

EDITORIAL
SEVENTY YEARS OF SOKA SPIRIT
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‘Looking back over the Soka Gakkai’s 70-year history,’ Jeff Farr writes, ‘we can see how our organization has a fearless tradition of protecting the people.’

The strong stance that the SGI took when Nichiren Shoshu started to act against our membership a decade ago was at first a surprise to many of us. But looking back over the Soka Gakkai’s 70-year history, we can see how our organization has a fearless tradition of protecting the people.

It was at a frightening time for Japan that the Soka Gakkai was founded. With Emperor Hirohito coming to power, Japan became increasingly nationalistic and militaristic. As many countries headed toward World War II, Japan’s leadership seemed eager to join them.

The Soka Gakkai’s appearance on Nov. 18, 1930, pointed Japan and the world in another direction—toward peace. First and second Soka Gakkai presidents Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda, based on their study of Nichiren Daishonin’s writings, decided that selflessly spreading this Buddhism was the best way to avert the immense human disaster looming before them.

This is why, in June 1943, Makiguchi put himself at great personal risk. When the priesthood summoned Soka Gakkai leaders to the head temple and ordered them to accept the Shinto talisman—under which the government was attempting to unify all religious groups in the war effort—Makiguchi soundly refused. He knew that the Daishonin would have forbade such compromise.

A friend recently asked me: “Why does the SGI keep going back to the incident with the Shinto talisman? Why is this emphasized so much?” Makiguchi’s refusal was an important moment in the history of Buddhism; it was when Soka Spirit—the fearless faith to protect the people that is the heart of Buddhism—reappeared after a long absence.

The Daishonin writes that “life flashes by in but a moment. No matter how many terrible enemies you may encounter, banish all fears and never think of backsliding” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 395). He also says that “the lion king fears no other beast, nor do its cubs. Slanderers are like barking foxes, but Nichiren’s followers are like roaring lions” (WND, 997). Makiguchi showed in June 1943 that he had inherited the spirit of these passages. Accepting the Shinto talisman would have meant compromising the Daishonin’s teachings and slandering the Lotus Sutra. He knew that the people would be led to more suffering, so he could not let himself fear the consequences of saying what had to be said.

And despite the harsh conditions he faced when he was subsequently imprisoned, Makiguchi continued to speak out. He even tried to teach his interrogators the truth of this Buddhism. As *The Untold History of the Fuji School* chronicles, when asked if he considered Japan an evil society, Makiguchi responded: “[The Daishonin] states that a nation will experience disasters—such as internal strife, revolution, famine and pestilence—and be led to ruin [if it slanders the Lotus Sutra]. Our past history indicates that we experienced such incidents and similar national disasters. The cause for the current

Japan–Sino conflict and the war in greater East Asia lies in the nation’s slander of the Law” (p. 122).

Essentially, he was unbegrudgingly giving his life for the sake of the Law with this statement. Consider to whom he was saying this—officials working for the emperor, whom they regarded as divinity. To tell them that the Pacific War was due to Japan’s slander of the Law was, in their eyes, the height of blasphemy. And this was in a country with no freedom of belief at the time.

Makiguchi’s death in prison came at age 73, from malnutrition. It was Nov. 18, 1944—the 14th anniversary of the Soka Gakkai’s founding. His spirit, though, has never died. President Toda inherited it to rebuild the organization, which was in ruins after the war. And SGI President Ikeda brought the same spirit with him to America and the world, sharing it with all of us.

“Let us return to the time of the Daishonin!” President Ikeda often says. The Soka Gakkai’s 70th anniversary reminds us to also return to the time of Makiguchi. Although the world has changed drastically in recent decades, if we practice with the same resolve that he had, the Soka Spirit tradition will never die.