propagation, despite the priesthood's interference, is a testament to the SGI's correctness in both teaching and intent.

Refuting the Priesthood's Wrongdoings

1) Planning to Destroy Kosen-rufu

In November 1991, the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood sent a "Notice of Excommunication" to the Soka Gakkai containing the priesthood's repeated claim that because the Soka Gakkai was not following the high priest, it was conducting itself

in a manner unbecoming a Nichiren Shoshu lay organization. This claim was made, however, with no substantiation whatsoever in terms of doctrine based on Nichiren's writings.

Kosen-rufu, or widespread propagation, is Nichiren's mandate for all practitioners of his teaching. Throughout his writings, he stresses the importance of working to fulfill "the great desire for widespread propagation" ("The Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life," *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 217). In *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings*, Nichiren states, "The 'great vow' refers to the propagation of the Lotus Sutra" (p. 82).

For this reason, since its founding, the Soka Gakkai has been dedicated to spreading Nichiren Buddhism for people's genuine happiness and the lasting peace of the entire world—through making Nichiren's "great vow" our own.

The priesthood's attempt to destroy the Soka Gakkai, therefore, amounts to the grave offense of destroying the work of kosen-rufu; it completely betrays Nichiren's intent.

2) Claiming the High Priest's Absolute Authority

Nichiren Shoshu claims the erroneous doctrine of "absolute faith in and strict obedience to the High Priest" (*Dai-Nichiren*, Special Edition II, "The Correct Way of Faith in Nichiren Shoshu," published by the Nichiren Shoshu Bureau of Religious Affairs, p. 13). Nowhere in their writings do Nichiren and his most trusted disciple, Nikko, teach the high priest's absolute authority or the necessity of following the high priest for the attainment of Buddhahood. The priesthood's claim completely contradicts Nichiren Buddhism.

In his "Twenty-six Admonitions," Nikko writes, "Do not follow even the high priest if he goes against the Buddha's Law and propounds his own views" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1618; April 1998 *Living Buddhism*, p. 23). Nikko's strong statement here clearly refutes the idea of the high priest's absolute authority.

3) Distorting the Heritage of the Law

Nichiren Shoshu propounds the erroneous view of the heritage

of the Law that Nichiren's inner enlightenment and the mysterious entity of the Law are possessed only by the high priest and transmitted to successive high priests merely by appointment and a transfer ceremony. The priesthood claims that "the Heritage of the Law entrusted to only one person" is "the basis of the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin" (December 2005 *Nichiren Shoshu Monthly*, p. 19). Nichiren Buddhists, according to the priesthood, are expected to "follow the guidance of the High Priest, who has inherited the Heritage of the Law" (*ibid.*, 19).

This view, however, completely contradicts the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism. According to Nichiren's teachings, the heritage of the Law is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, as he writes, "The ultimate Law of life and death as transmitted from the Buddha to all living beings is Myoho-renge-kyo" ("The Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life," WND, 216).

Nichiren did not intend the Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to be the possession of a select few. In "The Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life," he makes clear his intent, writing, "Nichiren has been trying to awaken all the people of Japan to faith in the Lotus Sutra so that they too can share the heritage and attain Buddhahood" (WND, 217). In Nichiren

Buddhism, the heritage of the Law is to be shared by all people through faith in the Gohonzon, in the Mystic Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

In the same letter, Nichiren concludes, "Even embracing the Lotus Sutra would be useless without the heritage of faith" (WND, 218). Since we can inherit the heritage of the Law and manifest it from within us only through faith, Nichiren explains that the essential meaning of the heritage of the Law is faith.

Put simply, the heritage of the Law is another name for our correct faith in Nichiren Buddhism. No matter how much people chant in front of the Gohonzon, if they contradict Nichiren's intent and teachings, then they cannot inherit the heritage of the Law and experience positive results from their Buddhist practice.

4) Misusing Rituals and Formalities

Nichiren Shoshu has also been using various rituals and formalities—such as funeral and memorial services, the bestowing of posthumous Buddhist names and memorial tablets—to financially exploit lay believers.

The funeral-related rituals and formalities conducted by the priesthood were not taught by Nichiren. Although they were developed in the priesthood

centuries after Nichiren's time, the priesthood claims that the funeral rites conducted by priests are necessary for the enlightenment of the deceased.

Nichiren, however, never taught such a thing. Rather, he stresses that people's attainment of Buddhahood depends upon their faith and practice while alive. For example, he writes to one of his followers, "Because your beloved departed father chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo while he was alive, he was a person who attained Buddhahood in his present form" ("White Horses and White Swans," WND, 1064).

By claiming that it is necessary to have priests conduct funeral rites for the attainment of enlightenment, Nichiren Shoshu clearly distorts Nichiren Buddhism.

5) Discriminating Against Lay Believers

Nichiren Shoshu postulates that priests are inherently superior to lay believers in terms of their spiritual capacity to understand and practice Nichiren Buddhism. The priesthood, therefore, claims that lay believers must regard priests as their teachers solely by the virtue of their priestly status. Nichiren and Nikko, however, never defined a practitioner's capacity to attain enlightenment by his or her status. Nor did they impose a teacher-and-disciple



relationship upon priests and lay believers.

Rather, Nichiren stressed that both priests and lay believers are essentially equal. As he writes, “The Buddha surely considers anyone in this world who embraces the Lotus Sutra, whether lay man or woman, monk or nun, to be the lord of all living beings” (“The Unity of Husband and Wife,” WND, 463).

The priesthood’s discrimination against lay believers indicates that it has lost sight of the fundamental purpose of Buddhism—to help all people equally attain Buddhahood.

6) Falling Into Corruption

Nichiren taught his priestly followers modesty and simplicity as their guide to living. He writes, “True priests are those who are honest and who desire little and yet know satisfaction”

(“The Essentials for Attaining Buddhahood,” WND, 747). Many Nichiren Shoshu priests, however, including the previous high priest Nikken and chief priests of branch temples, have been known to indulge themselves in extravagant lifestyles. They have been using Buddhism simply for their selfish gain.

Nichiren strictly rebukes such corrupt priests as “animal[s] dressed in priestly robes” (“The Fourteen Slanders,” WND, 760) and “Law-devouring hungry spirits” (“The Origin of the Service for Deceased Ancestors,” WND, 191).

To challenge those trying to destroy Buddhism is the greatest responsibility of Buddhist practitioners. If we ignore the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood’s erroneous teachings and malicious attempts to destroy the work of widespread propagation, then, strictly speaking, we will not only share the

same offense as the priesthood but also lack in compassion. Challenging Nichiren Shoshu’s erroneous doctrines and behavior is a requirement for today’s practitioners of Nichiren Buddhism; and it affords us an excellent opportunity to share Nichiren’s great vow for widespread propagation as we uncover the life of Buddhahood within us, which Nichiren himself discovered through challenging people’s fundamental ignorance and slander of the Law.



—Prepared by Shin Yatomi for the SGI-USA Study Department based on the October 2005 issue of The Daibyakurenge, the Soka Gakkai’s study journal.

FOR DISCUSSION:

- 1 What is the meaning of the heritage of the Law in Nichiren Buddhism? In light of Nichiren’s teachings, how do we inherit and manifest it in our lives?
- 2 Why is it important for us to address the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood’s erroneous teachings and behavior? How has your understanding and practice of Nichiren Buddhism benefited from addressing this issue?