

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON THE TEMPLE ISSUE Why Don't the SGI and Nichiren Shoshu Just Talk?

Q: Why don't the SGI and Nichiren Shoshu talk to each other?

A: Dialogue is a Buddhist tradition — it is a nonviolent way of resolving conflicts and assumes the presence of frankness, openness and equality between the two parties involved. This may be why many sutras are presented in the form of conversation between Shakyamuni and his disciples, and why Nichiren Daishonin used dialogue as a literary framework for many of his important writings, such as the “Rissho Ankoku Ron.” In accord with the importance Buddhism places upon dialogue, the SGI sought every possible opportunity to speak with the priesthood as the conflict arose toward the end of 1990. But, to the SGI's great disappointment, the priesthood refused to talk.

When the priesthood suddenly submitted its letter of inquiry at the regular communication conference on Dec. 13, 1990, demanding a written response within seven days, the SGI suggested that they discuss any unresolved issues through face-to-face discussion rather than exchanging documents. The priesthood officials seemed at first to agree with the SGI's suggestion, but four days later, the SGI received the same document in the mail. Though the SGI tenaciously communicated its desire to resolve any differences through dialogue, the priesthood adamantly refused.

On Jan. 2, 1991, only a few days after the priesthood's sudden and unilateral removal of SGI President Ikeda from the position of chief lay representative, Soka Gakkai President Akiya and General Director Morita went to Taiseki-ji only to be told by a temple official that they were “unworthy of receiving an audience with the high priest.” Furthermore, at the end of 1990, the priesthood notified the SGI of a clause added to Nichiren Shoshu's rules that lay believers may be expelled if they, in either speech or writing, “criticize” the high priest.

In November 1991, the priesthood sent the SGI a letter ordering it to disband. And within the same month, the SGI received a notice of excommunication.

The SGI values dialogue with society as well as among its membership. However, we should always keep in mind that we promote dialogue as a means to achieve a deeper and wider understanding of such universal values as humanism and freedom, equality and the sanctity of human life. This is why the SGI will not hesitate to conduct dialogue with those of different faiths or creeds with regard to shared concerns for the happiness and well-being of society and the world. Yet, the SGI will never compromise its beliefs and goals. Likewise, within the context of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, the SGI regards kosen-rufu as a foundation for dialogue.

Dialogue allows believers of the Daishonin's Buddhism to transcend their differences and unite for their mutual goal of kosen-rufu. It does not follow, however, that we compromise our beliefs just to have a dialogue.

Nichiren Daishonin writes: “All disciples and believers of Nichiren should chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with one mind (*itai doshin*), transcending all the differences among themselves.... When you are so united, even the great hope for kosen-rufu can be fulfilled without fail” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 23). Here he emphasizes the importance of the unity among believers as a means to achieve kosen-rufu, but never as a goal in and of itself. Obviously, it is backward to think that unity must be achieved even at the cost of compromising the Daishonin's spirit.

Also, some believe that the presence of priests is indispensable to the preservation and

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spread of the Daishonin's teaching, or assume Buddhism cannot survive without a priestly class. Yet, a priestly class is not an essential element of Buddhism; it is a tradition born out of the social and historical context of India, China and Japan as Buddhism migrated through these countries. Originally, the responsibility of the transmission and preservation of Buddhism rested with the *samgha* or Buddhist order. The *samgha* initially consisted of both priests and lay believers, but the priestly class eventually dominated.

Samgha came to denote the priestly class and became the etymological origin for the word for Buddhist priests both in Chinese and Japanese. The original significance is not the priestly class per se, but those who are deeply committed to preserving and spreading Buddhism in its purity, be they priests or lay believers. For this reason, in many writings, the Daishonin exhorts believers — priests and laity alike — to study and spread his teaching. The SGI's splendid progress of kosen-rufu over the last seven years without the priesthood also attests that the priestly class is not a necessity in Buddhism.

There is no need to think it is essential to seek unity with priests who neither uphold nor spread Buddhism correctly. Such priests disqualify themselves as members of the *samgha*.

Judging from the present situation, the priesthood might consider dialogue based on their aforementioned conditions — that the SGI apologize for “slander” it did not commit and promise to disband. But that would be contrary to the promotion of kosen-rufu and contrary to the Daishonin's intent.

While the SGI has no official line of communication with the priesthood, it has been striving to express its views and reveal the reality of the current leadership of the priesthood to priests and lay believers of Nichiren Shoshu through publications and through individual members' discussion. The SGI also has a close relationship and ongoing dialogue with reformist priests who have seceded from Taiseki-ji.

In this sense, despite the temple's obstinate refusal to meet, the SGI has been continuing its efforts to communicate with it. While always open to the possibility of open and frank dialogue, the SGI will not compromise its goal of kosen-rufu nor its integrity just to create a cosmetic unity with a priestly class that does not share that conviction.

Ten in a series

Key Points:

- **The SGI repeatedly sought to have a dialogue with the temple at the beginning of the issue, but the priesthood refused all opportunities.**
- **The priesthood neither views the laity as equals nor provides an opportunity for frank and open dialogue.**
- **The SGI is always open to the possibility for dialogue, but not at the expense of compromising Nichiren Daishonin's intent (kosen-rufu) or the integrity of his teachings.**

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