

The Times Call Forth Great People

The following speech was read by SGI Vice President Shigeo Hasegawa on SGI President Ikeda's behalf at the opening session of the SGI Spring Training Course, at the Soka International Friendship Hall in Sendagaya, Tokyo, April 19.

My heartfelt welcome to all of our precious SGI members who have gathered here from around the world. I greet you, leaders of profound seeking spirit, with my palms pressed together in deepest reverence and respect, and with the wish to warmly embrace every one of you in welcome.

When Nichiren Daishonin was in exile on Sado Island, a follower made the long and dangerous trip from Kamakura to visit him. He praised her valiant dedication, saying, "The length of the journey traveled in pursuit of the Law represents the strength of the seeking spirit" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1223). In another letter to her, he wrote, "Let it be known that Shakyamuni Buddha, Taho Buddha, all the Buddhas of the ten directions, great bodhisattvas such as Jogyo and Muhengyo [Superior Practices and Boundless Practices], Bonten, Taishaku, the Four Heavenly Kings and other deities will protect you and be with you always, just as a shadow accompanies the body" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 3, p. 52).

Your benefit and good fortune, too, are immense. Solely for the sake of Buddhism, you have joyfully gathered here in Japan to participate in this training course, challenging and overcoming financial and other obstacles and making time in your busy schedules to do so. There is not the slightest doubt that the benefit that accrues from all these causes you have made will shine gloriously throughout eternity, in lifetime after lifetime, not only for you but for all your descendants.

Through your faith and efforts, the SGI movement, with members now in 128 nations and territories around the globe, is making sure and steady progress into the 21st century. A solid foundation is now in place. I want to express my humble gratitude for your noble efforts and hard work.

Buddhism Does Not Exist Apart From Society

The SGI always advances by spreading its roots broadly and deeply into society. I have quoted these words of the Daishonin time and time again, and I repeat them now: "A person of wisdom is not one who practices Buddhism apart from worldly affairs" (MW-6, 142). The Daishonin also clearly stated in his explanation of the precept of adapting the teachings to the locality that we should practice Buddhism according to the manners and customs of the country we are in (MW-6, 12-13).

Buddhism is reason. It doesn't exist apart from society, apart from reality. That is why it is important for each of us to cultivate good judgment and common sense. We must respect society's ways and try to harmonize with them. Respecting the life of each individual, we work among the people. This is the SGI's fundamental creed.

The SGI always advances in the spirit of many in body, one in mind. Nichiren Daishonin regarded this unified commitment in faith as the key to the successful accomplishment of kosen-rufu. He wrote:

All disciples and believers of Nichiren should chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with one mind (*itai doshin*), 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... When you are so united, even the great hope for kosen-rufu can be fulfilled without fail. (MW-1, 23)

Here, today, in this gathering of representatives from 56 nations and territories, of different nationalities and ethnic groups, in this noble assemblage of people united in the shared aspiration of faith, is the true spirit of kosen-rufu. How overjoyed the Daishonin would be to see your vibrant, joyous advance in such brilliant unity! How surely he would praise and applaud your endeavors! I hope you will all be absolutely certain that the SGI is moving forward in exact accord with the Daishonin's teachings.

The Times of Nichikan Shonin

I hope you, as leaders, will always have the spirit to learn with a lively curiosity and interest. When leaders are enthusiastic to keep learning and growing, they inspire others. New ideas emerge and spread. Fresh energy to advance surges forth. Instead of pretending to know all the answers, assuming an air of wisdom, let us always strive for greater understanding and insight into all things, so that we can continue learning together and spur one another to grow. This is the kind of spirit I want to cherish.

Recently, an overseas member asked me about the date on the Gohonzon transcribed by Nichikan Shonin, now being conferred on SGI members, which reads June 13 of the fifth year of the Kyoho Era. The member wanted to know what that period was like. It corresponds to 1720 on the Western calendar. This was in the middle of Japan's Edo Period (1600–1868), best known as the time when the progressive Kyoho Reforms were being instituted by the youthful eighth Tokugawa shogun, Yoshimune.

The Kyoho Reforms attempted to curb political corruption, fiscal decline and economic chaos. Specifically, the reforms called for such measures as employing people of talent in important public positions, unifying and stabilizing the currency, developing new rice fields to increase revenues, establishing procedures to make direct legal recourse available to ordinary citizens, founding hospitals for the poor, and encouraging learning among the common people. The Kyoho Reforms are widely regarded as the most successful political reforms in the Edo Period.

The year 1720, in particular, marked a series of important new undertakings. For example, in January, work began on the codification of the law. In July, the government instituted a comprehensive medical policy. In August, it reinforced the firefighting system and relaxed the prohibition against the import of Western books. Great steps were made in that year. The spirit of the reforms spread through society, creating a turning point, a watershed in government and the economy alike.

Meanwhile in Europe...

The period in which Nichikan (1665–1726) lived was marked in Europe by the emergence of Rationalism and the Enlightenment, movements that sought to examine old customs and established authority from a logical, reasonable point of view and liberate society from ancient prejudices and superstitions. These intellectual currents contributed enormously to sudden and dramatic advances in the natural sciences, such as botany, chemistry, astronomy and medicine.

Mr. Toda once observed that: "The times call forth great people. Consequently, when great people appeared in the East, they also appeared in the West." Around the same year that Nichikan was born, the young Sir Isaac Newton gained the first glimmerings of what became his theory of universal gravitation. Newton's contemporary, the astronomer Edmond Halley, calculated the orbit of the comet that is today named after him and became the royal astronomer in 1720 — the fifth year of the Kyoho Era in Japan. Also in 1720,

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Monadologie, the definitive work of German philosopher Baron Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, saw publication.

Many other important thinkers and philosophers were also born around this time. For example, French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1712; Scottish economist Sir James Steuart Denham in 1712; the founder of modern economic theory, Adam Smith, in 1723; the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant in 1724; Qing-dynasty writer Cao Xueqin (Ts'ao Hsüeh-ch'in), author of the great Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Hong lou meng), around 1715.

Nichikan, Religious Reformer

For us the important point is that Nichikan was a great religious reformer who lived in these momentous times.

Japanese Buddhism in this period had become, through a state-instituted parishioner system, closely aligned to the ruling authorities. It had devolved into “funeral Buddhism” with the sole function of controlling and exploiting the common people.

Within Nichiren Shoshu, high-ranking priests appeared during the first half of the 17th century who acted in direct transgression of the Daishonin's teachings. High Priest Nissei, for instance, supported the creation of images of Shakyamuni Buddha. Nichikan vigorously denounced such corruptions and courageously worked to reestablish the integrity of the Daishonin's Buddhism within the priesthood and without. He was a great scholar who composed many important texts, such as the *Rokkan Sho* (Six-volume Writings) and commentaries on a number of the Daishonin's major writings. He wrote these works for the sake of later generations and out of a selfless dedication to realizing kosen-rufu.

His sights were focused on a future time when the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin would spread throughout the world. He interpreted the word *land* of the principle of securing the peace of the land through establishing the truth (*rissho ankoku*) as indicating “the entire world” and also “the future.”¹

At the same time, he was a great human being who loved the people and was loved by them in turn. He lived a frugal, simple life, and he took pains to be a model of the priestly ideal of having few desires and being satisfied with having little, so that those who came after him would do likewise. Of course, he never married or had a family.

He treated the sincere donations he received from lay followers as if they were more precious than all other treasures. He insisted that the offerings made in exchange for copies of the Gohonzon were the very written characters of the Gohonzon transformed into gold. Such offerings should be used, he sternly warned his fellow priests, for kosen-rufu and not for any other purpose.² The Nikken sect has utterly trampled on and violated this solemn spirit.

'No Prayer Will Go Unanswered'

Nichikan Shonin wrote, “If you have faith in this Gohonzon and chant Nam-myohorenge-kyo even for a short while, no prayer will go unanswered, no offense unexpiated, no good fortune unbestowed and no righteousness unproven.”³

How overjoyed Nichikan would surely be to know that SGI members all over the world are chanting to the Gohonzon that he transcribed and are showing wonderful actual proof of faith, your lives filled with benefit!

Nichikan further wrote, “This Gohonzon of a life-moment possessing 3,000 realms is not somewhere outside us. It resides within the faith of us ordinary people.”⁴ And: “Everyone who receives and embraces this object of worship enters the way of the Buddha from time without beginning.... We common mortals who have entered the way of this Buddha are entirely one with this Buddha of limitless joy.”⁵ And further: “When one embraces and has

faith in this Gohonzon and chants Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, one's life immediately becomes the object of fundamental respect of a life-moment possessing 3,000 realms. It becomes the life of Nichiren Daishonin.”⁶

As these statements convey, Nichikan directly refuted the discriminatory view that placed priests above and believers below. He broke new ground in his times by declaring that Buddhism was and always would be a teaching of humanism and great undifferentiating wisdom.

He also emphasized that the efforts of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth to propagate the Mystic Law would invariably be dogged by the hatred and jealousy of many, and that the most hostile of these elements would be found among high-ranking priests of which the sutra warns when it says, “Evil demons will take possession of others” (*Lotus Sutra*, p. 194).⁷

Elsewhere, Nichikan wrote: “On a flower-filled morning, we dislike the wind. On a moonlit night, we abhor the clouds. [In the same way,] if we do not rebuke the evil priests who slander the Law, how can we carry out the good of the True Law?”⁸

The Gohonzon transcribed by Nichikan functions to safeguard SGI members from the malicious schemes of slanderous priests who have succumbed to destructive forces; it is “the banner of the propagation of the Lotus Sutra” (MW-1, 211) behind which we unite to carry out our activities to spread the Mystic Law throughout the world as Bodhisattvas of the Earth.

Those Who Respect Are Respected

I hope that the SGI will always remain the most friendly and harmonious of organizations. I ask you, as leaders, to be careful never to lose your tempers and scold members emotionally. The role of a leader is to be patient, to listen to what everyone has to say and to be encouraging and supportive. The Daishonin said, “Always remember that believers in the Lotus Sutra should absolutely be the last to abuse each other” (MW-3, 208). He also said, “Even should the people on your side make a slight error, pretend not to see or hear it” (MW-3, 239).

Our fellow members are all family with whom we are linked by deep bonds. If we support and protect this family, they will act as protective forces in our environment, supporting and keeping us from harm lifetime after lifetime. This is a profound principle of Buddhism.

Those who sincerely respect and praise their friends will also be respected and praised. Those who truly rejoice at their friends' happiness will enjoy a deep and genuine happiness themselves.

You are all infinitely noble leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth and have an immeasurably profound mission. Please stay healthy and cheerful. And please serve others with an ever-youthful spirit, with sincerity and genuine concern as you carry out your human revolution and strive always to create a life of utmost value.

The people of the world are hoping that the coming century will be an age in which humanistic ideals and values such as those embraced by the SGI prevail. All the world has great expectations for your endeavors. You will demonstrate the greatness of Buddhism if each of you, in your respective country, on the unique stage of your mission, becomes an exemplary citizen who values and contributes to society and to the welfare of your local community.

I close my speech today with these simple words to you, dear friends of deep mystic bonds: Your individual triumphs are the triumphs of the SGI; your progress is the progress of the world.

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1. "Commentary on the 'Rissho Ankoku Ron,'" *Nichikan Shonin Mondanshu* (The Commentaries of Nichikan Shonin) (Tokyo: Seikyo Shimbunsha, 1980), p. 8.
2. *Fuji Shugaku Yoshu* (Essential Works of the Fuji School), ed. Nichiko Hori (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 1991), vol. 5, p. 356.
3. "Commentary on 'The True Object of Worship,'" *Nichikan Shonin Mondanshu*, p. 443.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 465.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 488.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 548.
7. "Commentary on 'The Selection of the Time,'" *Nichikan Shonin Mondanshu*, p. 234.
8. "Commentary on the 'Rissho Ankoku Ron,'" *Nichikan Shonin Mondanshu*, p. 26.

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