

Why Did Ikeda Quit ?

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The news was startling and entirely unexpected. Effective 24 April 1979, Ikeda Daisaku, the powerful president of Sōka Gakkai, abruptly resigned. The leader of this monolithic and powerful Buddhist lay organization that has spread its influence to every sector of Japanese society and has a following of nearly eight million people suddenly quit. He was given the post of "Honorary President" and was succeeded by the organization's former Director General, Hōjō Hiroshi.

Why Ikeda resigned is a matter of intense controversy. He is only 51 years old and appears to be in excellent health. He continued to maintain a busy schedule almost to the last day. Recent activities included lengthy trips to India and China and an interview in Tokyo with Henry Kissinger. Sōka Gakkai magazines and newspapers published just before his resignation gave no hint of what was to come and even discussed future trips and activities of Ikeda in his capacity as president. Clearly, his departure was not expected.

Sōka Gakkai publications lamely say Ikeda felt that he had held the position long enough, that younger leaders should be given a chance to lead, and that he wanted to devote more time to writing and to various other projects, including his work for world peace.

The same publications, however, openly hint at what may be the true cause of Ikeda's departure: a crisis in the relationship between Ikeda and other Sōka Gakkai leaders on the one hand and, on the other, the priests of its parent organization, the Japanese Buddhist sect known as the Nichiren Shōshū. Ikeda's departure and other conciliatory measures adopted by both sides are "designed to strengthen the union

and harmony between Sōka Gakkai and the Nichiren Shōshū priesthood.”

The crisis in synchronic perspective. Since its appearance over three decades ago, Sōka Gakkai has experienced occasional problems with the Nichiren Shōshū, problems stemming from the nature of their relationship. Officially, Sōka Gakkai is a lay organization of the Nichiren Shōshū, and in point of fact it has been primarily responsible for the nationwide and worldwide propagation of Nichiren Shōshū doctrines. There has always been an understanding between the two organizations that Sōka Gakkai would serve as a support group for the Nichiren Shōshū and that the Nichiren Shōshū head priest would have absolute authority over the Sōka Gakkai. The Sōka Gakkai was responsible for secular affairs – proselytization campaigns, publications, social, political and cultural organizations and activities, and leadership abroad – while Nichiren Shōshū was to maintain the temples, conduct religious services, distribute religious paraphernalia to all believers, and interpret all religious dogma.

Ikeda quit because the Nichiren Shōshū saw him as an obvious threat to its existence. Ikeda and the Sōka Gakkai had grown so big and powerful that it threatened to devour its parent. The Nichiren Shōshū priesthood felt that it was on the verge of being overwhelmed. It had to reassert its authority to make its presence felt, and Ikeda's resignation is the clear end-result of this drive.

Trouble had been brewing since mid-1977. The exact nature of the controversy and of the events leading to Ikeda's resignation is shrouded in secrecy and may never be revealed. It is probable, however, that Nichiren Shōshū priests were demanding more authority over individual members, more control over organizational decisions and religious dogma, and a diminished role for Ikeda within the movement.

Jealousy was certainly a factor. Before Sōka Gakkai came into being, the Nichiren Shōshū was a tiny sect with no more than fifty or sixty thousand members; over the years Sōka Gakkai has brought between five and ten million members into affiliation. Consciously or unconsciously, Sōka Gakkai leaders have taken more and more control over the direction of the organization, probably legitimizing their growing authority by reference to Sōka Gakkai's role in bringing Nichiren Shōshū into prominence. This feeling may be justified, but it has had a negative influence on relationships between the two groups.

Another factor was the personality and power of Ikeda himself. Nichiren Shōshū priests, then under the leadership of the High Priest Nittatsu,¹ are a proud and independent group of men who will not readily accept any challenge or usurpation of their authority. Ikeda, however, as unquestioned leader of the Sōka Gakkai, commanded the absolute loyalty and reverence of the vast majority of Nichiren Shōshū believers. That it came to a showdown between Ikeda and Nittatsu is hardly surprising.

The fact that a showdown did occur is clear from a paragraph in Ikeda's resignation statement:

I wish to take the responsibility for all that has happened, for having troubled all of you [members of the Sōka Gakkai] concerning the relationship between Sōka Gakkai and the temple and having caused anxiety to the High Priest.

The crisis in diachronic perspective. I was first alerted to the problem in September 1977 by Murata Kiyooki, now Editor of the *Japan times*, in a personal letter. At the time I was writing my doctoral dissertation on the Sōka Gakkai and had just completed an 18-month stay in Tokyo doing

1. Nittatsu died on 22 July 1979. The new high priest bears the name Nikken.
- Ed.

research on the movement and working closely with various Sōka Gakkai officials. A letter of inquiry brought a series of heated denials and numerous newspaper clippings from Sōka Gakkai publications showing Ikeda and Nittatsu meeting and chatting amicably. The unusual number of meetings between the two leaders and the great attention their meetings excited indicate, however, that a real problem did exist.

Murata, a leading Japanese authority on the Sōka Gakkai, states that problems developed recently when some Sōka Gakkai leaders and members began to “deify” Ikeda (*Japan times weekly*, 12 May 1973). Some went so far as to assert that Ikeda was “the true Buddha.” This idea goes back to the Nichiren Shōshū idea that Nichiren (1222–1282) a Japanese Buddhist monk upon whose teachings Nichiren movements are based, was the “true Buddha” and that Gautama the Buddha was a precursor.

Nichiren wrote that his ultimate objective was to convert all Japanese (and by extension all mankind) and, on completing this task, to build a “National Hall of Worship” (*kaidan*) at the foot of Mount Fuji.

These goals were not attained during Nichiren’s lifetime, and before his death Nichiren called on his followers of later generations to complete these tasks. It was the Sōka Gakkai, however, under Ikeda’s leadership, that developed a broad national following and built the temple known as the Shōhondō in Fujinomiya at the foot of Mount Fuji. It is not uncommon for some members of any religious cult to deify their leader, and it should not be surprising in a movement like Sōka Gakkai where so much power and prestige are vested in one man. Apparently some officials and members of Sōka Gakkai began to assert that Ikeda was the “true Buddha,” citing Ikeda’s accomplishments as evidence. Fukushima Genjirō, a former vice-president of Sōka Gakkai, was considered the highest-ranking proponent of the “Ikeda is the true Buddha” theory.

It is doubtful that Ikeda himself ever really supported this idea, but the very fact that it was being bruited must have irritated and worried Nichiren Shōshū priests and convinced them that the time to remove Ikeda had come.

Another problem had to do with Sōka Gakkai attempts to change traditional Nichiren Shōshū doctrines. Nichiren Shōshū is a highly conservative sect that considers itself the true guardian of Nichiren's teachings. Sōka Gakkai, repeatedly stressing the point that some reinterpreting was necessary in order "to bring the Nichiren movement and its doctrines into the twentieth century," has altered, through reinterpretation, some of these traditional doctrines. This development has angered and alarmed various conservative elements in the Nichiren Shōshū, and their public protests have embarrassed both the Sōka Gakkai and the Nichiren Shōshū priesthood.

The Sōka Gakkai reinterpretation of Nichiren's objective of building a national hall of worship after all Japanese had been converted is a case in point. Under Ikeda, the Sōka Gakkai has altered its views on this issue on more than one occasion. In 1965, for example, Ikeda was saying that if one-third of the Japanese people became Sōka Gakkai members, another third sympathetic to its goals, and only one-third remained hostile, then Nichiren's goal would have been reached and the national hall of worship could be built. Since 1972, however, the year the Shōhondō was completed, Sōka Gakkai has maintained that Nichiren's goal can be thought of as realized and his temple built when Nichiren's philosophy has been adequately introduced to Japanese society and had some positive impact on the people. Sōka Gakkai claims to have accomplished this goal and therefore to be justified in identifying the Shōhondō they built with the *kaidan* desired by Nichiren.

Such thinking, however, has angered some conservative elements within Nichiren Shōshū. For example, the Myō-

shinkō, formerly a small, fundamentalist lay organization of the Nichiren Shōshū, charged Ikeda and the Sōka Gakkai with heresy over this issue.² Myōshinkō's interpretation of Nichiren's writings leads it to insist that no national hall of worship can be built until all Japanese have been converted.

Myōshinkō has only a few thousand members and a tiny headquarters in an outlying part of Tokyo. Nevertheless, it succeeded for a time in winning several Nichiren Shōshū priests to its side, gained considerable publicity for itself, and caused intense public embarrassment for the Sōka Gakkai. Though limited in size, its protests and the issues they raised doubtless had some effect on the decision to retire Ikeda.

Another development that appears to have disturbed Nichiren Shōshū priests is the Sōka Gakkai practice of constructing its own halls of worship throughout Japan. These halls (*kaikan*) are used both for group activities and for religious services. This constitutes a serious challenge to Nichiren Shōshū because some members have begun to attend religious services at the conveniently located and attractive new halls instead of going to the sect's temples, thereby undermining its sacerdotal authority and finances.

Future prospects. Sōka Gakkai's future under its new president, Hōjō Hiroshi, is hard to predict. Certainly there will be an attempt to bring the Sōka Gakkai closer to Nichiren Shōshū. Ikeda, despite his power and prestige, was put into a difficult position because his own group is technically only a supporting organization of the Nichiren Shōshū.

Ikeda will not disappear from the scene, at least not yet. Sōka Gakkai publications of May and June 1979 devote more attention to President Hōjō than to former president Ikeda, but there are also numerous pictures of Hōjō and Ikeda together meeting various groups and dignitaries. It

2. Myōshinkō was excommunicated by the Nichiren Shōshū in September 1974.
— Ed.

has also been announced that Ikeda will continue his writing, and several articles by him have appeared in the organization's publications since his resignation.

There is every indication, however, that the Sōka Gakkai will be more withdrawn and less strident than in the past. It will seek less publicity, concentrate more on religious issues, be less active socially – and may even grow more conciliatory in its approach to other groups. The organization has suffered a stern rebuke, but it is still a powerful and influential body. It will be around for years to come.