

THE MEANING OF SLANDER AND RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE BY SHIN YATOMI, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

IT seems a long time has passed since the priests at Taiseki-ji told the members of SGI that they could not sing Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" in German. To do so, they announced, is tantamount to praising Christianity and thus a "slander" of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. This argument seemed rather ominous then, but now such a narrow, dogmatic approach to this Buddhism seems quite laughable. Over the last eight years, we have learned to look at the Daishonin's Buddhism from the standpoint of its essential humane spirit, reason and common sense. And we have come to grasp more deeply a simple yet important truth: religion exists for the sake of people, not vice versa.

With SGI President Ikeda's constant efforts to communicate the essence of the Lotus Sutra and the writings of Nichiren Daishonin, the Daishonin's Buddhism has entered a new era, no longer confined within the framework of Japan's ethnocentric, esoteric religious culture. For decades the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood endeavored to impose this culture upon the SGI's efforts to spread the Daishonin's Buddhism as a world religion. This atmosphere—characterized by a tradition of absolute priestly authority and emphasis on formalities—did have a shackling effect. Nevertheless, we were able to maintain our conviction that the Daishonin's Buddhism is a religion that can offer the universal values of humanism to all people of all nations, cultures and ethnicities. It is based on this perspective that we have been deepening and refreshing our understanding of how best to practice and communicate the Daishonin's Buddhism in today's world.

One expression of this refreshed understanding is Article 7 of the SGI Charter: "SGI shall, based on the Buddhist spirit of tolerance, respect other religions, engage in dialogue and work together with them toward the resolution of fundamental issues concerning humanity" (December 8, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 5).

Some have raised the question: Isn't "respecting other religions" a slander of the Law? Aren't we abandoning the Daishonin's spirit of *shakubuku*—to lead people to a correct understanding by refuting erroneous teachings? To answer directly, respecting other religions, or those who practice them, does not in itself constitute slander of the Law, nor does it go against the Daishonin's spirit.

In order to shed light on the meaning of Article 7 of the SGI Charter, we must examine in a little more detail what is meant by "slandering the Law." Prior to 1991, under the influence of the priesthood, the meaning of slander as it applied to our religious faith was ambiguous, and was often misinterpreted and misused. We often heard: "It's a slander to point your feet at the Gohonzon." Or, "It's a slander to put a gongyo book on the floor." We were also told that criticizing a priest constituted inexcusable slander, and that even "singing 'Ode to Joy' in German is a slander."

IN fact, the priesthood's tendency has been to use the term *slander* to describe any act that displeased them. This might be compared to a religious authority with a dogmatic belief in a Western religion promising his critics that they are "going to Hell" because of their criticism of him. To preserve their authority, the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood used the concept of slandering the Law as a tool to intimidate believers and often to defend their view of certain Japanese cultural traditions as essential Buddhist practice.

"The Law" in "slandering the Law" refers to the Lotus Sutra. Of course, as Nichiren Daishonin

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made clear, the Lotus Sutra of the Latter Day means the sutra's essence, the Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. But since the Daishonin expounded the Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo on the basis of the doctrines contained in the Lotus Sutra, when we examine the Buddhist concept of slander in terms of its doctrinal meaning, it is appropriate to take "the Law" to mean the Lotus Sutra. "A slander of the Law," therefore, literally means a slander of the Lotus Sutra; it is speech or conduct that denies the teaching and ideal of the Lotus Sutra.

What is the teaching and ideal of the Lotus Sutra? The Daishonin expressed what he saw as the quintessence of the Lotus Sutra in the form of the Gohonzon, using the doctrine of the three thousand realms in a single moment of life (*ichinen sanzen*) as his theoretical foundation. Based on the Lotus Sutra, T'ien-t'ai expounded the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment to explain that all beings are entities of the Mystic Law, endowed with the Buddha nature. In other words, the fundamental message of the Lotus Sutra is that all living beings have the Buddha nature and thus are infinitely precious and worthy of respect. The sanctity of life and the inherent dignity of all people are at the core of the Sutra's teaching. From this perspective, we can define slander of the Law as any denial of the sanctity of life or the inherent dignity of all people.

This interpretation of slander is consistent with the Daishonin's perspective. He criticized major Buddhist sects of his day as slanderous of the Lotus Sutra. His was not merely a criticism of doctrine, however. For example, the Daishonin criticized the Pure Land (Nembutsu) sect not just for denying the Lotus Sutra's validity on a doctrinal level. The Pure Land sect views this world itself as defiled and detestable; it teaches believers that they can only be happy in the afterlife if they are reborn in the Pure Land through reciting the name of the Amida Buddha. What lies at the core of the Pure Land teaching is despair and an escapist attitude.

The Daishonin stated: "If you chant the Nembutsu incantation often, you will come to feel like injuring yourself" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1509). The Daishonin denounced the Pure Land sect because it denied people's potential to overcome their suffering and thus diminished the inherent dignity of their lives. Historically, the Pure Land sect was often manipulated by the authorities as a tool to oppress and control people. This is in complete opposition to the ideal of the Lotus Sutra, which is to empower people through awakening their inner potential.

THE Daishonin's criticism was also directed toward the Shingon sect, not merely because it proclaimed its doctrinal superiority over the Lotus Sutra. The Shingon sect was essentially an esoteric teaching in which believers relied on priests to perform rituals so that they might receive blessings from the transcendental Dainichi Buddha; it promoted people's dependence upon an imaginary superior being and diminished their ability to reason. Such an idea fundamentally contradicts the ideal of the Lotus Sutra, which asserts the importance of self-reliance by pointing out the existence of Buddhahood within each person.

As we see in those two instances of the Daishonin's criticism of other Buddhist sects, slander of the Law is more than just vilifying the Lotus Sutra; it is to deny the sutra's underlying humanistic principle. For example, if a child speaks ill of the Lotus Sutra or its practitioners while completely ignorant of what he or she is doing and of what the essence of the sutra is about, should we admonish this child as a slanderer of the Law? While maybe in need of some schooling in manners, that child should certainly not be taken to task as a slanderer.

On the other hand, what if a government official or a doctor superficially praises the Lotus Sutra or the Daishonin's teachings, but is led by corruption to give tacit approval to the use of

contaminated blood supplies while knowing their potential for spreading disease? Some people, although though not directly critical of the Law, act counter to the Sutra's teaching about the inherent dignity of all people.

WHAT if a Christian minister in your neighborhood church were to ask for your cooperation in a neighborhood watch program to prevent crime or a community cleanup? Is lending this Christian minister your support considered to be a slander of the Law? Of course, it is not. In this case, discussing the safety of your community with those who embrace religions other than Buddhism has nothing to do with slandering the Law.

What is most important is to promote the happiness and peace of all humanity. Since Buddhism exists for us to achieve this goal, it is only natural to have dialogue and cooperate with those of different religious beliefs in the process of bringing such a Buddhist ideal to reality. From this viewpoint, Article 7 of the SGI Charter declares that we "respect other religions." This is not to say that we compromise our religious beliefs and abandon the Daishonin's spirit of *shakubuku*. The concept of "respecting other religions" is easier to comprehend if we understand its intention, which is to respect the people who practice those religions. It must be pointed out that showing respect to other human beings, regardless of their religious beliefs, is different from accepting or advocating their belief.

What is *shakubuku* then? Is it not to strictly refute erroneous teachings? *Shakubuku* may be defined from a number of perspectives. For example, *A Dictionary of Buddhist Terms and Concepts* explains that *shakubuku* is "a method of propagating Buddhism by refuting another's attachment to heretical views and thus leading him to the correct Buddhist teaching. The term is used in contrast to *shoju*, or leading another to the true teaching gradually without refuting his misconception" (pp. 376–77). Ultimately, however, *shakubuku* is to speak the truth of the Lotus Sutra—the universal potential of enlightenment possessed by all people. So *shakubuku* is not simply a matter of using harsh words or roundly refuting other religious beliefs.

T'ien-t'ai in his *Hokke Gengi* (Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra) explains that since the Lotus Sutra expounds the truth, it naturally refutes the provisional teachings (i.e., to teach it is to practice *shakubuku*) while the Nirvana Sutra, which was taught after, and serves to confirm the validity of the Lotus Sutra, accepts the provisional teachings (i.e., *shoju*).

Put simply, *shakubuku* is to speak the truth of the supremacy of the Lotus Sutra while *shoju* is to accept other religious teachings while teaching the benefit of the Lotus Sutra's teachings. Because we communicate the Daishonin's teachings based on our firm belief in the universal potential of enlightenment possessed by all people as expounded in the Lotus Sutra, and we hold these principles to be supreme, our method of communicating the Daishonin's Buddhism is basically *shakubuku*. The distinction between these two methods, however, may not be always clear-cut. Sometimes it is more appropriate to adopt *shoju* based on the spirit of *shakubuku*.

Nichiren Daishonin stated: "T'ien-t'ai declared that the practice should 'accord with the times.' His disciple Chang-an interpreted this to mean, 'You should distinguish between *shoju* and *shakubuku* and never adhere solely to one or the other.' The Lotus Sutra represents a single truth, but its practice and propagation vary according to the people and the time" (MW-1, 175). Instead of being overly concerned about which method to choose, what is most important to keep in mind is the goal of propagation—people's happiness.

RELIGION is inextricably bound with culture. Even if we recognize a need to examine the value and philosophical correctness of various religious doctrines, it is very difficult to justify being critical of another culture. In countries with little relation to Buddhism, and where religious values and cultural values are deeply intertwined, to disrespect or denounce a religious belief is tantamount to disrespecting and denouncing the culture. Buddhism makes clear that its teachings should be spread while showing respect for and taking into consideration the culture and traditions of the place where it is being propagated.

Although the basic attitude of the Daishonin's propagation was *shakubuku*, his writings indicate that he exercised flexibility in his method of propagation. He states: "It is natural for a rooster to crow in the morning but strange for him to crow at dusk. Now when the true and provisional teachings are utterly confused, it would be equally unnatural for one to seclude himself in the mountains, carrying out the easy practice of *shoju*, and avoid refuting the enemies of the Lotus Sutra. He would lose all chance to practice the Lotus Sutra" (MW-1, 105). In this passage, the Daishonin refers to a situation in which the true and provisional teachings of Buddhism are confused. In such a case, the Daishonin suggests that a clear distinction be made between what is a true Buddhist teaching and what is a provisional Buddhist teaching through the method of *shakubuku*.

THIS situation, however, may not represent today's American society where the majority of people are unfamiliar with Buddhism. In this regard, the Daishonin states: "When the country is full of evil persons without wisdom, then *shoju* is the primary method to be applied, as described in the *Anrakugyo* [Peaceful Practices] chapter. But at a time when there are many persons of perverse views who slander the Law, then *shakubuku* should come first, as described in the *Fukyo* chapter" (MW-2, 183).

The Daishonin explains that when a society is ignorant of Buddhism, *shoju*, the tolerant way of propagation, may be a better approach. However, when confusion in the realm of Buddhism is the chief concern, *shakubuku*, the method of strictly refuting error and directly revealing the truth, may be the primary method. The strict stance the SGI has taken toward the errors and abuses of the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood accords with this idea.

In another writing, the Daishonin said: "However, slander can be either minor or serious, and there are times when we should overlook it rather than attack it. The adherents of the Tendai and Shingon sects slander the Lotus Sutra and should be refuted. But without great wisdom it is very difficult to differentiate correctly between their doctrines and the teachings which Nichiren expounds. Therefore, at times you might be well advised to refrain from attacking them, just as I did in the 'Rissho Ankoku Ron'" (MW-1, 158). In the "Rissho Ankoku Ron," the Daishonin refutes the teachings of the Pure Land sect, but does not refer to the teachings of the Shingon or Tendai sects. Here the Daishonin explains that although other religious sects, such as the Shingon and Tendai sects, contradict the Lotus Sutra, if the timing and condition of people are not appropriate, it is wise not to refute them.

In a letter written to a believer who had previously practiced the Pure Land sect and chanted the Nembutsu incantation, the Daishonin writes as follows: "Women who put their faith in the Lotus Sutra should chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo sixty thousand, a hundred thousand, or even ten million times a day, and after that, if they still have some time to spare, they may now and then murmur to themselves the name of Amida or one of the other Buddhas" (MW-3, 26-27). Of course, if you chant daimoku one hundred thousand times a day, you would not have time to even sleep, let alone to chant the Pure Land sect's incantation. In this letter, although the

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Daishonin clarifies the erroneous teachings of the Pure Land sect, he does not tell her to stop chanting the name of Amida Buddha. The Daishonin simply tells the recipient to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Once again, we can see the Daishonin's flexible stance toward communicating his teaching to others. Had this believer been told never to chant the name of the Amida Buddha, she may have been unable to accept the Daishonin's teaching. Religious beliefs and attitudes are deeply rooted in people's minds; our sensitivity and understanding toward those to whom we are communicating are therefore critical, as the Daishonin demonstrates.

THE ultimate purpose of communicating Buddhism to others is to help them become happy, not to prove the superiority of Buddhism over other religions. As we can see in the Daishonin's examples, he was always concerned about how to lead people to the truth revealed in the Lotus Sutra—to their inherent enlightened potential. The Daishonin's views transcended narrow, religious sectarianism. He wrote, "I, Nichiren, am not the founder of any sect, nor am I a latter-day follower of any older sect" (MW-5, 195).

He did not try to spread his teachings to prove his own greatness; his sole concern was people's happiness, as he states: "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" (MW-1, 24). Based on his clear sense of purpose in propagation, he exercised a great deal of flexibility, while not compromising in proclaiming what constitutes the true essence of Buddhism.

As long as we do not contradict the essential teaching of the Daishonin and faith in the Gohonzon, it is natural that we take into account the background and condition of individuals as well as the customs and traditions of the time and of the country. So when we are trying to communicate the Daishonin's teaching, it is important to judge each case from the viewpoint of what is most important to the happiness of the person we are addressing. If we become overly concerned about details or methodology while forgetting the purpose of our dialogue, we may create a negative situation in which people actually go further away from Buddhism.

We might also consider that the time in which the Daishonin appeared—when the correct teaching and practice of the Lotus Sutra had never before been revealed—and the country—Japan, where great confusion in the realm of Buddhism prevailed—demanded that he clearly demonstrate what was correct and what was false, even to the point that doing so invited grave persecution. In this way, he could establish the correct teaching for all humankind in the Latter Day of the Law. Our mission today is to enable that powerful and universal teaching to flow to every corner of every nation of the world, a world whose survival depends on the wisdom that teaching can impart.

SGI President Ikeda gives us valuable insight into what it means to respect the practitioners of other religions while maintaining the integrity of the Daishonin's Buddhism. He writes in *The New Human Revolution*:

To take a strict stance in distinguishing between good and evil and to show generosity toward others—these two things are in no way incompatible and are essentially part of the same whole.

Let's suppose, for example, that someone eats poisonous mushrooms and is rushed to a doctor. Irrespective of who the patient may be, the doctor naturally exhausts all possible means to save the person and also offers sincere words of encouragement. This, we might say, is an example of "generosity toward others."

It is also likely, however, that the doctor will warn the patient not to eat harmful

mushrooms in the future. I am sure there is no doctor who would stand by indifferently while the patient declares, “But poisonous mushrooms are delicious; I want to eat them again.” This corresponds to “taking a strict stance toward the Law.”

In both these instances, the doctor is motivated by his compassion and commitment to removing the patient’s suffering. This is also the behavior of a Buddhist.

For that reason, there is no contradiction between the spirit of *shakubuku*—that of “refuting the erroneous and revealing the true”—and true friendship. The spirit of compassion is fundamental to both. Consequently, it is the Buddhist ideal that the more we exert ourselves in faith, the greater the generosity with which we can embrace our friends and deepen our friendships. Because *shakubuku* is an endeavor to touch the others’ lives through dialogue, trust and friendship are essential.

Please become a person who transcends differences of religion and prays for the happiness of her fellow human beings, who forges deep ties of friendship with many people. Your doing so will also testify to the depth and breadth of Buddhism. (*The New Human Revolution*, vol. 1, pp. 204–05).

Our challenge to grasp and practice the intent of Article 7 of the SGI Charter is two-fold. We must endeavor to be tolerant toward people regardless of their religious affiliation, while at the same time maintaining and protecting the integrity of the Daishonin’s Buddhism. As mentioned before, slander of the Law is a denial of the inherent dignity of all people, and *shakubuku* is a dialogue with others that arises from our sincere conviction in the universal potential—the treasure of enlightenment possessed by all. When we understand slander and *shakubuku* in those terms, it helps us understand the meaning of the SGI Charter.

AS we set our sights on the peace and happiness of humanity as the ultimate goal of Buddhism, it is natural to respect all people as human beings regardless of their religious beliefs and cooperate with them toward humane goals. SGI President Ikeda states, “A person of true tolerance is at the same time a person of action who works to encourage the bonds of empathy and appreciation among people” (July 1996, *Seikyo Times*, p. 8). After all, if we discriminate against people based on their religious beliefs and refuse to work with them toward the resolution of humanity’s problems, we would be contradicting the spirit of the Lotus Sutra and thus committing slander of the Law in the truest sense. □

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