

In It for the Money
STANDS TO REASON
By JEFF FARR, Associate Editor

Law-devouring hungry spirits renounce the world to spread Buddhism only because they think that if they preach the Law, people will respect them. Seeking worldly fame and fortune, they spend their entire present lifetime trying to outdo others in everything. They neither help people nor attempt to save even their own parents. Such persons are called Law-devouring hungry spirits, or those who use the Law to satisfy their desires. (“The Origin of Urabon,” *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 4, p. 93)

In a 1271 letter to Shijo Kingo, Nichiren Daishonin details the psychology of “Law-devouring hungry spirits” — not the kindest thing to call the priests of his day. The Daishonin here criticizes the way priests of other sects handled believers’ offerings, explaining how some secretly received offerings, using them only for themselves, while others openly received them and still didn’t share at all. He saw how his priestly peers were only in religion for the money.

This letter thus shows something of what makes powerful enemies tick — what they want, how they think, the predilections that make them into enemies of the Law. They preach the Law for respect, fame and fortune, the Daishonin says. And they never intend to save a soul.

Essentially, they are our enemies because they willingly abuse the Law.

This of course angered the Daishonin more than anything. He hated to see the people’s spiritual aspirations manipulated for the self-gain of the few. It was a time of extreme religious and societal upheaval, one in which the various sects in Japan vied with each other for power against an unstable political backdrop. A huge audience of suffering, confused people, desperately seeking fulfillment through religion, was ripe for the priests to manipulate.

Nikken is also a Law-devouring hungry spirit. He, too, abuses the Law to gain power over people and get their hard-earned dollars. One could argue that it was in hoping to make more money that he devised his new teaching in 1990 — that he alone possesses true enlightenment, that only through association with him could we ever become happy. An important part of keeping this connection with him strong for many temple members has been making financial donations to the priesthood. They’re signing checks for funeral services and good luck tablets (*toba*), hoping this will pay off as happiness for their loved ones and themselves.

But the Daishonin never allowed his followers to even think that financial contributions to him would equal their happiness. And he never took on a luxurious lifestyle, paid for by his followers, as Nikken and friends have so infamously.

The term *Law-devouring hungry spirits* may seem harsh. And other things that the SGI has called the priests over the last few years may seem extreme. We know these priests are greedy, but *Law-devouring hungry spirits*? Isn’t this just name calling?

No. The Daishonin’s purpose in using such forceful words was to wake the people up — he didn’t expect the priests to listen and suddenly change. The people, he declared, deserve something better than corrupt priests and should demand it.

The SGI’s purpose in its war of words is the same today: to wake people up. We all deserve something a lot better than religious leaders who abuse the Law.

And now we’re demanding it.

Four in a series