

SEATTLE INCIDENT OVERVIEW — PART 1
WHAT IS THE SEATTLE INCIDENT TRIAL?
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This year will be the fourth year in the ongoing Seattle Incident trial, which started in Tokyo in 1995. The *World Tribune* and SGI-USA Organization Center have received a number of requests for an update regarding the trial. We have also heard that some individuals associated with the Nichiren Shoshu temples have been trying to give the impression that the trial is over, that Nikken and the temple have won. However, the trial, which stems from a defamation lawsuit against the Soka Gakkai and its publications filed by Nikken and Nichiren Shoshu in 1993, is still underway; a ruling on the case has not been handed down.

We felt it important to correct any misinformation and provide an accurate update. The purpose of this three-part series is to review what's happened so far in the trial, to clarify what point the trial's at, and to look toward the trial's future.

What is the Seattle Incident? Long before Nikken became Nichiren Shoshu's high priest, he was the priesthood's Study Department leader. This was the position he held when, in March 1963, he was sent to America to conduct the first-ever Gohonzon-conferal ceremonies outside Japan.

Late one evening in Seattle, his first stop on the American mainland, Nikken was questioned by police after becoming involved in a dispute with known prostitutes near the downtown hotel where he was staying. According to the police who questioned the prostitutes, their disagreement with Nikken had been over a monetary transaction.

Mrs. Hiroe Clow, the SGI-USA leader who was handling Nikken's visit to Seattle, was called by police to the scene. At the downtown location where the officers were detaining Nikken, she convinced the police to release him to her.

Mrs. Clow did not reveal her account of the incident until 1992, after Nikken excommunicated the SGI. She kept it secret for so long because she wanted to avoid bringing embarrassment and disgrace to the priesthood and to the Gakkai, which sought to protect the priesthood. After the excommunication, though, she realized that Nikken's true nature was being revealed in not merely a personal indiscretion but in a selfish attempt to destroy the SGI. So she wanted the world to know that Nikken was not the holy man he pretended to be — he was no "Daishonin of modern times" as he let himself be called by his followers.

The Clow story was published in June 1992 in the *Soka Shimpo*, the Soka Gakkai youth division newspaper, which enraged Nikken and the priesthood. Nikken publicly and in print called Mrs. Clow a liar, and said he would resign as high priest if the incident were ever proven true.

(Mrs. Clow filed suit in the Los Angeles Superior Court charging Nikken with libel in defaming her character, but that suit was eventually dismissed before trial on jurisdictional grounds.)

Nichiren Shoshu in December 1993 filed its libel suit in the Tokyo District Court against the Soka Gakkai and its publications, and this became the current Seattle Incident trial. Nikken is the plaintiff; in order to prove he has been libeled, he must convince the court that Mrs. Clow's account of his encounter with prostitutes is untrue.

Why is the trial taking so long? The Japanese legal process, particularly in civil cases, proceeds at a slow pace. And rather than being heard by a jury, cases are heard and ruled

on by a panel of judges. At the district court level where the case is being heard, the simplest of cases usually takes three years to complete. Rather than being scheduled on consecutive days, intervals as long as several weeks can separate court sessions.

Complicated cases like the Seattle Incident case can easily take several years to conclude under such conditions. When appeals are considered, it's within the realm of possibility that a case of this sort can take as long as 15 or 20 years to proceed through the Japanese system.

After Nichiren Shoshu filed its suit, almost two years passed before the trial got underway. The first major development was Mrs. Clow's testimony: She testified for the defense, the Soka Gakkai, twice in October 1995; she was cross-examined by attorneys for Nikken and Nichiren Shoshu in February 1996.

In September and October 1996, Ronald Sprinkle, a former Seattle police officer, also traveled to Tokyo as a defense witness; he was one of the two officers who detained Nikken. A deposition from the other officer at the scene, which corroborated Mrs. Clow's and Mr. Sprinkle's accounts, was also submitted by the defense.

The trial then entered an intense phase in which the Soka Gakkai pushed for Nikken to testify in person, while the priesthood worked to avoid his being called to the witness stand. After almost a year of wrangling, the court finally ordered Nikken to testify.

His attorneys questioned him in December 1997; the Soka Gakkai's attorneys questioned him twice, in February and May 1998. During these three sessions, Nikken denied having anything to do with the prostitutes but admitted having left his hotel for drinks that night. This contradicted initial statements by the plaintiff's side that Nikken had never set foot outside his hotel after returning from the evening's Gohonzon-conferral ceremony. The Soka Gakkai attorneys were confident that Nikken had contradicted himself many times during his testimony, presenting himself to the court as an unreliable witness.

Throughout, SGI members around the world have been praying that the truth be clearly revealed through these court proceedings. Why have they been doing so, and why is victory in the trial so important to them? Like Mrs. Clow, who died in 1996, they want the world to know that Nikken is not what he pretends to be. They want his deceitful behavior in trying to cover up his past indiscretions to be known by all.

His attacks on the SGI can then be seen in their true light by everyone, and this will assure that he will not be mistaken for a genuine practitioner and representative of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

One in a three-part series