

The Same Reason Now and Then:

Is the SGI Contradicting Its Past Stance Toward the High Priest and Pilgrimage?

Currently, Nichiren Shoshu does not allow SGI members, at least officially, on the grounds of the head temple. The priesthood, however, has been long persuading SGI members to join the temple's parish by stressing the benefit of praying directly to the Dai-Gohonzon or by condemning one's unwillingness to visit the head temple not only as a sign of apostasy but also as a cause for karmic retribution.²⁷

It is true that before the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood excommunicated the SGI in 1991, the SGI had long supported the high priest and stressed pilgrimage to the head temple widely among its membership. After the excommunication, however, the SGI has been publicly pointing out High Priest Nikken's distortion of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, and it now discourages its members from going to the head temple.

Is the SGI contradicting itself? Not at all. Up until 1991, the SGI respected and supported the high priest based on one essential assumption: that the office of high priest is vested with the responsibility to protect the integrity of the Daishonin's Buddhism and the believers who are sincerely working to spread it widely. The SGI believed that the successive high priests had done so to the best of their ability, despite their occasional frailties.

In 1991, however, this basic assumption and trust toward the priesthood was betrayed when the priesthood unilaterally enacted a series of

● KEY POINTS:

- (1) **Our Standard Is the Goshu, and Our Purpose Kosen-rufu:** As practitioners of Nichiren Buddhism, our standard is the Daishonin's teaching as expressed in his writings, and our purpose is to strive to share and fulfill the Daishonin's great vow and desire for kosen-rufu.
- (2) **The High Priest Works Against the Goshu and Kosen-rufu:** The office of high priest was intended to protect Buddhism and support those who propagate it. In the past, the SGI supported the successive high priests and pilgrimage to the head temple because the priesthood held to the same standard and purpose, or at least appeared to support them. Now the SGI challenges the priesthood's errors to protect the integrity of Buddhism and ensure its continued spread. The SGI's fundamental standard and purpose of its action has never changed. Not participating in Nichiren Shoshu's pilgrimage also accords exactly with that consistent standard.

measures aimed at disbanding the SGI, culminating in its excommunication in November of that year. The priesthood, furthermore, started to promote a doctrine of "absolute faith in and strict obedience to the High Priest"²⁸ in order to silence any criticism. Clearly this absolute authority of the high priest derived neither from the Daishonin nor Nikko Shonin, both of

The priesthood declares our “absolute faith and strict obedience to the high priest” to be “the supreme fundamental principle” of Buddhism. Nichiren Daishonin’s repeated injunction to “rely on the Law and not upon persons” seems ignored by many priests.



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whom always stressed Buddhist teachings themselves rather than clerical authority.

When the high priest seemed to be trying to fulfill his responsibility, the SGI supported him. When the head temple was not actively opposing the spread of the Daishonin’s Buddhism, the SGI promoted pilgrimage. Now the high priest and the rest of the priesthood not only neglect their responsibility but also act in opposition to it. The SGI, therefore, does not support the high priest in his attempt to distort the Daishonin’s teaching, nor does it promote pilgrimage to the head temple in support of the priesthood’s aim to further disseminate its misleading teaching.

The Daishonin stressed the integrity of Buddhism as the basis of our Buddhist practice. As he wrote, “Since the Buddha preached in his last testament to rely on the Law and not upon persons, you must not believe in anyone who does not preach according to the sutra, no matter how eminent he may be” (“On Chanting the Daimoku of the Lotus Sutra,” *Gosho Zenshu*, p. 9). Foreseeing the possibility of doctrinal error by the high priest, Nikko Shonin also wrote, “Do not follow even the high priest if he goes against the Buddha’s Law and pro-

pounds his own views” (“The Twenty-six Admonitions of Nikko,” GZ, p. 1618). In his warning against the high priest’s error must have been his wish to protect the office of high priest from the high priest himself.

The SGI supported the high priest and promoted pilgrimage to the head temple because of its commitment to protect the integrity of the Daishonin’s teaching. Now, exactly for the same reasons, the SGI condemns the high priest’s error and discourages pilgrimage to the head temple, which the priesthood uses to support the high priest’s erroneous teaching. The SGI followed the teachings of the Daishonin and Nikko Shonin before 1991 in its support of the high priest and pilgrimage, because that equated to protecting the Daishonin’s Buddhism and its wide propagation. Since 1991, the SGI has been following the teachings of the Daishonin and Nikko Shonin in its opposition to pilgrimage and the high priest, who has turned against Buddhism. The SGI may seem to be taking an opposite course of action then and now, but the reason behind its stance toward the priesthood has been the same all along — protecting and spreading the Daishonin’s Buddhism to the best of its ability. ■