

# Soka Spirit

## Three Key Errors of the Nichiren Shoshu Priesthood

**T**sunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda, the first two presidents of the Soka Gakkai, began their Buddhist practice as lay members of Nichiren Shoshu. That was the twentieth-century name of the Buddhist order founded in the thirteenth century by Nikko Shonin, Nichiren Daishonin's closest disciple and immediate successor.

Originally known as the Fuji school, Nichiren Shoshu had unfortunately dwindled to become one of Japan's smaller and impoverished Buddhist schools, having long since lost its founding spirit to accomplish kosen-rufu—to widely propagate the law of Nam-myohorenge-kyo that Nichiren taught. Nevertheless, Makiguchi, an educator devoted to scholastic reform, deeply studied Nichiren's writings, and thereby awoke to the profound power of Nichiren's teachings to revitalize the lives of ordinary people and society. He awakened in himself a personal vow to accomplish kosen-rufu as a disciple of Nichiren Daishonin, a vow that Makiguchi's disciple, Josei Toda, shared.

Based on the staunch faith and sense of mission of the founding presidents, the Soka Gakkai quickly grew into a dynamic, progressive and socially engaged lay Buddhist movement. For decades, the Soka Gakkai gave wholehearted support to the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood,

building hundreds of new temples and completely restoring its head temple, Taiseki-ji. At the same time, the Soka Gakkai struggled to maintain a harmonious relationship with the priesthood, which had become overwhelmingly authoritarian and ritualistic.

From the beginning, the two had conflicting priorities. The priests of Nichiren Shoshu were focused on maintaining their order and its traditions. The Soka Gakkai was focused on realizing Nichiren's vow to accomplish *kosen-rufu*, the widespread propagation of his teachings for the peace and happiness of humankind.

Prior to the Soka Gakkai, as with most Buddhist denominations in Japan, most lay believers of Nichiren Shoshu did not carry out a daily Buddhist practice. Priests were expected to recite the sutra and conduct rites such as funerals and memorials on the laity's behalf.

President Makiguchi was the first to propose a format for chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* together with reciting the Lotus Sutra as part of the daily practice of lay believers. The appearance of a proactive laity that embraced the mission to accomplish *kosen-rufu* was a major departure from the passive approach Nichiren Shoshu believers had long taken.

By the 1970s and 1980s, Nichiren Shoshu had become wealthy through the generous donations and support of the Soka Gakkai members. The Soka Gakkai and its international movement, the SGI, continued to grow. But the open, engaged and dynamic movement triggered growing resentment among certain priests of Nichiren Shoshu. Their worldview was rooted in centuries of Japanese Buddhist history in which lay believers were seen as passive participants, whose role it was simply to venerate and make donations to the priests. Of course, this was not the view of Nichiren Daishonin, who treasured and fully empowered his lay followers. But to the priesthood, the dynamic SGI, in which laity took the initiative in an atmosphere of mutual encouragement, represented a threat.

A few of the senior priests, including a priest called Nikken, who would become the sixty-seventh high priest, became intensely jealous and vindictive toward the Soka Gakkai and its president, Daisaku Ikeda, who had consistently been dedicated to supporting the priesthood and enhancing its prosperity. This jealousy became what Buddhism describes as a devilish function, turning priests who should have been celebrating and supporting the great progress of kosen-rufu into those bent on destroying it.

In early 1991, under the direction of its high priest, Nikken, the priesthood launched a series of measures to disband the Soka Gakkai. Finally, in November 1991, they issued an order excommunicating the organization, aiming to prompt a large percentage of Soka Gakkai members to leave the organization and directly join their temples.

That didn't happen.

The crux of the priesthood's motives lay in its view that priests are necessary intermediaries between lay believers and the power and teachings of Nichiren Buddhism. Emphasizing ritual and formality not found in Nichiren Daishonin's writings, the priests sought to make veneration and obedience to themselves and their high priest, in particular, the most important aspect of a practitioner's faith.

In contrast, the Soka Gakkai bases itself directly on the spirit and intent of Nichiren Daishonin as set forth in his writings and proven in practice by the organization's founding presidents. The fact that the SGI has flourished all the more since the time of its excommunication is evidence of its correct interpretation and practice of Nichiren's teachings. SGI members in 192 countries and territories have consistently proven the power of correct faith and practice of Nichiren Buddhism in their lives and in their communities.

The following three points summarize the roots of the errors of the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood.

## Error 1: The Absolute Power of the High Priest

“Faith in the high priest” has become the central doctrine of Nichiren Shoshu, which has incorrectly elevated the position of the chief priest of their head temple to that of the object of worship. The priesthood upholds the view that, without venerating and obediently following the high priest, practitioners cannot attain enlightenment—a view that undermines the self-empowering properties of Nichiren Buddhism and contradicts the writings of Nichiren Daishonin.

According to the priesthood, the high priest alone has the power to determine who attains Buddhahood and who does not. They write, “The master gives his sanction to a disciple’s enlightenment . . . The very establishment of the object of worship according to the sanction of the High Priest, who is the only person to be bequeathed the Daishonin’s Buddhism, is what makes the attainment of Buddhahood possible.”<sup>1</sup>

The idea of the high priest “sanctioning” a disciple’s enlightenment is found nowhere in the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin. Nor does the concept of the high priest being absolute and infallible originate in Nichiren’s teachings. Rather, these concepts appeared centuries after Nichiren in order to bolster the status of the office of high priest of the Fuji school at times when those holding the office lacked the respect and support of the other priests.

Nichiren’s successor, Nikko Shonin, states in his “Twenty-six Admonitions,” “Do not follow even the high priest if he goes against the Buddha’s Law and propounds his own views” (*Gosho zenshu*, p. 1618).<sup>2</sup> It is obvious that Nikko did not consider those who would hold the office of high priest to be beyond the possibility of error or corruption. Having absolute faith in whoever holds the office of the high priest is an erroneous teaching completely contrary to what Nichiren taught.

## Error 2: The High Priest Receives Exclusive Transmission of the Law

To justify the notion that the high priest is absolute, the priesthood propounds the mysterious idea of the “heritage of the Law being entrusted to a single person.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, they encourage “single-minded faith in [the high priest] as the living body of Shakyamuni (Nichiren)”<sup>4</sup> through which practitioners can access the heritage of the Law.

They state that the transmission takes place through a “golden utterance” in a face-to-face conversation between the outgoing high priest and his successor and that “the fundamental principle of the Daishonin’s Buddhism is transmitted only to the High Priest.”<sup>5</sup>

Quite to the contrary, Nichiren repeatedly stresses that the Law is inherited through embracing the Gohonzon with faith. He states: “The heritage of the Lotus Sutra flows within the lives of those who never forsake it . . .

“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” (“The Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life,” *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 217).

The idea of an exclusive lineage belonging to a select group of clergy was prevalent in other Buddhist schools during the Daishonin’s time, but Nichiren himself took pains to refute such views in his writings. Concerning the question of who controls what is holy or sacred in the universe and the human heart, Nichiren Buddhism teaches that all people have equal access through their own faith and practice.

## Error 3: Inequality of Priests and Laity

That priests are afforded an elevated status in society is especially true in Japan. During the seventeenth century, partly in response to the influx of Christianity, the Japanese government mandated that all

citizens register with their local Buddhist temple. Priests became de facto agents of the government, conducting the census, issuing travel and work documents, and becoming intertwined in both the secular and religious lives of the people.

Nichiren Shoshu states: “Nichiren Shoshu believers must support their direct masters, who are the chief priests of their local temples, and offer their devotion to the major master, who is the High Priest.”<sup>6</sup>

In his letter to the Soka Gakkai on January 12, 1991, Nichijun Fujimoto, the general administrator of Nichiren Shoshu, wrote: “To talk about the priesthood and the laity with a sense of equality manifests great conceit. In fact, it corresponds to the five cardinal sins—to destroy the unity of Buddhist practitioners.”

And more recently, the priesthood published, “It is only natural that an innate difference exists between the priesthood and laity in the Daishonin’s Buddhism.”<sup>7</sup>

Nichiren clarifies the equality of priests and laity when he states: “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-1, 463); and “Anyone who teaches others even a single phrase of the Lotus Sutra is the envoy of the Thus Come One, whether that person be priest or layman, nun or laywoman” (“A Ship to Cross the Sea of Suffering,” WND-1, 33).

And finally, he writes: “Shakyamuni Buddha who attained enlightenment countless kalpas ago, the Lotus Sutra that leads all people to Buddhahood, and we ordinary human beings are in no way different or separate from one another. To chant Myoho-rence-kyo with this realization is to inherit the ultimate Law of life and death. This is a matter of the utmost importance for Nichiren’s disciples and lay supporters, and this is what it means to embrace the Lotus Sutra” (“The Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life,” WND-1, 216).

The equality of all people is a fundamental tenet of the Lotus Sutra and Nichiren Buddhism. The correct relationship between a Buddhist teacher and a disciple is expressed in the principle of the oneness of mentor and disciple, which means that both the teacher and the disciple equally share responsibility for kosen-rufu based on mutual respect and commitment. A genuine teacher becomes qualified as such through relentless struggle to awaken Buddhahood within ordinary people in the face of all obstacles, even at the risk of one's own life.

But in Nichiren Shoshu, the teacher is qualified simply by office and rank. Rather than selflessly working to teach others, the high priest requires that others venerate him, while considering lay believers unworthy to know the "secrets" he supposedly possesses. It is important that we clearly understand that this approach is a distortion of Buddhism and seek to develop a correct understanding through our study and practice of the principles Nichiren himself taught.

## Notes

1. *A Refutation of the Soka Gakkai's "Counterfeit Object of Worship": 100 Questions and Answers* (Los Angeles: Nichiren Shoshu Temple, 1996), p. 8.
2. See *The Untold History of the Fuji School* (Santa Monica, California: World Tribune Press, 2000), p. 21.
3. *Nichiren Shoshu Monthly*, October 2008 (Los Angeles: Nichiren Shoshu Temple, 2008), p. 17.
4. *Nichiren Shoshu Monthly*, September 2008, p. 22.
5. *Nichiren Shoshu Monthly*, December 2008, p. 21.
6. *Nichiren Shoshu Monthly*, March 2009, p. 8.
7. *Nichiren Shoshu Monthly*, February 2009, p. 22.