

EXPERIENCE—NORIKO ADCOCK, SAN DIEGO A RENEWED SENSE OF PURPOSE

“When deluded, one is called an ordinary being, but when enlightened, one is called a Buddha. This is similar to a tarnished mirror that will shine like a jewel when polished. A mind now clouded by the illusions of the innate darkness of life is like a tarnished mirror, but when polished, it is sure to become like a clear mirror, reflecting the essential nature of phenomena and the true aspect of reality. Arouse deep faith, and diligently polish your mirror day and night. How should you polish it? Only by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.” (The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, p. 4)

I practiced as a member of Nichiren Shoshu for the past eight years. What I would like to share is not a mere emotional account of my past struggle, but what I experienced firsthand as a temple member. I clearly understand how Nichiren Shoshu operates from by observing the operation of the local temple.

First let me backtrack. In 1956, I left my small town, Chichibu-shi, just outside of Tokyo, for the United States as a 19-year-old newlywed. My husband was an American serviceman.

Because of his job, we moved around a lot and, eventually, we found ourselves in San Diego. It is here that I was introduced to Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism by a Soka Gakkai member 37 years ago, in 1963.

I happened to live near an SGI member. She came to my home regularly to visit with her friends to tell me about Buddhism. They were very persistent.

I think I was looking for something to believe in, but I hadn’t found anything. Shinto was my family religion, but I never believed in it. I even tried going to church, but that didn’t fulfill me either.

One woman from the SGI left a book by the second Soka Gakkai president, Josei Toda, about Buddhist practice and daily life. I read it and it really impressed me. So I decided to join in October 1963.

One year later, in 1964, my husband was transferred to Seattle. Incidentally, this is where I first met Hiroe Clow; she was the women’s leader in Seattle at the time. She was a warm, honest and sincere woman.

Shortly after moving, I experienced difficulties in my marriage. I came back to San Diego with my three children. Eventually, my husband and I divorced. Having never worked before, I had to go on welfare for six months because my husband never paid child support. There were days when I didn’t have food; this was how I struggled to raise my family.

I was encouraged by the San Diego members to use my Buddhist practice to overcome my problems. Being a fairly new member, I listened to what they said. I chanted and did my best to introduce as many people as I could to Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism using the *Seikyo Shimbun* or *World Tribune*.

I had no skills, so I chanted to find a job. After submitting many applications, eventually I got one as a waitress at the CPO Officer’s Club. That’s where I met my second husband, whom I stayed with for 23 years, until his death in 1991. We had nothing but good memories.

I believe all these changes happened in my life because of my Buddhist practice and

because of the support of the SGI members. I was able to overcome each obstacle that arose in the course of my life.

I lived a comfortable life.

So, if my life was so good, why did I leave the SGI? Things grew very hectic in the organization over the years, and I could not handle what I believed to be an increasingly intolerable and authoritarian environment. In 1982, I left the organization, although I practiced on my own for the next nine years. For the most part, I lost touch with the daily goings-on of the SGI. I had no idea of what was happening between the top leaders of Nichiren Shoshu and the SGI.

Then, in 1991, my friend who was still practicing within the organization told me of the schism between the SGI and the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood. Because the Gohonzon I received was from Nichiren Shoshu, I decided to go to the temple in Etiwanda, Calif., to find out what this was all about. I spoke with the chief priest for two hours one day. He told me the Soka Gakkai was trying to take over the priesthood. I innocently decided to trust the priesthood of Nichiren Shoshu, and I believed I was doing the right thing.

At the time of this schism, the Etiwanda temple was virtually deserted. With the few members that were left and the priest, we resolved to unite to protect our temple and Nichiren Shoshu. I was happy to be practicing with other people once again, and at first practicing with the temple seemed to go well.

However, around 1993 things began to change—the head temple replaced the chief priest with a new one from Chicago. Instead of having open discussion meetings, the meetings became very cold; the priests became very controlling. The priests now had to obey the High Priest Nikken Abe. Based on directives that I believe came from the head temple, everything was handled in a secret manner; believers were kept in the dark. We were no longer able to voice our opinions, talk about problems or make suggestions.

The temple also stopped study meetings on the Daishonin's Buddhism. Study was reduced to a priest lifelessly reading a one-page passage without any explanation or discussion. Yet we'd go to the meeting and still have to make a financial contributions. Many American members realized there was nothing to learn at the temple, that they could study the Goshō on their own at home. Many people stopped attending meetings because of all these changes.

Doubt regarding the integrity of Nichiren Shoshu gradually grew in me—a doubt stemming from the priests' insistence that Hiroe Clow lied about the Seattle Incident and the news of the destruction of the Grand Main Temple and the Grand Reception Hall by Nichiren Shoshu. What deeply disturbed me was the fact that High Priest Nikken was using a huge amount of financial contributions from the members to rebuild these structures.

I contributed to the construction of the Grand Main Temple in 1965. I honestly cannot understand why it was destroyed. The local priest never gave us a convincing explanation, but the rumor was that it was torn down because its foundation had deteriorated. This argument did not convince me at all. I couldn't believe that the Grand Main Temple, which was built by top architects, would deteriorate in a mere 25 years.

For the last three years as a temple member, I stopped attending most activities. They were void of all spirituality. Most temple members became consumed with their own trivial interests, and they were always gossiping about each other or complaining about the chief priest. I could no longer see any joy in their faith.

There was no encouragement from the priests either. The most the new chief priest ever

said to address the problems was that we should be friendly and be unified. Of course, he also taught absolute obedience to the high priest.

My eyes opened slowly to the reality of the corruption of the priesthood. But after five years with the temple, having noticed no significant growth in my life, I began to reminisce about my days in the SGI, though I told no one. I remembered the early years of my practice, when I experienced so much joy and so many breakthroughs. I also remembered that it was the SGI that introduced me to the practice, not the priests.

I decided to return to the SGI last October because of the sincere encouragement of the SGI members. Danny Nagashima, the new SGI-USA general director, visited me and explained many things about the schism between the temple and the SGI. I was also impressed by his polite attitude, his humility and his passion. He listened with all his heart to everything I had to say. This encounter opened my heart and prompted me to resolve to leave Nichiren Shoshu. I said to myself: "I will begin my Buddhist practice afresh, trusting what he says. I will return to the spirit that I first had when I encountered this Buddhism. I will make a new start."

Also, thanks to a letter to High Priest Nikken written by Chief Priest Yumu Yamane of Renshu-ji temple, who recently seceded from Nichiren Shoshu, I was able to confirm the doubts that I had about the temple. Chief Priest Yamane clarified that the priesthood was not interested in "explaining Buddhism to lay believers"; that Nichiren Shoshu is very rigid and cold and does not make any effort to respect the culture and nature of people of other countries; and that Nichiren Shoshu believes "priests must follow the high priest absolutely, and believers must follow their chief priest absolutely." He also pointed out the lack of democracy and free-thinking in the temple, producing people who do not think or act of their own accord.

Now that I've returned to the SGI, I am surrounded by many warmhearted people. I can see many of my old fellow members; I recently ran into two members who also left the temple. When they saw me, they commented on how happy I look now.

Sometimes I think I stayed too long with the temple. Maybe I had too much pride to come back, and I was holding on to too many bad memories of the way the organization used to be. But I think I knew I would eventually come back because I didn't want to be a spiritually blind, egotistical person. In some ways, I surprised myself by coming back. I believe the SGI has changed for the better.

I feel a renewed sense of purpose. I believe experience is power, and I will continue to share this experience.

I am in the process of continuing my human revolution. I may make more mistakes in the future, but I will be humble enough to self-reflect all the time, aiming to become a polished individual. For this cause, I will always return to the prime point of faith. I will continue to advance and try my best.