

**LIVING THE TEACHINGS (5)  
THE HERITAGE OF ATSUHARA  
BY FRED ZAITSU, PUBLISHER**

***“Urge on, but do not frighten, the ones from Atsuhara, who are ignorant of Buddhism. Tell them to be prepared for the worst, and not to expect good times, but take bad times for granted” (“On Persecutions Befalling the Sage,” The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, p. 998).***

The region beneath the southern slope of Mount Fuji offers some of the richest rice paddies in Japan. Several rivers thread their way through these fields in Shizuoka Prefecture where I grew up. I used to wander through the paddies, and from time to time, I’d come upon a stone monument that looked like it had been there forever. It was a memorial to the three martyrs of Atsuhara. I thought little about it until I learned the whole incredible story after joining the Soka Gakkai.

Seven hundred years earlier, farmers harvested rice from the same land I walked as a child. On September 21, 1279, twenty farmers from Atsuhara Village working on the harvest were arrested on fabricated charges, that included armed attack on a priest’s residence at Ryusen-ji temple and theft.

The arrest was a direct result of the farmers’ faith in Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. Successful propagation efforts by Nikko Shonin, the disciple and successor of Nichiren Daishonin, aroused hostility among local Tendai priests. In particular, the deputy chief priest of Ryusen-ji temple, Gyochi, was the central figure behind the Atsuhara Persecution. His power extended beyond temple walls, as he was a member of the politically powerful Hojo family. Already a corrupt force in the area, he became totally perverse when three priests from his temple, as well as many farmers in his parish, converted to Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism.

SGI President Ikeda has recently written about Atsuhara, beginning with a quote from the Daishonin: “‘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” (*World Tribune*, March 16, 2001, p. 8).

The arrests culminated in the beheading of three brothers for refusing to renounce their faith. The Daishonin alone had borne the brunt of persecution throughout his life. Now it was falling heavily on his followers, but they remained steadfast in their faith. This display of faith among his disciples precipitated the inscription of the Dai-Gohonzon the following month, which he dedicated to humanity.

In learning the story of the Atsuhara martyrs, I saw the familiar countryside of my childhood differently. I felt proud that my hometown was full of historical places related to the Atsuhara Persecution. The remains of Ryusen-ji temple still exist and nearby Jisso-ji temple still stands. It was in the sutra library of Jisso-ji that the Daishonin did research for writing “On

Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land.” It is also where he first met thirteen-year-old Nikko Shonin who aided him in his research and became his disciple.

After the SGI and Nichiren Shoshu separated in 1991, a question kept popping up in my mind — why are the people in Atsuhara predominantly believers of the Minobu school of Nichiren Buddhism? That school traces its origins to one of the five senior priests who rebelled against Nikko, the Daishonin’s chosen successor. Although Minobu believers chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, their interpretations of the Daishonin’s teachings betray his intent and are contrary to the views of Nikko Shonin. They relegate the Daishonin’s status to that of a mere adherent of the Tendai school and do not appreciate the significance of the Gohonzon as the sole object of devotion.

My family — on both my mother and father’s side — belonged to the Minobu sect. I remember the only times we chanted were at funerals, memorials and ceremonies. When we visited our family’s graves my mother and grandmother would tell me to chant, so I did. Once or twice a year, a priest would come to our house, recite the sutra and collect a donation.

I have wondered why a region so closely connected to the history of the Daishonin and Nikko Shonin does not bear their orthodox legacy. I did some research looking for an answer but found none. All I can do is reason out what might have happened.

The Daishonin died in 1282, and in 1298 Nikko Shonin built a seminary at Omosu Village that emphasized the intensive study of Nichiren Daishonin’s teachings and distinguished between the doctrines of the Fuji school and those set forth by the five senior priests.

Nikko Shonin died in 1333, shortly after the death of another key figure in the Atsuhara Persecution, Nanjo Tokimitsu, a strong lay leader and landowner in the area who provided support and protection for the farmers. (Nanjo Tokimitsu also donated the land for the head temple of the Fuji school founded by Nikko.)

Without strong, leading practitioners who understood the spirit of Nichiren Daishonin to instruct and encourage them in faith, I imagine that farmers in the region eventually lost confidence and were swayed in their beliefs. Left on their own, they probably saw little or no difference between the Fuji school and the Minobu school. Because of their conflict with Nikko Shonin, the Minobu priests probably looked at the Atsuhara area as a prime target for propagation. They must have watched for just the right time. Converting the Atsuhara farmers to Minobu would not have been so difficult. The only area that they hesitated to approach was the area immediately surrounding head temple Taiseki-ji. To me the tragedy of the Atsuhara farmers did not end in 1279.

The more similar that Nichiren schools appear in practice and doctrine, the more vigilant we must be in pointing out the differences. This is why Nichiren Daishonin strictly refuted the Tendai school. They had once correctly embraced the Law and then had gone astray. This was of more concern than those sects that followed teachings other than the Lotus Sutra. To allow confusion to go unchallenged is contrary to the Daishonin’s spirit of compassion. This is as true today as it was seven hundred years ago.

The battle between fundamental enlightenment and fundamental darkness — between the Buddha and the devil — is most evident in the realm where the Buddha’s teachings can be altered ever so deceptively. This is most likely what happened in the province where I grew up. Without a courageous teacher of the Law to clarify the truth, people gradually succumbed to the propagation efforts of the Minobu sect, unaware of their mistake. We must not make the same mistake again. This is why the Daishonin admonishes us to be prepared for the worst. “The worst” is becoming incapable of seeing injustice and being victimized by evil.