

Questions and Answers on the Temple Issue

The following excerpts from the pamphlet Questions and Answers on the Temple Issue include the "Introduction" and questions 2 and 4. These are the only sections in the pamphlet required for the Entrance-level Exam.

Introduction

THIS pamphlet attempts to outline some key elements of what has become known in the Soka Gakkai International (SGI) as the "temple issue"—events and information related to Nichiren Shoshu's attacks on the SGI, and its continued efforts to undermine SGI's movement.

When the priesthood of Nichiren Shoshu began a series of measures against the SGI at the beginning of this decade intended to disband and destroy the organization, it may have been shocking and disturbing, but it was not surprising from the standpoint of Nichiren Daishonin's teachings and of history. Many incidents and events going back to the Soka Gakkai's inception before World War II indicated that within the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood there existed the potential for hatred and jealousy toward lay believers. It was evident in the attitude and behavior of more than a few priests. As the Gakkai's growth and influence increased, so did the number of priests who harbored such an attitude until, eventually, it reached the office of high priest.

Buddhism means growth, progress, improvement—of the individual and of society; it spurs development through a deep inner reformation. This reformation, as it progresses in the life of the individual, sends waves of vitality, humanity and harmony into the family, the workplace, the community and society. This is the process of human revolution as it unfolds into the broader process we call kosen-rufu. The ultimate aim is to secure a world of peace, harmony, fulfillment and happiness.

This most elemental purpose of Buddhism has never been well received by those with a strong stake in the status quo, in the established order—particularly when that order is stagnant and calls for passivity or unquestioning obedience on the part of ordinary people.

The Soka Gakkai since its inception has been based on the purest intent of Buddhism, aiming at a fundamental reordering of the lives of the people who embrace its practice and philosophy. Because of this, the movement and its leaders have been maligned, hated and looked upon with contempt by those who feel threatened by its energy and the changes it promises to bring. There is no question that the passage in the Lotus Sutra, "And since hatred and jealousy toward this sutra abound even when the Thus Come One is in the world, how much more will this be so after his passing?" (LS10, 164), applies precisely to the Soka Gakkai's situation, as it did to Nichiren Daishonin.

The human revolution and social renaissance of the SGI are particularly

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distasteful to those whose authority and power are rooted in a weak and dependent people. The practice of Buddhism produces a happier and more aware populace; a socially responsible and politically involved citizenry; a people who know what true leadership means, whether religious or secular, and who are perceptive and courageous enough to unmask self-serving authority.

History abounds with examples of oppression by religious or secular authority over those who advocated a new way of thinking or tried to empower ordinary people. Many new traditions sprang from the courage of these ordinary individuals who overcame such oppression. The world's major religions have all experienced such opposition during their early history.

Examples of opposition to those who spread Buddhism in its true spirit are many in Buddhist scripture, particularly in the Lotus Sutra. Nichiren Daishonin chronicles in detail the persecutions, by cunning and self-serving priests and political leaders, that he and his supporters underwent in thirteenth-century Japan.

Buddhism characterizes opposition by authority as devilish functions, as obstacles, as influence by "bad friends" or ultimately, as opposition by the third of the "three powerful enemies," and also addresses the internal ramifications of these in the life and faith of the believer. But in its harshest form, the formula of oppression in the history of Buddhism is always the same: A religious authority perceives the teachings or movement promoted by a genuine Buddhist leader as a threat, and then, colluding with secular authorities, attempts to use whatever means are at his disposal to suppress, disband or do away with that leader or movement. Because that leader is innocent of any secular wrongdoing or religious error, crimes and misdeeds are invented and rumored, with the ultimate aim to quash the influence and respect afforded to those committed to Buddhism.

Another vital point to keep in mind is this: Meeting opposition to our efforts to spread the Daishonin's Buddhism does not mean that the SGI has done something wrong and is therefore experiencing retribution.

On the contrary, as we know from the Daishonin's own history, he himself experienced many persecutions from the government and harassment from the religious authorities of his day. Such obstacles, the Daishonin explains, are not only a natural consequence of one's efforts to spread Buddhism but also an indication of the correctness of the teaching that he or she practices:

If you propagate it, devils will arise without fail. Were it not for these, there would be no way of knowing that this is the true teaching. One passage from the same volume reads, "As practice progresses and understanding grows, the three obstacles and four devils emerge, vying with one another to interfere.... You should be neither influenced nor frightened by them. If you fall under their influence, you will be led into the paths of evil. If you are frightened by them, you will be prevented from practicing true Buddhism." This quotation not only applies to Nichiren but also is the guide for his disciples. Reverently make this teaching your own and transmit it as an axiom of faith for future generations. (MW-1, 145)

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And:

When I examine these passages, I know that if I do not call forth these three enemies of the Lotus Sutra, then I will not be a true votary of the Lotus Sutra. Only by making them appear can I be a true votary. (MW-4, 20)

When the Lotus Sutra states, “hatred and jealousy toward this sutra abound,” it puts no limits on who might become susceptible to such base impulses. Any of us is prone to selfish or spiteful emotions. It is only through a life devoted to developing the “greater self,” to ceaseless efforts to improve ourselves and take responsibility for the happiness of others, that we can guard against succumbing to such tendencies. Position, status or role in the realm of Buddhism or society do not guarantee the nobility of one’s deeds.

The Daishonin admonishes: “Strengthen your faith day by day and month after month. Should you slacken even a bit, demons will take advantage” (MW-1, 241–42), so that we may win over our weaknesses and never fall victim to our own “demons” of greed, anger and foolishness.

To criticize anti-Buddhist attitude and behavior or to refuse to follow those who maintain such an attitude and behavior in no way contradicts Buddhism. It is in fact the only correct action to take if one regards the Daishonin’s teachings on such matters seriously. This has been the stance of the Gakkai toward the “Nikken sect,” the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood in its corrupt state under the leadership of Nikken Abe.

Ultimately, all the difficulties that the Soka Gakkai and SGI have undergone in regards to the temple issue herald the arrival of a glorious time—a time when Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism will be spread widely by the Bodhisattvas of the Earth to serve as the philosophical basis of world peace and humanity’s happiness in the centuries to come. This is called the Soka Renaissance.

Therefore, we can confidently say that by being excommunicated by Nikken, the Soka Gakkai has actually liberated itself from the shackles of the priesthood and its authoritarianism. This also means that the Daishonin’s Buddhism has been given the grand opportunity in this time period to be taught exactly as it was by Nichiren Daishonin. □

Question 2:

Why Is It Important To Know About the Temple Issue?

THE temple issue speaks to the essence of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. To understand the issue challenges each of us to realize that taking full responsibility for our own happiness is the path of correct faith and practice.

Simply put, the temple issue provides a real-world, modern-day opportunity to witness the principles that Nichiren Daishonin spoke about 700 years ago. For this reason, we should avoid viewing the problem as something of the past or of another place, something that is not our personal concern. To do so would mean missing an

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irreplaceable learning opportunity. We would also do a disservice to those who join the SGI in the future: If we do not understand and transmit the profound implications of these events to future generations, then those to follow may face similar obstacles without the benefit of the example and understanding we could pass on.

In many of his writings, Nichiren Daishonin cautions how futile it is to practice Buddhism without correctly grasping the meaning of faith. If we fail to understand the fundamental principles of our faith, he says, no matter how much time we may put into it, our practice will “become an endless, painful austerity” (MW-1, 4), and our Buddhist knowledge will “not relieve [us] of mortal sufferings in the least” (MW-1, 4). He goes so far as to say that without a correct understanding of faith, “it would be useless to embrace the Lotus Sutra [i.e., the Gohonzon]” (MW-1, 25).

“Correct faith” in the Daishonin’s Buddhism means to view things as Nichiren Daishonin taught, share his convictions, and practice and develop our lives in accord with that understanding. Question 4 of this pamphlet lists a few examples of how the temple’s view on certain matters of faith diverges significantly from that of the Daishonin.

In another Goshō, he writes:

It is a time when...truth and error stand shoulder to shoulder, and when Mahayana and Hinayana dispute which is superior. At such a time, one must set aside all other affairs and devote one’s attention to rebuking slander of the Law. This is the practice of shakubuku. (MW-5, 103)

Erroneous views in Buddhism are often propounded by those well versed in theory yet who fail to grasp the heart or spirit of Buddhism, those who lack a compassionate practice. It is up to those who do understand the heart of Buddhism to shed light on what is true and what is erroneous.

As SGI members, we might ask ourselves whether we could clearly explain this issue to someone else, even to someone outside our organization or someone interested in practicing for the first time. If we are asked: “What is the temple issue about?” or “How can you say that the SGI is correct and Nichiren Shōshū is wrong”? can we give a convincing answer?

When we can answer these questions through our own understanding and conviction, then we have grasped something important for our own faith and lives. We will also gain insight into fundamental issues affecting humanity: the nature of justice, the qualities of a true leader, equality, tolerance, and the purpose of religion. The temple issue gives us an excellent opportunity to learn about the Daishonin’s Buddhism, which is, after all, about our own lives and humanity.

It is no secret that the intention of Nichiren Shōshū is to disband the SGI and destroy our movement, denying millions of believers the source of nourishment for their faith and practice and stopping the progress of kosen-rufu.

In a recent speech at the head temple, Nichiren Shōshū General Administrator

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Nichijun Fujimoto is reported to have said, "Now is the time to crush the Soka Gakkai." Efforts by priests and temple members in the United States to convince members to leave the SGI by creating doubts regarding the Gohonzon or spreading misinformation about the SGI are clearly increasing.

The Daishonin writes, "Simply to chant one four-phrase verse or the daimoku, and to protect those who do so, is called the essential practice" (MW-3, 9). The best way to protect ourselves and our fellow members from being misled is to arm ourselves with correct information and understanding. Our study of the temple issue will help us do this. □

Question 4:

What Is the Real Difference Between the Temple and SGI?

THE difference between the Soka Gakkai International and Nichiren Shoshu clearly can be seen in at least four key areas:

1) View of Equality

THE Lotus Sutra is a teaching of absolute equality — it affirms that all people, regardless of status, gender or background, are potentially Buddhas.

Nichiren Daishonin reaffirms this in many places throughout his writings. To a lay believer named Abutsu-bo, he writes:

You, yourself, are a true Buddha who possesses the three enlightened properties. You should chant Nam-myoho-rence-kyo with this conviction. (MW-1, 30)

In another letter he writes:

There should be no discrimination among those who propagate the five characters of Myoho-rence-kyo in the Latter Day of the Law, be they men or women. (MW-1, 93)

While the SGI bases itself on absolute respect for the individual, and its activities focus on thorough dialogue with people on all levels of society, Nichiren Shoshu staunchly asserts that it is a "sin" to speak of the equality of priests and lay practitioners, as we can see in a letter to the SGI from the temple's chief administrator, Nichijun Fujimoto:

To talk about the priesthood and laity with a sense of equality are expressions of great conceit. In fact, they correspond to the five cardinal sins.... (January 12, 1991)

Representative of such beliefs is the following comment from a priest's sermon

at a temple in Japan:

A priest who wears this robe is special and different from lay believers. He is always seated with the Gohonzon behind him, but whatever the priest may do on other occasions and no matter how luxuriant his lifestyle, it is totally all right. You lay believers are confused about this point. These matters are of no account. (Seido Oyabu, at Horin-ji, January 1991)

Around this doctrine of absolute clerical superiority, it created an atmosphere in which the actions and intentions of priests can never be questioned; in which lay believers are obliged to serve priests, but priests have no obligation to serve the believers. Even funeral and memorial services are conducted with the expectation of receiving donations, and with undisguised dissatisfaction if those donations fall below par. This is in stark contrast to the attitude of Nichiren Daishonin, which was one of appreciation, respect, service and support of the believers.

2) View of the Gohonzon

NICHIREN Daishonin clearly indicates in the Gosho that the Gohonzon is a manifestation of his life as an enlightened human being, and that it is no different from the enlightened potential within all ordinary people.

He writes:

Never seek this Gohonzon outside yourself. The Gohonzon exists only within the mortal flesh of us ordinary people who embrace the Lotus Sutra and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. (MW-1, 213)

In another letter, he writes: "Abutsu-bo is the Treasure Tower itself, and the Treasure Tower is Abutsu-bo himself. No other knowledge is purposeful" (MW-1, 30). Later in the same letter, the Daishonin equates the "Treasure Tower" to the Gohonzon.

Nichiren Shoshu's position is that these teachings by the Daishonin are to be interpreted by priests only, not by lay believers. Their teaching on the Gohonzon is as follows: The Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is not inherent in all phenomena or in the lives of ordinary people. It exists only in the physical object of the Dai-Gohonzon and in the life of the current high priest, who has received it through a secret ceremony conducted with his predecessor. Only the high priest can empower a Gohonzon by personally conducting a special ceremony. Any benefit comes to the believer directly through the auspices and sanction of the office of the high priest. Temple publications state, "The sanctioning of the object of worship by the High Priest, who is the only person to be bequeathed the Daishonin's Buddhism, is what makes the attainment of Buddhahood possible" (From an NST publication, *Refuting the Soka Gakkai's Counterfeit Object of Worship* 100 Questions and Answers, p. 36).

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The temple's stance is that believing the Law or the Gohonzon to exist within one's own life will send that person to hell.

Nichiren Shoshu's position on the Gohonzon stands in stark contrast with that of the Daishonin himself. The Soka Gakkai embraces the Daishonin's view that the Gohonzon is the embodiment of the Buddha's wisdom and compassion. The Daishonin inscribed it so that we can awaken the same wisdom and compassion within us. One's power of faith and practice to the Gohonzon enables him or her to tap the power of the Gohonzon within to which the Daishonin so adamantly refers. For the high priest or anyone to claim sole possession of the Law and control over the power of the Gohonzon is the basest form of exploitation of the Daishonin's teachings.

3) View of the "Heritage" of the Law

IN his letter "Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life," Nichiren Daishonin clearly describes and defines what it means to receive the "heritage" or "lifeblood" of faith in his Buddhism:

Shakyamuni who attained enlightenment countless aeons ago, the Lotus Sutra which leads all people to Buddhahood, and we ordinary human beings are in no way different or separate from each other. Therefore, to chant Myoho-enge-kyo with this realization is to inherit the ultimate law of life and death. (MW-1, 22)

In addition, the Daishonin writes:

All disciples and believers of Nichiren should chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo with one mind, transcending all differences among themselves to become as inseparable as fish and the water in which they swim. This spiritual bond is the basis for the universal transmission of the ultimate law of life and death. (MW-1, 23)

And:

Be resolved to summon forth the great power of your faith, and chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo with the prayer that your faith will be steadfast and correct at the moment of your death. Never seek any other way to inherit the ultimate law and manifest it in your life. (MW-1, 25)

Before 1991, Nikken himself supported the view of the heritage as expressed by the Daishonin in these passages, saying: "This lifeblood of faith is inherited not only by a high priest. It is also inherited by all priests and lay believers who inherit the true teaching. When these priests and lay believers carry out pure faith in the true teaching and practice accordingly, they unlock the pure water of the law within their lives and equally attain enlightenment through believing in

and understanding the Law.” (*Dai-Nichiren*, April 1987)

The priesthood today repeatedly refers to the exclusive transmission of the heritage of the Law to the high priest through what it calls the “Face to Face Bestowal of the Living Essence of the Law,” insisting that the nature of this bestowal is beyond the capacity of ordinary people to comprehend. In a section called “Absolute Faith in and Strict Obedience to the High Priest,” we see the following passage:

When the priests and lay believers of the faith of Nichiren Shoshu have the occasion to be in the presence of the High Priest, with palms pressed earnestly together in sincere gratitude, we pay prayer-like reverence to him as the Master who embodies the Living Essence of the Body of the entirety of the Law of all existence.... In short, with perfectly sincere faith and self-imposed, strict obedience, we should hold the High Priest’s instruction in deepest reverence—and we must realize that it is **right there** (sic) that the great, direct path of the true relationship of unfiltered, unrestricted faith between Master and disciple, which leads to ultimate enlightenment in this lifetime, is to be found. (*Dai-Nichiren*, Special Edition: On the Soka Gakkai Problem (II) pp. 13–14)

The SGI firmly rejects this idea of the exclusive possession and bestowal of an intangible “essence” of all Buddhism to a single individual by virtue of his religious position. Not only does Nichiren Daishonin never mention such a rite, he clearly refutes it.

4) Attitude and Behavior

THE most essential difference lies in the realm of commitment and action taken toward the accomplishment of kosen-rufu and the people’s happiness, toward securing a peaceful world based on the spread of the Daishonin’s Buddhism.

SGI members have continuously exerted themselves for decades to spread Buddhism, devoting their evenings and weekends to chant and work for the happiness of their friends. SGI President Ikeda, in particular, has met with one person after another, Buddhists and non-Buddhists of all nations and fields of society, to share his commitment to peace and engender an understanding of Buddhist humanism.

It is evident, however, that priests have played a far more passive role, spending most of their time at the temple attending primarily to ceremonies and services. While many Gakkai members were at activities in the evenings, visiting and encouraging friends or studying Buddhism together, most priests remained at home. It also became clear that many were indulging themselves by joining expensive country clubs or frequenting night-clubs, lavishly and frivolously spending money earned from the members’ donations.

Nevertheless, Nichiren Shoshu priests continued to maintain an air of superiority and even condescension toward hard-working Gakkai members. Their aloofness toward the laity is still evident in their relationship with

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Hokkeko or temple members. For example, at a May 1997 ceremony at a temple in Los Angeles after which the lay temple members held a pot-luck lunch in the parking lot, the dozen or so priests in attendance quickly exited to a separate room to enjoy their own catered feast. There was no exchange or interaction with the laity, other than with a few appointed representatives. □

Q2 Key Points:

- The temple issue gives us an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the basics of the Daishonin's Buddhism.
- It causes all of us to ask: "What is the meaning of correct faith and practice?"
- It teaches us about our own lives, about how to deepen our faith.
- Understanding the issue can help us educate others, thus helping them become aware of the priesthood's designs.

Q4 Key Points:

- The SGI and Nichiren Shoshu differ fundamentally in their action and commitment to kosen-rufu and their respect and support of ordinary believers.
- While the SGI advocates and practices the highest respect for the individual, the temple demands that believers place their highest respect in the priests.
- Nichiren Shoshu has twisted the Daishonin's teachings, interpreting them only from the standpoint of the assumed superiority and infallibility of the priesthood.