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Worldwide Kosen-rufu and the Soka Gakkai — Chapter 3: Repudiating the Nichiren Shoshu Priesthood under Nikken

Since its establishment, the Soka Gakkai has grounded itself completely on faith that is directly connected to Nichiren Daishonin. It has consistently taken action to spread the Daishonin's Buddhist teachings to create happiness for all people and bring about world peace.

However, a group emerged that sought to destroy this movement for kosen-rufu, and in doing so that group, known as the "Nikken sect," revealed its true nature as a devilish function.

The Nikken sect refers to the priesthood of the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist school in its corrupt state under the leadership of Nikken Abe, who claimed to be the 67th in the lineage of its high priests. This sect has taken the position that its high priest, who is also its chief administrator, possesses absolute and uncontested authority and power.

In the more than quarter century since instigating what has become known as the "second priesthood issue" in 1990, the Nikken sect has betrayed the teachings and spirit of Nichiren Buddhism and has become a group given over to slander of the Buddhist Law.

Though Nikken transferred the office of high priest to a successor, Nichinyo, in December 2005, the lineage he has passed on continues to be muddied by his slander of the Law.

The Battle against Evil Functions

In his treatise "On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land," Nichiren Daishonin writes, "Rather than offering up ten thousand prayers for remedy, it would be better simply to outlaw this one evil" (WND-1, 15) and "The only thing to do now is to abandon the evil ways and take up those that are good, to cut off this affliction at the source, to cut it off at the root" (WND-1, 17).

In other words, in striving to practice Buddhism correctly, it is essential never to forget to wage a continuous battle against the "one evil," that is, negative influences that delude people and lead them astray.

Speaking Out against the "Enemies of the Lotus Sutra"

Nichiren Buddhism emphasizes that admonishing and striving against evil is an important element of faith.

The Daishonin writes, "However great the good causes one may make, or even if one reads and copies the entirety of the Lotus Sutra a thousand or ten thousand times, or attains the way of perceiving three thousand realms in a single moment of life, if one fails to denounce the enemies of the Lotus Sutra, it will be impossible to attain the way" (WND-1, 78).

The "enemies of the Lotus Sutra" refers to those who encourage people to abandon the Lotus Sutra and thereby close off the path to Buddhahood for all people.

The Lotus Sutra teaches that the Buddha nature exists in the life of every person, expressing the most universal ideal of respect for all human beings. For this reason, to deny or deprecate the sutra, to impede the spread of the sutra, or to oppress or harm practitioners of the sutra is to oppose the ideals

of respect for the dignity of life, the equality of all people, and the primacy of ordinary people. To engage in such acts is what it means to become an “enemy of the Lotus Sutra.”

In light of this, one figure from the Daishonin’s lifetime who can be cited as a prime example of an enemy of the Lotus Sutra is Ryokan of Gokuraku-ji temple.¹ While outwardly garnering respect from people of the time, many of whom revered him as a “living Buddha,” Ryokan covertly harbored animosity toward the Daishonin, who was striving to spread Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the essence of the Lotus Sutra, and conspired to have him persecuted. In doing so, he functioned as what the Lotus Sutra describes as an “arrogant false sage.”

In contemporary times, by scheming to destroy the Soka Gakkai, the organization working to accomplish the Daishonin’s will of kosen-rufu, it is Nikken who accords with the definition of an enemy of the Lotus Sutra.

An Overview of the Priesthood Issue

The Daishonin’s spirit and practice for kosen-rufu was correctly inherited and carried on by his disciple Nikko Shonin (1246–1333).

That spirit and practice, however, gradually waned within the priesthood of Nichiren Shoshu—a Buddhist school that derived its teachings from the lineage of Nikko Shonin—giving way to hollow formality and ritual. As a result, the school turned into what has often been described in Japan as “funeral Buddhism.”² In the process, the priests took on an increasingly authoritarian posture, adopting a discriminatory attitude toward lay believers.

By the time the Soka Gakkai was established, the correct understanding and practice of the Daishonin’s teachings had been all but lost within the priesthood.

The Soka Gakkai focused its efforts on realizing the great vow for kosen-rufu, and had always supported the priesthood while correcting it whenever necessary.

After World War II, when the priesthood faced severe economic problems, the Soka Gakkai earnestly and sincerely supported and protected it, and eventually built and donated more than 350 temples.

However, elements within the priesthood refused to acknowledge or express gratitude for this earnest support, and friction at times arose with certain priests who were intent first and foremost on maintaining their religious authority. But in every case, the Soka Gakkai persisted in working to resolve the situation and restore good relations.

The priesthood’s tendency to flaunt its authority and look down on lay believers became more

¹ Ryokan (1217–1303): A priest of the True Word Precepts school and chief priest of Gokuraku-ji temple from 1267. For many years, Ryokan harassed Nichiren and his disciples, both openly and covertly.

² Temples in Japan collected money and other offerings as payment for performing funeral services and other rituals, amassing wealth in the process. With both power and wealth at their command, Buddhist priests lost interest in the study and practice of the teachings, and instead grew decadent and corrupt. As a result, Buddhism in Japan changed into a religion that stressed ceremonies, such as funerals and services for deceased ancestors—giving rise to the name “funeral Buddhism.”

pronounced after Nikken took the office of high priest, as it increasingly disregarded the sincere intentions with which the Soka Gakkai had been supporting it for the sake of kosen-rufu.

The Soka Gakkai had been making great strides in establishing Nichiren Buddhism as a world religion, and its leader, SGI President Ikeda, had become highly respected among notable world figures in many fields. Nevertheless, Nikken came to regard him with enmity and began plotting to destroy the Soka Gakkai.

Nikken's aim was to sever relations with the Soka Gakkai and take control of its members, turning them into subservient followers of the priests, and in 1990 he conceived and put into action a surreptitious plan he named "Operation C" ("C" meaning to "cut" the Soka Gakkai).

Its implementation began in December that year, with the priesthood's sudden announcement of a revision to its rules as a religious corporation effectively dismissing President Ikeda from his position as chief lay representative of Nichiren Shoshu.

The Soka Gakkai sought to address and resolve the situation through dialogue, but the priesthood refused any discussion.

On November 7, 1991, the priesthood sent the Soka Gakkai a document titled "Remonstrance to Disband," followed, on November 28, by a "Notice of Excommunication."

In addition to this high-handed move, it took the cruel measure of refusing to confer the Gohonzon upon members of the Soka Gakkai. The priests were telling people, in effect, that if they wished to receive the Gohonzon, they could do so only by following the priesthood. In this way, they were holding the Gohonzon, the basis of faith, hostage in a cowardly attempt to pressure and intimidate believers.

Nevertheless, in 1993, the Soka Gakkai decided that it would confer upon its members around the world a Gohonzon transcribed by Nichikan Shonin (1665–1726), a great restorer of Nichiren Buddhism. This was made possible through the cooperation of a temple that had opposed Nikken's actions and supported the Soka Gakkai.

The Soka Gakkai is now the only religious group working to achieve kosen-rufu in direct accord with Nichiren Daishonin's spirit, conferring upon believers the Gohonzon, which he described as "the banner of propagation of the Lotus Sutra" (WND-1, 831). As such, the Soka Gakkai has become the global organization qualified to confer the Gohonzon in order to realize kosen-rufu, the Buddha's will and intent.

In 1998, the Nikken sect demolished the Sho-Hondo (Grand Main Temple), an edifice at the Nichiren Shoshu head temple, Taiseki-ji, built in 1972 under the aegis of the Soka Gakkai through the sincere faith and contributions of some eight million people. This reckless act made the priesthood's malicious and vindictive nature all the more apparent.

The Sho-Hondo, constructed to last 1,000 years, was hailed as a masterpiece of 20th-century architecture that rivaled any religious edifice in the world. Nikken, however, heartlessly had it demolished just 26 years after its completion, disregarding the sincere faith of eight million believers.

The Major Offenses and Erroneous Doctrines of the Nikken Sect

Core to the Nikken sect is a deluded belief that venerates its high priest as a special, absolute, and

infallible being, a belief that might be called “high priest worship.” One of the premises for this claim is that there exists a mysterious heritage or lineage that is only passed on from one high priest to the next, a presumption that bolstered the priesthood’s tendency to look down on lay believers.

Of course, there is nothing in Nichiren Daishonin’s writings to justify or support this in any way, and it therefore constitutes a false doctrine that is starkly opposed to the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism.

Careful study of the essential principles of Nichiren Buddhism makes clear the key errors of the Nikken sect.

1. The Slander of Destroying Kosen-rufu

The Nikken sect implemented its “Operation C” with the aim of destroying the Soka Gakkai, the organization dedicated to kosen-rufu, and in 1991 it sent the Soka Gakkai its notification of excommunication.

The document cited no passages from Nichiren Daishonin’s writings and expressed no doctrinal basis to support the Soka Gakkai’s excommunication. It simply repeated its assertion in an authoritarian and emotional manner that the Soka Gakkai was not obediently following the priesthood.

The task of achieving kosen-rufu, the widespread propagation of the Mystic Law, is the legacy left by Nichiren Daishonin. This is evident when he declares: “The ‘great vow’ refers to the propagation of the Lotus Sutra” (OTT, 82) and “When you are so united, even the great desire for widespread propagation can be fulfilled” (WND-1, 217).

It is for this reason that the Soka Gakkai has aimed since its founding to accomplish kosen-rufu, exerting itself in the propagation of Nichiren Buddhism, not only in Japan but throughout the world.

To attempt to destroy the Soka Gakkai, therefore, is to attempt to destroy kosen-rufu, an act that constitutes a grave slander of the Buddhist Law and the great offense of betraying the Daishonin’s spirit and intent to save all people from suffering.

Nikken’s Grave Offense of Causing Disunity in the Buddhist Order

The Buddhist teachings describe the greatest offenses a person can commit as the “five cardinal sins.”

These are (1) killing one’s father, (2) killing one’s mother, (3) killing an arhat, (4) injuring a Buddha, and (5) causing disunity in the Buddhist Order.

Among these offenses, causing disunity in the Buddhist Order, or actions that create disruption and division among the body of Buddhist practitioners, is extremely serious as it destroys the Buddha’s teachings and deludes people, causing them to fall into unhappiness. This is the gravest offense that Nikken has committed.

2. The False Doctrine of Worship of the High Priest

It is the doctrine of the Nikken sect that the high priest be regarded as an object of worship or veneration. A high priest should be a person who is primarily responsible for protecting, teaching, and spreading the Buddhist teachings. This person should serve as a model for carrying out faith, practice, and study and for upholding the correct teachings.

In this regard, since the outbreak of the second priesthood issue, Nikken and his supporters, rejecting any dialogue, have consistently claimed that because the high priest is infallible and an object of worship or veneration, one must follow him without question.

The idea of the high priest as an object of faith is an extremely vain doctrine that violates the three treasures—the Buddha, the Law (the Buddha’s teachings), and the Buddhist Order—of Nichiren Buddhism.

For example, a document carried in a publication for Nichiren Shoshu senior priests in July 1991 states that the high priest to whom the heritage of the Law has been transmitted is an honorable entity that is one and inseparable with the Dai-Gohonzon, and that faith in these two fundamental objects (the Dai-Gohonzon and the high priest) must be absolute.

In Nichiren Buddhism, however, there should be just one object of devotion, the Gohonzon.

The Nikken sect’s erroneous doctrine purports that the high priest, whose function should be to protect the Gohonzon, in fact stands on an equal par with the Gohonzon. This is a dogma of unprecedented distortion.

Correct Faith Means Basing Oneself on the Gohonzon

Since the time of the Daishonin and Nikko Shonin, correct faith has been defined as faith based upon the Gohonzon.

Nichiren Daishonin writes, “Believe in this mandala with all your heart” (WND-1, 412) and “Since Nichiren’s disciples and lay supporters believe solely in the Lotus Sutra . . . they can enter the treasure tower of the Gohonzon” (WND-1, 832).

And Nikko Shonin states, “It is specified in the honorable writings [of Nichiren Daishonin] that the five characters of Myoho-enge-kyo should be the object of devotion. That is, the object of devotion he inscribed in his own hand” (GZ, 1606).

The Error of Regarding the High Priest as Infallible

In “The Twenty-six Admonitions of Nikko,”³ he writes: “Do not follow even the high priest if he goes against the Buddha’s Law and propounds his own views” (GZ, 1618).

Nikko Shonin issued this warning based on his assumption that it was possible that in the future the head of the school might commit a serious error.

In the same document, Nikko Shonin writes, “My disciples should conduct themselves as holy priests, patterning their behavior after that of the late master. However, even if a high priest or a priest striving for practice and understanding should temporarily deviate from the principle of sexual abstinence, he may still be allowed to remain in the priesthood as a common priest without rank” (GZ, 1619).

This means that if a high priest or a senior priest of considerable learning should commit a prohibited act or serious error that by rights would warrant expulsion, he should rather be allowed to

³ “Nikko Yuikai Okibumi” in Japanese. Written by Nikko Shonin in 1333. It addresses practitioners of future generations, exhorting them to maintain the purity of Nichiren’s teachings, and outlines the fundamental spirit of faith, practice, and study.

renew his practice among priests of ordinary rank, while pursuing a basic path of reflection and contrition.

From these “Admonitions of Nikko,” it is clear that the view that the high priest is infallible promoted by the Nikken sect is completely misguided. It is a dogma that violates the teachings of both the Daishonin and Nikko Shonin.

3. A Mistaken View of Heritage

“Heritage” or “lineage” in Nichiren Buddhism has always been something open to all people, not the exclusive possession of an elite few.

However, Nikken and his followers hold an erroneous view of heritage which is the source of their notion that the high priest is absolute.

That view is as follows: There exists a mysterious heritage or lineage that is passed on only from one high priest to the next. Simply by receiving that lineage, one exclusively inherits the Buddha’s enlightenment and the essence of the Buddha’s Law itself.

In the same publication cited earlier, the Nikken sect states that the transmission of the “Heritage of the Law” entrusted to only one person is surely the entity that embodies the “Oneness of Person and Law.”

The idea of the existence of such a mysterious transmission is false, however, and bears no relation at all to the teachings of the Daishonin or Nikko Shonin. It amounts to a fiction concocted in later times in order to bolster the status and authority of the high priest.

The True Meaning of “Heritage” Is Faith That Is Open to All People

The Japanese term for heritage, literally “bloodline,” is used frequently in the esoteric teachings of the True Word school and by schools such as Tendai and Zen. It likens the transfer of the teachings from teacher to disciple to the genetic heritage passed from parent to child.

In the Buddhist world of Nichiren Daishonin’s time, this heritage predominantly meant the passing on of the deepest Buddhist teachings to a select group of individuals in the form of a “secret transmission.”

In contrast to this, in “The Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life,” the Daishonin writes, “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-1, 217).

In Nichiren Buddhism, the heritage is ultimately described as the “heritage of faith” (WND-1, 218), that is, as faith itself.

On the other hand, the Nikken sect claims a mysterious, exclusive heritage that, upon receipt, automatically makes one a Buddha regardless of faith or practice. This is far removed from the essential meaning of the heritage of faith, the heritage taught by the Daishonin.

4. Discriminatory Attitude toward the Laity

An idea that permeates the entire Nichiren Shoshu priesthood, from Nikken to all the priests, is the idea that they, as priests, are superior and that lay believers are inferior. That is, they adopt a

discriminatory attitude toward the laity.

There is no teaching or principle within Nichiren Buddhism that would justify priests treating lay persons with such disrespect or contempt.

On the contrary, the Daishonin clearly confirmed the equality of clergy and laity, saying: “For this reason, 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” (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” (WND-1, 33).

Behind the Nikken sect’s blatant denial of the equality of clergy and laity is the degradation of the role of Buddhism in Japan, primarily during the Edo period (1603–1867), to the extent that it became known as “funeral Buddhism,” and the spread of the so-called temple parishioner system⁴ during the same period. This resulted in priests exerting control over lay believers and forcing them into a servile position, while lay believers came to depend entirely on the priests, rather than carry out their own Buddhist practice.

The harmful tendencies and errors inherent in the temple parishioner system remain deeply ingrained in the Nikken sect, and this has resulted in a belief that priests are superior to laity.

5. Misuse of Religious Rituals

One of the major errors of the Nikken sect is its misuse of Buddhist rituals and ceremonies, turning them into means for making money. These include funeral and memorial services, the bestowal of posthumous Buddhist names, and the issuing of wooden memorial tablets to be placed beside the grave.

Such rituals conducted by priests nowadays were not instituted by the Daishonin, but became established in later times. The Nikken sect asserts that unless a funeral service is conducted by a priest, the deceased will be unable to attain Buddhahood; but the Daishonin never taught or stated anything of the sort.

Rather, he encouraged those who had lost loved ones with such statements as “Therefore, because your beloved departed father chanted Nam-myoho-rence-kyo while he was alive, he was a person who attained Buddhahood in his present form” (WND-1, 1064).

In this way, he stressed that attaining Buddhahood depends on one’s own faith and practice while alive.

Therefore, to ignore the Daishonin’s guidance and assert that the deceased cannot attain

⁴ The temple parishioner system was a means by which families were affiliated officially with a local Buddhist temple during the regime of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603–1867). It was a mandatory system of citizen registration intended to detect “hidden Christians”—those secretly practicing Christianity, which had been outlawed. It was also a way for government, with the temples as proxies, to monitor and control the population. Under the system, individuals and families were not permitted to change religious affiliation. People were expected to visit their assigned temple and rely on it to conduct funeral and memorial ceremonies, to offer donations for these services, and thereby provide the temples with a permanent source of income.

Buddhahood unless a priest conducts their funeral, in itself constitutes the offense of distorting the Daishonin's teachings.

6. Corruption and Immorality

With regard to the conduct of priests, Nichiren Daishonin states, "True priests are those who are honest and who desire little and yet know satisfaction" (WND-1, 747).

The priests of the Nikken sect, however, beginning with Nikken himself, have consistently behaved in a corrupt and self-indulgent manner, in stark violation of the Daishonin's instruction. The Daishonin compared any such irresponsible priest who uses Buddhism for selfish gain to "an animal dressed in priestly robes" (WND-1, 760) or to "Law-devouring hungry spirits" (WND-1, 190).

Spiritual Independence

November 28, 1991, marked the day that the Soka Gakkai was excommunicated from the Nichiren Shoshu school. To Soka Gakkai members, however, this day marks the day they achieved their spiritual independence. Freeing themselves from the chains of the corrupt and misguided priesthood, Soka Gakkai members have emerged all around the globe, embracing their mission to achieve kosen-rufu. Their numbers have steadily grown, until today they are active in 192 countries and territories worldwide.

The Nikken sect, on the other hand, has continued on its course of decline, its membership today a mere two percent of what it was before it excommunicated the Soka Gakkai.

By striving to achieve the Daishonin's will for kosen-rufu, the Soka Gakkai has succeeded to the true heritage of Nichiren Buddhism. Resolutely challenging and refuting the false and destructive actions of the Nikken sect, Soka Gakkai members are opening the way for the further expansion of kosen-rufu throughout the world.

[To be continued]