

SOKA SPIRIT Q&A BY STEPHANIE ARAIZA

In November 1991, the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood, under the leadership of High Priest Nikken Abe, excommunicated all of the more than 10 million members of the Soka Gakkai International. At the center of the conflict was the clergy's insistence that priests are necessary intermediaries between Buddhist lay believers and their goal of enlightenment. The SGI, under the leadership of President Daisaku Ikeda, disagrees with that assertion and believes that the struggle toward enlightenment is entirely up to each person's efforts. The SGI believes that priests hold no special power over the faith of believers and that the priesthood's claims contradict the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin.

The following article answers some commonly asked questions about this subject referred to as Soka Spirit.

We see injustice all around us. It's in our schools, government, courts, families, friendships — everywhere. As a young person, it is easy to lose hope and feel there's nothing we can do. The Soka Spirit movement, the movement to clarify and protect the truth of Nichiren Daishonin's teachings, is the perfect vehicle to learn how to identify injustice at its root and eradicate it. This type of training is exactly what our generation needs to effect the kind of change the world needs in the twenty-first century.

What is Soka Spirit? Who started it? Why does it matter? In the ten years since Nichiren Shoshu excommunicated millions of SGI members, a whole new generation of people — especially young people — has embraced Buddhism in the SGI. In the hope that they can feel as empowered as I do, I would like to share the answers I've found to some fundamental questions about this revolution we call Soka Spirit.

Why is it now called Soka Spirit and not the temple issue?

If High Priest Nikken resigned tomorrow and Nichiren Shoshu apologized for its actions, things would not go back to “normal.” This is not simply an issue between the temple and the SGI. This conflict with the priesthood serves as a wake-up call to learn how to protect the SGI and the pure essence of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

Soka Spirit is the fundamental spirit of the SGI, a spirit perhaps best expressed in the Daishonin's own words, “If you are of the same mind as Nichiren, you must be a Bodhisattva of the Earth” (WND, 385).

Soka means value creation. What better way to create value than to identify and oppose those forces that would destroy the SGI and lead people to suffering? This issue is a wonderful opportunity to learn the true power of the Daishonin's Buddhism — the power to lead suffering people toward happiness.

It's about learning — as the first three presidents of the Soka Gakkai did — that the real battle is an internal one, developing the courage to practice as Bodhisattvas of the Earth and fight against the fundamental darkness inherent in all life. While Nichiren Shoshu may be the focal point of this particular struggle, the real battle is waged within ourselves, against our own passivity. In this way, Soka Spirit provides the perfect stage for our own human revolution — the perfection of our true selves through battling external evil.

Why should I care about this? What does Soka Spirit have to do with me?

Many of us began our Buddhist practice with the desire to see changes in our daily lives — to receive benefit. SGI President Ikeda has said: “The Daishonin writes, ‘The *ku* of *kudoku* (benefit) means to extinguish evil and *doku* means to bring forth good’ (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 762). Good is not simply a matter of doing charitable deeds or living piously; it includes fighting evil and injustice. By rebuking evil, we expiate our negative karma and bring forth good fortune and benefit. This is the meaning of benefit in the Daishonin’s Buddhism. Happiness is born when we fight injustice” (*World Tribune*, October 29, 1999, p. 5).

When we read the fourth silent prayer every day, we pray “that the great desire for kosen-rufu be fulfilled, and that the Soka Gakkai International develop eternally in this endeavor.” Soka Spirit activities provide us an opportunity to take action toward these goals.

When we refute Nichiren Shoshu, are we slandering them?

The Daishonin dedicated his life to strictly correcting anything contrary to the teaching of Shakyamuni. He held public debates and prayer-challenges with priests of other sects to determine the correct teachings of Buddhism and wrote many strongly-worded letters of remonstrance with other schools of Buddhism. Our efforts to clarify the Daishonin’s intent through refuting the errors of Nichiren Shoshu are a continuation of this spirit.

Central to the Daishonin’s teaching is the declaration that all people equally possess the potential for enlightenment and that the power to bring forth the Law exists within all people. Nichiren Shoshu teaches that the high priest alone bestows this power, that the priesthood is inherently superior to the laity and we can’t attain enlightenment without them. They teach that correct faith is “absolute faith in and strict obedience to the high priest” (*Dai-Nichiren Special Edition: The Correct Way of Faith in Nichiren Shoshu*, p. 13). This is not the teaching of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism based on the Lotus Sutra; therefore, we must refute it.

In “Letter of Petition from Yorimoto,” the Daishonin states, “If one sees a misguided priest sending others into hell with his evil teachings and fails to reproach that priest and expose his errors, then one is oneself betraying the Buddha’s teaching” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 807).

So how do we refute erroneous teachings? We can pray sincerely for those people who have been swayed by the priesthood. We can study Buddhist teachings, clarifying the truth for ourselves and share this understanding with others. Some people do not have a solid understanding of the history of Buddhism, and may not be able to stand firm against those who would distort it.

We can also share Buddhism with our friends. When we have the courage to reach out to others with genuine compassion, we can increase the allies of the Buddha and further negate the influence of distorted views.

It is important to understand that the SGI is not attacking Nichiren Shoshu out of pettiness, but is refuting those who would interpret the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin for their own purposes.

When we introduce people to Buddhism, should we tell them about the conflict with Nichiren Shoshu right away?

When I began my Buddhist practice in 1997, I had a hard time with this one. People in America have a lot of experience with corrupt religions and spiritual leaders trying to take advantage of them. I felt as if I needed to carefully consider when someone was ready to hear about the temple issue, as it was then referred to.

After I actually studied the issue, however, I realized it perfectly displayed the central theme of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism — that every person has the right and ability to become happy, regardless of their circumstances or access to the clergy. The Daishonin states, “There should be no discrimination among those who propagate the five characters of Myoho-renge-kyo in the Latter Day of the Law, be they men or women” (WND, 385).

This is the complete opposite of my past religious experience and is what drew me to Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism in the first place.

Armed with this awareness, I feel pride in sharing that my religious organization actually practices what it preaches. I can’t think of a better way to express the greatness of Buddhism than through the SGI’s spirit to protect the Daishonin’s teachings.

We are not simply about sharing the correctness of the true teaching. We refute views that lead people to suffering, particularly from those who portray themselves as possessing the correct teaching.

I would warn my friends about a car salesman who once ripped me off. Similarly, I would share with those I introduce to the Daishonin’s Buddhism that there are people who try to distort it. When we propagate our faith, we can best protect new members by explaining this issue along with the basics of the practice. If they know the truth from the start, how can anyone mislead them?

Is it our responsibility to protect the purity of the Daishonin’s teachings? If so, what is our role?

It is easy to assume that it is enough to understand the Daishonin’s teachings for ourselves, to make sure we’re not slandering the Law ourselves. But the Daishonin says, “To hope to attain Buddhahood without speaking out against slander is as futile as trying to find water in the midst of fire or fire in the midst of water” (WND, 747). He clearly states that our pursuit of absolute happiness is not possible without refuting slander. To truly practice Buddhism, we must stand up for justice in our prayer and our study, and by sharing it with others.

The members of the SGI are now in a position to prevent the past transgressions of Nichiren Shoshu from being repeated. Through our own efforts, we can keep the Daishonin’s teachings from being available only to those who show allegiance to the head temple. It was the Soka Gakkai that created the structure of our current gongyo. It was also the Soka Gakkai who refused to declare Shinto superior to the Law, as the priesthood did.

It is now our time, the youth of the SGI, to stand up for the teaching that will lead humanity to peace. We cannot expect that someone else will do it. We don’t need to be confined by history. We can build the type of kosen-rufu movement we want — one that follows the Daishonin’s intent. We can guarantee that our children and grandchildren have the same opportunity to benefit from this wonderful teaching, the way it was intended to be practiced.