

“The Law Does Not Spread by Itself”

IN preparing this month’s column, I recalled the many question-and-answer sessions I’ve had with members over the last few years about the severed relationship between the SGI and Nichiren Shoshu. For some, this issue touches emotional chords. Often, people they’ve known have allied themselves with the temple because they became angry or held a grudge against something or someone in the SGI-USA. For others, it is an attachment to ritual and ceremony. For all, it is a fundamental misunderstanding of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism.

The more I listen to the members, the more I realize how the lack of a cultural and historical context keeps some from seeing just how serious a matter is the religion one embraces.

Nichiren Daishonin spent his entire life warning people about the dangers of false teachings. It is the underlying theme of nearly all of his writings, and the reason he suffered persecution during his lifetime. Priests in thirteenth-century Kamakura depended upon the ignorance of the people to go about making their living.

From the Daishonin’s perspective, belief in misleading teachings is the root cause of people’s suffering. Nonetheless, only a relative handful of the people embraced the Daishonin’s teachings while he was alive. Most remained firmly attached to the very sects he warned them about. What he didn’t live to see were the additional sects that would flourish in Japan based on distortions of *his* teachings—which means that the Japanese have lived under the influence of misleading sects for the last seven centuries. America, on the other hand, which is basically a Judeo-Christian nation, has suffered little of the ill effects of these various sects. For this reason, I will share my personal experience growing up in Japan.

I was born in the Atsuhara region. My family were strong supporters of the Minobu sect.

Atsuhara, a small town in the Mount Fuji area, is rich in the history of the Daishonin’s Buddhism. It is the site where three farmers were beheaded for refusing to forsake their faith (see “The Untold History of the Fuji School,” p. 6). It is where the Daishonin wrote a draft of his thesis “On Securing the Peace of the Land through the Propagation of True Buddhism”—at Jisso-ji temple. My friends and I used to play at that temple when we were kids. It is also where Nikko Shonin and Nanjo Tokimitsu lived and carried out their propagation activities.

It has been said that family discord often afflicts followers of the Minobu sect. In my family, there were always domestic problems. My mother and mother-in-law quarreled constantly; even my aunt joined in. One of the most vivid memories of my childhood is the total chaos at home. Of course, we didn’t know anything about the Daishonin’s teachings. We only practiced our religion when praying at the funeral or memorial service of one of our friends or

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relatives.

I LEFT home after high school and moved to Yokohama, where I attended college. In those days, sports clubs were very popular. I joined one and took up boxing. I also rented an apartment from a couple who happened to be district leaders in the Soka Gakkai. This is where I ended up after moving twice.

My landlady and her friends in the Soka Gakkai would often speak to me about Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and about joining. I would always turn her down. Because of my background with the Minobu sect, I didn't understand a thing she was talking about. I certainly didn't believe one religion could be any different from any other; to me they were all the same. I was not all that interested in religion anyway.

ONE day while boxing, I injured my back; the pain was excruciating. I learned that I had a herniated disk. I could hardly sleep, much less walk. I barely ate, so I got skinnier and skinnier. I couldn't concentrate in school; my grades plummeted. I was totally without hope. I even thought of suicide, but I didn't have the courage to do it.

One doctor told me that my only hope was to undergo a high-risk operation; but I could still end up paralyzed. I was terrified. I decided to have the surgery, but first I wanted to go home and see my mother for what might be the last time. I looked so bad that my mother cried when she saw me.

On the train ride back to Yokohama, I thought about the discussions I'd had with my landlady and others for the past year. I started chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo under my breath in an effort to calm myself because I was frightened of my condition. I remember my landlady telling me that chanting would give me a sense of security. When the train arrived in Yokohama, it was quite late, but I burst into my landlady's living room anyway; I told her I wanted to become a member of the Soka Gakkai and start chanting.

I received the Gohonzon and enshrined it in my apartment. That afternoon, when I went to the hospital, the doctor examined me and said, much to my surprise, that there was no herniated disk; that I wouldn't need the operation. Instead he prescribed Vitamin B. That was it. I had mixed feelings. I was still in pain. The doctor seemed not to know what to do. I determined that from that moment I would take charge of my own life. I was 21 years old. From that day on, I practiced in earnest. My leaders gave me many books to read. And I attended every study meeting I could. I began to learn how great Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is.

As I studied Buddhism and about the Daishonin's life, there were so many people who helped me to practice. They encouraged me as if I were their very own son, and the young men's division members helped me to attend meetings. They were sincerely concerned about me. For this reason, Buddhism became very alive for me.

This is the kind of philosophy I had been looking for all along. The more I chanted, the more hope and confidence I felt. I changed my attitude toward life.

Three months later, I went home to Atsuhara. My mother couldn't believe her

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eyes when she saw me. I had completely changed my attitude. The last time she had seen me, I seemed on the verge of death. Now I had strong conviction to overcome my problems. Seeing such a radical change, my mother decided to join the Soka Gakkai immediately. My mother-in-law and my sister also joined that very evening.

I grew so busy with activities that I almost forgot about my illness. After six months of practice, I realized I had overcome all of my physical problems.

It was through my problems that I could be open-minded enough to seek and develop an active practice based on the "living philosophy" of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. I feel appreciation for my illness because it led me to the practice, as well as to my Gakkai friends. It helped me to change my life. The willingness of other members to help me enabled me to see that the spirit to sincerely care for and support one person is the heart of the SGI organization. As the Daishonin states: "The Law does not spread by itself. Because the person propagates it, both the person and the Law are worthy of respect" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 856).

Even in a place such as Atsuhara, where the lay believers gave their lives for the sake of the Law, the spirit of the Daishonin was abandoned. With that in mind, I'd like everyone to recognize that the Daishonin's spirit is always at great risk of being lost, as the current situation with Nichiren Shoshu so aptly illustrates. We can never become complacent. We must take responsibility to propagate and uphold the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin; and to embrace SGI President Ikeda's spirit to fight for justice and for the happiness of all people. After all, the Daishonin's teachings are a "living philosophy" only to the extent that we give them full expression in daily life.

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