

**AN ESSAY BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA  
THE ATSUHARA PERSECUTION:  
PUTTING BUDDHISM FIRST**

**‘Practitioners can be clearly divided into two categories: those who put Buddhism first and those who put themselves first,’ SGI President Ikeda explains. ‘In every age, one finds that those who abandon their faith tend to put their own feelings and interests before the teachings of Buddhism. By doing so, they create an opening by which devilish functions can gain entrance to their hearts and minds.’**

*The second of two essays by SGI President Ikeda on the Atsuhara Persecution. The first essay appeared in the March 9 World Tribune.*

If teacher and disciple are of different minds, they will never accomplish anything” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 909). During the Atsuhara Persecution, Nikko Shonin sent detailed reports on the unfolding events to Nichiren Daishonin, who was then at Mount Minobu, and received practical guidance and instruction from him. He faced this persecution completely united with his mentor, the Daishonin.

In 1278, Gyochi—the deputy chief priest of Ryusen-ji temple in Atsuhara Village—forged a government directive with his cronies outlawing faith in the Lotus Sutra in what was an underhanded attempt to stop the spread of the Daishonin’s teachings. The Daishonin declared that he did not even have to see the directive to know that it was fake. And in fact, it was quickly exposed as a forgery.

The schemers, however, were persistent with their devious machinations. They plotted to destroy the unity of the Daishonin’s followers by sowing seeds of doubt and dissension among those who harbored ill feeling or jealousy toward their fellow believers and cunningly persuading them to abandon their faith and turn on their comrades.

It is believed that onetime followers Ota Chikamasa and Nagasaki Tokitsuna, who abandoned their faith during the Atsuhara Persecution, had nursed ill will toward Takahashi Rokuro Hyoe, a key figure among the lay believers in the Fuji area.

Also, Sammi-bo, another who forsook his faith during the persecution, had been jealous of Nikko Shonin. As Nikko Sho-nin’s senior and a scholarly priest who studied at Mount Hiei, site of the head temple of the Tendai school, he was very arrogant, making much of his limited learning. And he was quite unenthusiastic about working among the people. Though the Daishonin had sent Sammi-bo to the Fuji area, he objected to serving there under his junior, Nikko Shonin.

Practitioners can be clearly divided into two categories: those who put Buddhism first and those who put themselves first. In every age, one finds that those who abandon their faith tend to put their own feelings and interests before the Buddhist teachings. By doing so, they create an opening through which devilish functions can gain entrance to their hearts and minds.

The Daishonin saw through the base nature of such people, describing them as “cowardly, unreasoning, greedy, and doubting” (WND, 998). One after another, these thankless traitors who had appeared among the Daishonin’s followers met untimely deaths—several of them being thrown from their horses.

The Daishonin declares that their fate constitutes “punishment for their treachery

against the Lotus Sutra,” and he identifies that punishment as “conspicuous and individual” (WND, 997). As many of you may know, those who betrayed their faith and forgot their debt of gratitude by turning on the Soka Gakkai—an organization acting in complete accord with the Buddha’s intent and decree—are all meeting the most pitiful, wretched ends.



Sept. 21, 1279—Gyochi chose this day, because he knew that many of the Atsuhara farmers who followed the Daishonin were going to harvest the rice in the fields that belonged to Nisshu, one of the priests at Ryusen-ji who had converted to the Daishonin’s teachings thanks to Nikko Shonin. Gyochi gathered together a large force, including local officials of the Shimogata Manor Administration Office, and launched a sudden attack on them in the midst of the harvest. Twenty farmers who were followers of the Daishonin were arrested and detained unjustly at the local administrative office.

In addition, Gyochi drew up a list of false charges and presented it to the military government. He accused Nisshu of leading a group of armed farmers in an attack on the chief priest’s private quarters at Ryusen-ji and of stealing rice from fields belonging to the temple. These charges were nothing more than “a false suit designed to hide his [Gyochi’s] own offenses” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 850).

To bring a fraudulent lawsuit against innocent individuals in order to hide one’s own crimes constitutes a blatant “abuse of the right to sue.” The malicious plots against the Soka Gakkai in recent years have followed this pattern.

As soon as he learned of the content of Gyochi’s suit, Nikko Shonin drafted a letter of petition to the authorities and sent it to the Daishonin. Nikko Shonin’s draft clearly explains what happened and sets forth the evil deeds of Gyochi and his confederates. The Daishonin added to the first half of the petition the fact that the predictions of his treatise “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land” had come true, along with a refutation of the erroneous teachings of Gyochi and other Ryusen-ji priests.

With the first half written by the Daishonin and the second by Nikko Shonin, this document, the “Ryu-sen-ji Petition” (*Gosho Zenshu*, pp. 849–53), is clear evidence of the shared struggle of mentor and disciple.



The 20 farmers under arrest were quickly dispatched to Kamakura, the seat of the military government, where they underwent questioning by the powerful Hei no Saemon, the deputy chief of the Office of Police and Military Affairs. Not one of them broke under the inhumane interrogation to which they were subjected. Not one of them caved in to the authorities’ threats, intimidation and torture.

Finally, Jinshiro and his two brothers—the three martyrs—gave their lives for their beliefs. It was a moment of indelible significance in the history of human rights. They died truly heroic deaths.

“On Practicing the Buddha’s Teachings” tells us that even should we be beheaded, “Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the Buddhas of the ten directions will come to us instantly...while all the heavenly gods and benevolent deities will raise a canopy over our heads and unfurl banners on high. They will escort us under their protection to the treasure land of Tranquil Light” (WND, 395–96).

I once asked my mentor, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda, about the deaths of the three martyrs of Atsuhara. His reply was clear and unequivocal: “Even if we should be

killed, if our death has been for the sake of the Mystic Law, then we will attain Buddhahood without fail. It will be like having a dream shortly after drifting off to sleep, and then falling into a deep, peaceful slumber afterward.” No matter how those who dedicate their lives to kosen-rufu may die, it will never be a miserable, wretched death.

There is also a legend that one of the farmers arrested was a woman, who declared bravely: “Don’t delay my execution because I am a woman. Execute me now!”

Immediately after learning of the deaths, the Daishonin wrote the letter “Reply to Sages and Others,” in which he urged his followers: “You must not be afraid. I am sure that if you keep advancing strongly things are certain to become clear” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1455). This was his lion’s roar.

Nanjo Tokimitsu, a young local steward in his 20s and a lay follower of the Daishonin, carried out this injunction to the letter, stepping bravely into the fray to fight for his comrades. He became the target of much pressure from the government for protecting and giving shelter to the Atsuhara believers, but even in the direst of circumstances he staunchly defended the Daishonin and led the counterattack against the authorities in the cause of justice.

The fact that the local believers surmounted and emerged triumphant in the Atsuhara Persecution was due to the intrepid, tenacious efforts of this youth, who dedicated his life to the path of mentor and disciple.



At that time, the Daishonin observed, “In the past, and in the present Latter Day of the Law, the rulers, high ministers, and people who despise the votaries of the Lotus Sutra seem to be free from punishment at first, but eventually they are all doomed to fall” (WND, 997).

Fourteen years later, in April 1293, government forces surrounded Hei no Saemon’s residence and set it on fire. His eldest son, Munetsuna, had secretly accused him of plotting against the government.

As the flames and government forces closed in around him, Hei no Saemon had no choice but to kill himself, tormented by the agonies of the hell of incessant suffering—in the very house where he had tortured and killed the three martyrs. By his side was his second son, Sukemune, who had tortured the captive Atsu-hara farmers by firing blunt-tipped arrows at them.

The entire family, once so illustrious and powerful, perished in the flames. The eldest son, who had betrayed his father, was exiled to Sado, and Hei no Saemon’s line was wiped out.

The 26th high priest, Nichikan, wrote in his “Commentary on ‘The Selection of the Time,’” “The distant cause [of the demise of Hei no Saemon’s family] is the offense of striking Nichiren Daishonin, while the near cause is the offense of executing the three martyrs at the time of the Atsu-hara Persecution.”



Another verse of the Soka Gakkai song “The Three Martyrs of Atsuhara” goes:

*Jinshiro, passing from one life into the next,  
Like cherry blossoms scattering in the breeze,  
Renowned as a model of devotion to kosen-rufu—*

*How noble the life  
Of this honorable martyr of Atsuhara.*

The Soka Gakkai's founding father, Tsunesaburo Maki-guchi, died in prison in the same spirit as the three martyrs of Atsuhara. And Mr. Toda and myself, too, following in my mentor's footsteps, have borne the brunt of all manner of persecution. To battle on amid persecution and give our lives to our cause is the source of the greatest pride.

Obstacles lead to enlightenment. Selflessly propagating the Mystic Law toward the realization of worldwide kosen-rufu is the undying distinction of the first three Soka Gakkai presidents.