

## CHAPTER 14

# Liberating the Daishonin's Buddhism

November 28, 1991, will probably be marked as one of the most memorable days in the history of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. In an ultimate display of clerical authority, the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood excommunicated the SGI with its worldwide membership of more than ten million. The priesthood's sense of power rests on its ability to exclude believers from communion with the high priest, who, according to its new doctrine, is identical with the Dai-Gohonzon and Nichiren Daishonin in his spiritual properties.

The priesthood maintains that communion with or connection to the high priest is essential for believers' salvation; the excommunicated have no hope of attaining enlightenment. From the priesthood's standpoint, therefore, excommunication is a spiritual death sentence; it is a device to evoke believers' fear and thereby demand their obedience. For this device to be effective, however, believers must be convinced that their happiness depends upon their relationship with the high priest. Since excommunication is the priesthood's last resort in its attempt to restore its superior

status over believers, all it could do when this failed was to threaten excommunication again (in 1997) to those it had already excommunicated.

The 1991 excommunication was unprecedented in scale in the entire history of Buddhism and was certainly rare in any world religion. On November 7, prior to the excommunication, the priesthood sent the Gakkai a notice calling for its dissolution. On July 4, 1992, the priesthood revoked Daisaku Ikeda's status as a lay believer of Nichiren Shoshu, that is, excommunicating once again the leader of the already excommunicated lay organization. On September 29, 1997, Nichiren Shoshu held an emergency council session and revised its rules so that believers who belong to other religious groups would lose their status as believers unless they terminated their religious affiliations before the end of November (the priesthood maintained that it had excommunicated the Soka Gakkai organization but not its members). Thus, Gakkai members were once again expelled from Nichiren Shoshu on November 30, 1997. These repeated efforts to excommunicate SGI members demonstrate the failure of the priesthood's measures as well as its frustration.

Behind the priesthood's self-destructive decision to excommunicate the SGI was the high priest's insecurity over the control of the ever-growing international lay Buddhist movement as well as his animosity toward its leader. Although it cannot be denied that there was an underlying feeling of discontent and mistrust among priests toward the lay organization, something that had existed since the 1970s, what directly motivated the priesthood's hysteric behavior in punishing the SGI was sixty-seventh high priest Nikken Abe's emotionalism.

In February 1989, the priesthood proposed a large increase

in the fees paid by lay believers to visit Taiseki-ji. When Gakkai representatives asked that the priesthood reconsider the price hikes, the priesthood retracted its proposal altogether in frustration. This incident seemed to solidify Nikken's resolve to disband the Gakkai and gain control of its membership.

On July 16, 1990, Nikken and his close associates met in secrecy at Taiseki-ji's branch office in Nishikata, Tokyo. They agreed on a plan to enfeeble the Gakkai and gain control over its membership. The plan was code-named Operation C, whose meaning Nikken himself disclosed to one priest as "Operation Cut"—to "cut off Ikeda from Nichiren Shoshu and thereby from the Gakkai membership." The plan was scheduled to be implemented in August 1990. The existence of Operation C, denied by the priesthood, was proven when conference notes taken by Jitoku Kawabe, a senior priest and participant in the Nishikata meeting, were made public.

The plan describes in detail steps necessary to achieve its goal—control of the Gakkai membership. The basic steps in the plan include: 1) dismiss Ikeda as chief lay representative; 2) demand that priests comprise half of the Gakkai's Board of Directors; 3) bar Ikeda from public appearances and prohibit reports on his activities in Gakkai publications; 4) if the Gakkai does not accept these demands, excommunicate Ikeda and the lay organization; 5) run an advertisement in major newspapers for one week announcing that the Gakkai is no longer associated with Nichiren Shoshu; and 6) urge members to secede from the Gakkai and directly join their temple parish.

The following day, July 17, the priesthood held its regular communication conference with Soka Gakkai representatives. There, Gakkai leaders requested that senior officials in

the priesthood admonish priests who were displaying extravagant lifestyles. This request from the Gakkai inadvertently put the priesthood in an awkward position. If it decided to launch Operation C the following month as scheduled, the action would reflect badly as an emotional reaction to the Gakkai's legitimate claim.

On July 18, Nikken called another conference at Taiseki-ji and decided to postpone the implementation of Operation C until the seven-hundredth anniversary of the head temple's founding was celebrated in October. Meanwhile, in response to the Gakkai's request, the priesthood issued a notice listing more than twenty points cautioning priests on their conduct.

On December 16, 1990, the priesthood sent a letter of inquiry to the Soka Gakkai accusing Ikeda of disrespecting the high priest and committing doctrinal errors in his speech at a Soka Gakkai Headquarters leaders meeting on November 16. The priesthood was using Ikeda's speech as a pretext to implement the once-delayed Operation C. The accusations in the priesthood's letter of inquiry, however, were based on inaccurate transcriptions of the speech and statements taken out of context, which the priesthood later admitted.

The Gakkai requested a face-to-face meeting with priesthood representatives to resolve misunderstandings through discussion rather than exchanging documents. On December 26, however, the priesthood sent the Gakkai a letter describing the Gakkai's response as "insincere." Based on the priesthood's view of itself as an absolute and unquestionable religious authority, anything short of immediate supplication to its demands would be cast as insincere or slanderous.

On December 27, 1990, the priesthood held an emergency council session and amended the school's rules to place a term limit on the offices of lay representatives. The

rule meant Ikeda's term as chief lay representative would expire immediately. The priesthood initially maintained that the loss of Ikeda's position was merely the result of these revisions and not intended as punitive. The sequence of the events, however, clearly indicates otherwise. This was the first step in the temple's implementation of Operation C.

On December 25, just prior to Ikeda's dismissal, Nikken met with active anti-Gakkai priest Kojun Takahashi and his brother Isao Dan, an anti-Gakkai tabloid media reporter, at the head temple. At the meeting, the high priest thanked Dan for his long-standing critical coverage of the Gakkai and asked him to further intensify his written attacks. Nikken also expressed his desire to "gain 200,000 Gakkai members" as a result of expelling Ikeda from Nichiren Shoshu. This figure, sufficient to ensure a foundation of financial contributions for all the branch temples, indicates the calculating attitude with which Nikken executed Operation C.

On January 1, 1991, the Soka Gakkai sent a letter to the priesthood, responding to each of the priesthood's allegations in its original letter of inquiry. As a result, the priesthood acknowledged three transcription errors and one unsubstantiated statement based on hearsay in their allegations.

On January 16, Soka Gakkai President Einosuke Akiya sent a letter of protest to Nichiren Shoshu General Administrator Nichijun Fujimoto, pointing out the priesthood's trumped-up charges against the Gakkai and demanding its accountability for the incident as well as the retraction of punitive measures taken against the Gakkai.

Meanwhile, with the priesthood's initial accusations now proven unjustifiable, Nikken sought another pretext to proceed with Operation C in Ikeda's past statements about the Grand Main Temple. At nationwide chief priests' meetings

held at the head temple on January 6 and 10, 1991, Nikken criticized Ikeda for his statement made on October 12, 1968, at the ceremony to mark the start of the Grand Main Temple construction. At that time, Ikeda described the Grand Main Temple as “the high sanctuary of the true teaching of the Lotus Sutra.” Nikken alleged that Ikeda had attempted to define the significance of the Grand Main Temple even before the sixty-sixth high priest Nittatsu. Nikken asserted that Ikeda’s statement demonstrated his arrogance in overstepping the bounds of a lay believer and that the current “problem” of the Gakkai stemmed from this arrogance.

After Nikken’s speech, however, the priesthood found out that Nittatsu had indeed made statements about the significance of the Grand Main Temple as the high sanctuary prior to October 1968. Nikken’s claim that Ikeda had done so first was shown to be false. In spite of the revelation, the priesthood published Nikken’s speech in the February 1991 issue of *Dai-Nichiren* with a brief statement acknowledging Nittatsu’s prior statements. In protest, the Gakkai sent a letter requesting a retraction and an apology. The priesthood responded in a letter dated March 9 that some of Nittatsu’s statements had been inappropriate and were made under pressure from the Gakkai. On March 30, the Gakkai responded, refuting in detail the priesthood’s allegations.

Despite its unsuccessful attempts to justify its claims against the Gakkai based on Ikeda’s November 1990 speech and his October 1968 statement, the priesthood proceeded with its plan. It decided that from July 1991, it would abolish the Gakkai-sponsored pilgrimage to the head temple and institute a new system in which all believers must obtain a permit from the chief priest of their local branch temple to visit Taiseki-ji to worship the Dai-Gohonzon. Needless to say, the

measure was devised to make Gakkai members directly dependent on their temples, where they could be encouraged to secede from the Soka Gakkai. The scheme, however, produced only small, frustrating results, which forced the priesthood to its final phase of Operation C—the excommunication of the SGI in November.

Contrary to the priesthood's expectation, however, SGI members interpreted this intended spiritual death sentence as a declaration of spiritual independence from abusive priestly authority. In an ironic reversal of the priesthood's intended purpose, the excommunication encouraged the SGI to rally under the theme of "Soka Renaissance." Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism could now take its place as a global religion, rather than the possession of a provincial and restrictive clergy. Its humanitarian and egalitarian principles could now be directly communicated, without dogmatic constraints, to the world.

Besides Nikken's emotionalism, there are some additional underlying elements behind this conflict. These reflect be-

### ***The Three Powerful Enemies***

havior patterns displayed by the priesthood over the last seven centuries. First, the priesthood became so preoccupied with its own prosperity that the spread of the Daishonin's Buddhism was reduced to a means for economic gain. For example, the priesthood's aggressive promotion of funeral-related rituals, such as memorial tablets and posthumous Buddhist names, reflects the attitude that members' bereavement is merely a source of income.

Second, the priesthood continues to view lay believers as inferiors and to demand an absolute obedience similar to the

feudal relationship between a lord and his vassals. This archaic attitude, which is contrary to the Daishonin's egalitarian teaching, has become a source of anxiety for the priesthood. This anxiety grew as the importance of priests to both the practice of individual believers and to propagation diminished considerably with the successful development of the lay Buddhist movement. The more the priesthood asserted its superiority and importance, the more oppressive it became toward lay believers. Trapped in this vicious cycle, the priesthood under Nikken's leadership has grown extremely authoritarian to a level never before seen in the school's history.

From the standpoint of Buddhism, the priesthood's attempt to destroy the SGI is an unavoidable obstacle to the spread of Buddhism as foretold in the Lotus Sutra and predicted and experienced by the Daishonin himself. In the "Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni says to Bodhisattva Constellation King Flower: "After I have passed into extinction, in the last five hundred year period you must spread it [the Lotus Sutra] abroad widely throughout Jambudvīpa and never allow it to be cut off, nor must you allow evil devils, the devil's people, heavenly beings, dragons, *yakshas* or *kumbhanda* demons to seize the advantage!" (LS23, 288).

This sutra passage describes the Buddha's mandate to spread the teachings and ideals of the Lotus Sutra throughout the world and overcome various obstacles in the process. In Buddhist history, the SGI's current state of development may be one of the few phenomena, if not the only one, that precisely correspond to the global spread of Buddhism as foretold by the sutra.

In the "Encouraging Devotion" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, the descriptions of those inevitable obstacles come



vividly alive. The sutra explains that its practitioners will face three kinds of obstacles. First, they will face “many ignorant people / who will curse and speak ill” of them and attack them with “swords and staves” (LS13, 193). Second, the sutra predicts: “In that evil age there will be monks / with perverse wisdom and hearts that are fawning and crooked / who will suppose they have attained what they have not attained, / being proud and boastful in heart” (ibid.). Third, the sutra goes on: “Or there will be forest-dwelling monks / wearing clothing of patched rags and living in retirement, / who will claim they are practicing the true way, / despising and looking down on all humanity” (ibid.). Those three obstacles facing the sutra’s practitioners are called the three powerful enemies of Buddhism, according to the Chinese Buddhist scholar Miaolo (711–782). The most powerful is the third kind: priests who are revered as saints and respected by the general public and who, in fear of losing fame and profit, induce the secular authorities to persecute the sutra’s practitioners.

During the Daishonin’s time, Ryokan, chief priest of Gokuraku-ji, a prestigious temple of the Ritsu school in Kamakura, fit the sutra’s descriptions of the third powerful enemy. Ryokan was the main instigator behind the government’s execution attempt on the Daishonin and his exile to Sado Island among other persecutions. Although he was considered a saintly priest by many for his promotion of public construction projects, he was amassing personal wealth behind the scenes and inciting the government to persecute the Daishonin and his followers.

In recent events, Nikken has proven to be functioning in the same way—as the third of the three powerful enemies. Using his religious authority, Nikken devised a plan to destroy the SGI and excommunicate it to gratify his personal

desires. Furthermore, in league with Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party as well as anti-Gakkai journalists and activists, including Masatomo Yamazaki, Nikken has supported various anti-Gakkai campaigns in politics and media. For example, in October 1994, the LDP started to attack the Soka Gakkai in nationally televised Diet sessions, demanding Ikeda's testimony. The political harassment toward the Gakkai proceeded according to a plan detailed in a letter Yamazaki wrote to Nikken in late 1994.

LDP politicians incited anti-Gakkai sentiments in Japan, using the public's fear of religious organizations after the sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway by the Aum Supreme Truth sect. The ruling party also attempted to revise the Religious Corporation Act to restrict the Gakkai's activities. Yamazaki's letter to Nikken indicates the priesthood's connection with those political attacks on the Gakkai.

Nichiren Shoshu also supported a petition drive in April 1992 demanding that the Tokyo metropolitan government, where the Gakkai is registered as a religious corporation, dissolve the Gakkai. The petition was rejected by the Tokyo governor's office, but Taiseki-ji later paid 10 million yen to petition organizer Nenko Ryu, a former Gakkai leader and longtime detractor. The priesthood also supported some weekly tabloids during those anti-Gakkai political campaigns. For example, Nichiren Shoshu collaborated with the weekly magazine *Shukan Bunshun* to publish articles critical of the Gakkai.

Nikken's dismissal of Ikeda as chief lay representative and his expulsion from Nichiren Shoshu interestingly coincide with the passage from the Lotus Sutra, which states that the sutra's practitioners "again and again . . . will be banished / to a place far removed from towers and temples" (LS13, 195).

As the Daishonin himself experienced through the persecutions induced by Ryokan, the third of the three powerful enemies manifests itself in the form of religious authority. Referring to Ryokan, the Daishonin states that the third powerful enemy of Buddhism typically exhibits the characteristics of greed, jealousy, delusion, lewdness and self-indulgence despite the reputation of abiding by Buddhist precepts (GZ, 350). The third powerful enemy invariably takes the form of religious authority in order to abuse believers and obstruct the spread of Buddhism. As the Daishonin explains: "It is the way of the great devil to assume the form of a venerable monk..." (WND, 81).

Nichiren Shoshu's most recent wrongdoing is twofold. First, it excommunicated the SGI and attempted to destroy its international Buddhist movement.

***Absolute Authority  
of the High Priest***

To destroy a harmoniously united group of believers is considered to be the most serious of offenses in Buddhism, since Buddhism cannot benefit people without a Buddhist order dedicated to its spread. Second, Nichiren Shoshu has distorted the Daishonin's Buddhism by presenting its priest-centered authoritarian doctrine as orthodox, thus causing profound confusion among believers.

To bolster the high priest's authority and thus silence both internal and external criticism, Nichiren Shoshu has been propounding the absolute authority of the high priest and raising his person and administrative office to the level of an object of religious veneration. Nichiren Shoshu asserts that believers' faith in the high priest is as important as their faith in the Gohonzon. In a document dated July 30, 1991,

Nichiren Shoshu senior priests stress that the high priest and the Dai-Gohonzon are “the inseparable object of veneration” and insist that believers’ faith in those two must be “absolute.” In a document dated September 6, 1991, the senior priests also write: “the Daishonin, who is the original Buddha, the Dai-Gohonzon of the high sanctuary, and the successive high priests are one in their internal identity and constitute an inseparable object of veneration.” In the June 1991 issue of *Dai-Nichiren*, a temple believer writes: “The high priest is the modern-day Daishonin and, in his internal identity, is the object of veneration that possesses the entity of the oneness of the Person and the Law.” Nichiren Shoshu Vice Study Department Chief Kosei Mizushima claims in the eleventh issue of *Fuji Gakuho*, the official publication of Taiseki-ji’s seminary; “The essence or soul of the Law has been transmitted into the body of the current High Priest Nikken in the same manner as in the Daishonin’s day without the slightest difference, although his appearance as an ordinary person and as a vessel of the Law may be different.” Along with those doctrinal changes, Nichiren Shoshu also revised its rules and regulations so that those who criticize the high priest may be subject to punitive measures.

With those doctrinal and administrative revisions, Nichiren Shoshu has sought to establish the absolute rule of the high priest. In his sermon at a chief priests meeting on August 28, 1997, Nikken cited a letter from Nichikan, a chief priest of the temple Hosho-ji in the seventeenth century (a different person from the twenty-sixth high priest Nichikan), which was sent to Taiseki-ji’s chief parishioner to solidify the fragile position of the newly appointed nineteenth high priest, Nisshun. The letter states: “The matter of Taiseki-ji [regarding the transfer of the office of high priest] is the transmission of

the golden utterances [of the Buddha]. Those who receive this transmission, learned or unlearned, shall possess the living body of Shakyamuni and of Nichiren. Earnest faith in this enables the people of the Latter Day to sow the seeds of Buddhahood" (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 5, p. 271).

Nikken commented on this letter as follows: "Since a long time ago, I have always thought of this document as noteworthy because it explains precisely the faith of Taiseikiji." Nikken, like Nisshun, wished to gain advantage by supporting dogma that painted the high priest as an absolute vessel of the Law and equal to the Buddha.

When faced with the three powerful enemies, the Daishonin vigorously refuted their erroneous views while expressing

***A Renaissance of the  
Daishonin's Buddhism***

his powerful optimism for the spread of Buddhism. In his well-known treatise "On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace

of the Land," the Daishonin sharply criticizes the teaching of the Pure Land school: "Rather than offering up ten thousand prayers for remedy, it would be better simply to outlaw this one evil" (WND, 15). When he submitted the document to the powerful retired regent Hojo Tokiyori, the Pure Land School was widespread in Japan. The Daishonin points out in the treatise that its erroneous teaching must be refuted to alleviate the confusion and suffering of the people. As shown in this passage, the Daishonin maintained an uncompromising stance toward what he saw as misleading teachings and corrupt religious authority.

Although he underwent numerous persecutions perpetrated by political and religious authority, the Daishonin's

view of the three powerful enemies was positive and optimistic. He saw their appearances as proof of his identity as the votary of the Lotus Sutra as foretold by the sutra. He states: “Even if it were possible to point straight at the earth and miss it, if the flowers were to cease blooming in spring, still I am certain that these three powerful enemies exist in the land of Japan” (WND, 272).

The Daishonin’s confidence in the appearance of the three powerful enemies is an expression of his confidence in his identity as the true practitioner of the Lotus Sutra as he states: “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 the votary of the Lotus Sutra. Only by making them appear can I be the votary” (WND, 53).

The Daishonin also viewed the appearance of the three powerful enemies as a sign of the spread of Buddhism: “Great events never have minor omens. When great evil occurs, great good follows. Since great slander already exists in our land, the great correct Law will spread without fail. What could any of you have to lament? Even if you are not the Venerable Mahakashyapa, you should all perform a dance! Even if you are not Shariputra, you should leap up and dance” (WND, 1119). No doubt such hope and optimism in the appearance of the three powerful enemies were a source of the Daishonin’s resilience in facing his extreme difficulties.

The essential nature of the priesthood’s recent actions is the same as that of the corrupt religious authority that persecuted the Daishonin in the thirteenth century. As Ryokan was threatened by the Daishonin’s popular Buddhist movement growing in Kamakura, the priesthood views the growing influence of the laity. The priesthood’s anxiety in losing its power over lay believers has brought about its recent oppression of

the SGI movement. In this sense, SGI members may view the excommunication and other oppressions perpetrated by the priesthood as proof of their identity as true practitioners of the Lotus Sutra and a sign of the greater spread of the Daishonin's Buddhism in the near future.

As the Daishonin's understanding of the three powerful enemies became a source of his hope and optimism, SGI members' understanding of the recent temple issue will no doubt serve as the driving force behind the development of the Daishonin's Buddhism. The priesthood's excommunication of the SGI, in this sense, will be recorded as a pivotal moment in the history of Buddhism. It has served to announce a new era in which the Daishonin's humanistic ideals will flow unrestricted, thus marking the beginning of a real renaissance of the Daishonin's Buddhism.