

An Uneven Battle

Sōka Gakkai vs. Nichiren Shōshū

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THE MOST DRAMATIC EVENT of recent years on the Japanese religious scene has undoubtedly been the confrontation between Nichiren Shōshū, an independent branch of Nichiren Buddhism, and the Sōka Gakkai, Nichiren Shōshū's largest lay organization, but one that showed right from the start the characteristics of a New Religion. The roots of the present difficulties appear to lie in the ambiguous character of the Sōka Gakkai as well as in the numerical imbalance between the Sōka Gakkai (claiming 16 million members) and the Nichiren Shōshū proper (traditionally a minor sect in the Nichiren line).

The two are now going through a process of separation—a process that has been far from peaceful and has required all kinds of delicate adjustments. Nobody has characterized the case better than Tamaru Noriyoshi, professor emeritus of the science of religion at Tokyo University:

I regard the two organizations as something like Siamese twins, virtually fused in a vital area. Any attempt to separate them would require delicate surgery, painful to both and extremely risky to their survival if not done well.¹

The present confrontation and its historical roots have been introduced to the English-speaking audience by the journals of our Institute and of the NCC Center for the Study of Religion.² The present essay provides a glimpse of the day-to-day happenings of the struggle and a taste of the atmosphere wherein it is conducted by gleaning passages from two Sōka Gakkai publica-

¹ From a panel discussion on the problem in *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 4: 6. The “divorce” metaphor has also been used: “Alimony is yet to be settled and divorce proceedings are proving to be very painful with a long struggle ahead for the embittered couple” (T. Ashley, see note 2). But this metaphor may be too weak.

² Cf. Daniel A. Métraux, “The Dispute between the Sōka Gakkai and the Nichiren Shōshū Priesthood: A Lay Revolution against a Conservative Clergy.” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 19/4: 325-336; and Trevor Ashley, “A Matter of Principles—A Note on the Recent Conflict between Nichiren Shōshū and Sōka Gakkai.” *Japanese Religions* 17/2: 167-175.

tions in the Japanese language³—with due apologies for the fact that this will permit us to hear only one side of the story.

Preliminaries

For the sake of convenience I am going to use the following expedients:

1. My translations will often be free: summarizing and sometimes clarifying but not, I trust, betraying the original.
2. The following terms will be left untranslated:

Daimoku 題目: The sacred formula or mantra: *namu-myōhō-renge-kyō* (Praise to the *Lotus Sūtra of the Wonderful Law*), the recitation of which is the main religious practice of the Nichiren believers.

Gohonzon 御本尊 (or *Dai-gohonzon*, the “main object of worship”): The great mandala whereon the *daimoku* is inscribed in Nichiren’s own hand. It is enshrined in the Taiseikiji, the head temple of Nichiren Shōshū. The head priest has traditionally had the prerogative of making copies of it to distribute to fervent followers. The Sōka Gakkai has strongly urged its followers to enshrine a copy in their homes.

Gosho 御書: The writings of Nichiren, which form the sacred scripture of Nichiren Shōshū and Sōka Gakkai.

Hossu 法主: The head priest of the sect, deemed to be the representative and legitimate successor of Nichiren (the “true Buddha”) through the *kechimyaku* (the “Dharma lineage”) of successive head priests. The name of the present *hossu* is Abe Nikken and his title is Nikken Shōnin.

Kōsen rufu 広宣流布: The spreading or propagation of Nichiren’s Buddha Dharma from Japan throughout the entire world. The Sōka Gakkai believes that the moment for this has finally arrived and that the Sōka Gakkai is the chosen instrument for it.

Shōnin 聖人 (or 上人): Literally “holy man”: a title given to the founder of a sect and to the successive head priests.

³ One of the two, the *Chūgai Nippō*, is not strictly speaking a Sōka Gakkai publication, but it has been functioning recently as a mouthpiece for the Sōka Gakkai and the reform movement within the Nichiren Shōshū, mainly by printing texts of the *FAX tsūshin* “*chiyū*,” a “free press agency” of Nichiren Shōshū. The other one is the *Seikyō Shimbun*, the daily newspaper of the Sōka Gakkai.

Tōba 塔婆: memorial “stupa boards” put on people’s graves, as a link with the cosmic Buddha.

3. I shall be using the following abbreviations:

C. N. *Chūgai Nippō* 中外日報, a Buddhist-centered quasi-daily paper of religious news.

N. S. *Nichiren Shōshū* 日蓮正宗 (nowadays often called the “Nikkenshū” in Sōka Gakkai circles).

S. G. *Sōka Gakkai* 創価学会 (often called the “Ikeda sect” by the N. S.).

S. G. I. *Sōka Gakkai International* (formerly simply N. S. abroad).

S. S. *Seikyō Shimbun* 聖教新聞, the daily newspaper of the S. G.

A Simplified Time Table

1990 Nov. 16. Ikeda Daisaku, president of the S. G. I. and honorary president of the S. G., gives a speech at the 35th S. G. Leaders Meeting at S. G. headquarters. The N. S. headquarters somehow obtains a tape of this speech.

Nov. 26. Finding fault with Ikeda’s speech, the N. S. leadership asks for an explanation within a week. The S. G. asks for a meeting instead, which never materializes.

Dec. 27. N. S. headquarters revises the by-laws of the sect and removes Ikeda from his position (held since 1984) as head of the representatives of the N. S. lay confraternities.

1991 March 14. The press learns that the N. S. has revoked the mandate of the S. G. I. to spread the Nichiren Dharma abroad, and will from now on take care of the task itself.

June 5. The N. S. announces in the press that from now on the faithful will need a pass, issued by their temple, to make the pilgrimage to Taisekiji. The right of the S. G. to organize the pilgrimage for its own members is thereby withdrawn.

Nov. 8. The S. G. receives an “Admonition to Disband” from the N. S. leadership. That same evening, S. G. president Akiya and two vice-presidents hold a press conference to explain the S. G. standpoint.

Nov. 28. N. S. headquarters issues the “Notification of Excommunication” against the S. G., which receives it the following day.

1992 February. Abe Nikken outlines the N. S. position in a long article in the February issue of the monthly, *Bungei Shunjū* 文芸春秋.

The Fight is on

I cannot here go into the reasons why the N. S. headquarters initiated its punitive measures against the S. G. and finally amputated the greatest part of its body by the supreme measure, excommunication. We can only surmise that it felt itself being slowly strangled in a deadly embrace or on the point of being taken over by its giant offspring. The headquarters could not have really expected that the S. G. would back down as a result, but it may have hoped that when it came to a showdown many of the faithful would choose the N. S. over the S.G. It is too early as yet to judge how far this hope was realized.

The S. G. did not in fact take the attacks lying down. The demotion of Ikeda Daisaku from Head Representative of the lay believers triggered a gigantic outcry of indignation over this act of lèse-majesté and supreme ingratitude towards the great leader who had made the N. S. numerous, powerful, and rich. Immediately an orchestrated counterattack, no holds barred, was launched against the N. S., using every means at the disposal of the mighty organization. The S. G. thereby showed a cocky fighting spirit and an unwavering confidence in their final victory. This fighting spirit was not considered to be the least bit un-Buddhist:

The so-called Buddhist ideal, “good people do not get angry,” is nothing more than a Confucian ethical idea grafted on Buddhism by the Tokugawa feudal regime. It is such ideas that tend to make religion the opium of the masses. The truly ideal person is one who fights the evil that exploits the people. (S. S., 92-3-28)

Confidence in the struggle’s final outcome is daily displayed on the pages of the S. S., where the word *victory* appears over and over again. But let us listen to the S. G. leaders. At the end of 1991, S. G. I. president Ikeda declared:

This year difficulties have occurred, as foreseen in the *Gosho*. However, during this year’s storms the S. G. citadel did not flinch one inch. In the course of time the truth will shine forth. We are the “victors for ever”.... We absolutely cannot allow the camp of “absolute evil,” which tries to destroy us, to persist. The lion has finally stood up and roared. It is going to fight till the end, unto the day that the victory of the right cause, the victory of humaneness, is proven by the facts. So, let us fight, let us progress, let us tell our story! (S. S., 91-12-23)

And a year later S. G. president Akiya had this to say to his troops:

During the year 1992, which we have dubbed “The Year of the S. G. Renaissance,” we have fought the Nikken sect, that ultimate evil and embodiment of the lust for power and authority, and have thereby victoriously gained “the freedom of our souls”.... Next year, let us march to...the “Victory of the Right Cause of the S. G.” Overthrowing the Nikken sect, cutting down that great blasphemer of the Dharma and destroyer of the *Kōsen rufu*, and expelling Nikken is precisely to make manifest the true cause of Nichiren Daishōnin. The S. G., as directly linked to Nichiren, is the only organization, faithful to the Buddha’s will and commissioned by the Buddha, that practices the Buddha Dharma of Nichiren rightly and propagates that Dharma in the world. (S. S., 92-10-23)

Interestingly, the final measures by the N. S. establishment provoked barely any reaction on the S. G. side. It is clear that by that time the S. G. had ceased to attribute to the N. S. leadership any authority over the S. G. On the occasion of the “Admonition to Disband” of November 1991, the S. G. held a press conference, but the S. S. of the next day devoted only a small notice to the affair under the title “A Totally Meaningless ‘Admonition to Disband’ from the Sect.”

It is clear that the fact itself of admonishing the S. G.—a religious legal person, independent from the N. S.—to disband has no meaning at all, ...and that there is no reason for the S. G. to react to it. Moreover, the text of the Admonition proves once more that the sect has no valid reason for this demand. On the contrary, it is the N. S. itself that deviates grievously from the spirit of Nichiren and has become a new sect, the “Nikkenshū,” which puts Nikken above Nichiren. (S. S., 91-11-9)

The same issue of the S. S. also carried a brief declaration by president Akiya: “The S. G. is an independent religious body and is not in the least bit affected by this Admonition. We go on as before.” To a reporter who wanted to know how this was going to affect the faithful, Akiya answered confidently: “They were strongly affected a year ago, at the beginning of the problem, but this time there will be no reaction to speak of.” A headline in the C. N. at the time read, “The Admonition Is Like a Dog That Has the Courage to Bark from Afar.” (C. N., 91-11-11)

What about the “Notification of Excommunication?” The day after its arrival, the S. S. responded: “An extremely droll ‘Notification of Excommunication’ has arrived from the sect. To the false religion, Nikkenshū, we say: The S. G. is the orthodox line of the Buddha Dharma of Nichiren.” It also printed a short declaration by president Akiya, the gist of which was:

The sect's taking of such an anachronistic measure against its greatest lay movement, which has made it into a world religion, is an event out of the dark Middle Ages. When it comes to excommunication, it is on the contrary today's N. S. that stands condemned from the standpoint of Nichiren Daishōnin. (S. S., 91-11-30)

And the next day, the excommunication was greeted by the organization as "The Independence Day of the Soul," and it was stressed, more strongly than ever, that "the S. G. is directly linked to Nichiren Shōnin by way of the *Gosho*."

Infighting

In the wake of Ikeda's demotion by the sect for allegedly betraying the doctrine and tradition of the N. S., the S. G. launched a vigorous campaign of vilification against the N. S. establishment (the priesthood and especially the *Hossu*, Abe Nikken). No stone has been left unturned nor has any sin or peccadillo—past or present—gone unexposed. The N. S. priests must by now feel that they live in glass houses. The general picture conveyed is that of a priesthood totally degenerated, mired in a feudal mentality, and fallen away from Nichiren's Dharma. One of the main targets of the criticism is the authoritarian clericalism reigning in the sect:

N. S. Is a Thing of the Priests, by the Priests, for the Priests. (headline in C. N., 91-3-12) The Discriminatory Theory is That Priests are the Masters (Superior), Lay People Are Disciples Inferior)... The Temples Have Made the Faithful Their Slaves and Exploited Them. (headlines in S. S., 92-1-31) There is disdain for the laity, who are considered as "subcontractors of the priests." The discrimination between priests and laity is an anachronism and betrays a feudal view of the lay people as an uneducated mass. (C. N., 91-2-13). [And the priests are advised:] Rather than the authority of the habit, show the mercy of the Buddha! (C. N., 91-2-21)

The priests are a degenerate lot, breaking all the monastic rules (leading a married life, drinking alcoholic beverages...) and not practicing any monastic ascetical disciplines; living in luxury, spending big money on luxury cars, night life, geisha parties, and golf club memberships; living only to earn money by funerals, memorial services, and the indiscriminate selling of *tōba*. And the temples have become not only costly funeral parlors but also "trading companies in *tōbas*." (C. N., 91-3-12) To better sell these services, the priests appeal to folk beliefs and superstitious fears, which have nothing to do with Buddhism. They tell the people: "If you do not put up *tōba*, you

will become unhappy and the spirits of the deceased will come back to possess and harm you.” (C. N., 91-4-25)

Moreover, totally against Nichiren’s spirit of *fujufuse* 不受不施 [not receiving and not giving], the priests practice syncretism with Shinto by hanging up Shinto amulets in the entrance of their temple (N.C., 91-5-8) and giving donations to Shinto shrines. (C.N., 91-4-10); with Christianity (there is even a priest who declared “that he loves reading the Bible!”); and even with the rivaling Nichirenshū: “In the Muromachi and Edo periods, representatives of the Taisekiji attended the ceremonies at Minobuzan on feast days!” (C. N., 91-4-27) Is not all this defilement of the Dharma [*hōbō* 謗法]? (C. N., 91-2-12)

In the campaign demanding the resignation of Abe Nikken, launched in 1991 by the S. G., the *Hossu* is portrayed as sharing all these undesirable traits to the highest degree. Several catalogs of his “mortal sins” saw the light (e.g., in a long document entitled “Demand That Abe Nikken Step Down from the *Hossu* Throne,” published in installments in the S. S. of January 1992 and in C. N. 91-11-12). Reports gave the salacious details of “the luxurious life of the dirty *Hossu* and consorts” (headline in C. N., 91-3-29); his stays over the years in super-class hotels in the most famous hot springs (C. N., 91-3-29); his plans to build a palace of 2 billion yen for himself (thereby evidently mixing funds of the sect with personal money) (C. N., 91-3-19), etc. An old escapade with a prostitute during a trip to the U.S.A. is delved up, and “the talk is that Nikken has a bastard child with a married woman living in one of the subtemples” (C. N., 91-6-11). As a further plum, the C. N. headlined one day: “The Tab for a Life of Luxury—Did Nikken’s Gout and Diabetes (Two Illnesses wherein He Reaps What He Sowed) Take a Turn for the Worse?” (C. N., 91-5-16). And a well-documented report on Mrs. Nikken’s buying sprees carries the title: “The Imelda of the Taisekiji” (C. N., 91-10-21).

As for syncretism, it is made known that “the *Hossu* has built a tomb for his ancestors in a temple of the Zen sect, of which Nichiren has said: ‘Zen is of the devil’. Can you imagine the Pope building a tomb in a Muslim mosque? It would be the action of an apostate and a traitor to the Church and the faithful.” (C. N., 92-1-10) But the worst accusation of all is that he makes himself the sole and absolute master of the Buddha Dharma of Nichiren and lords it over the faithful mercilessly. He thus richly deserves the titles: “Nikken, a destructive demon, worse than Devadatta” and “The demonic *Hossu*, who turned the temples into his private property and destroyed the spirit of the sect” (S. S., 92-2-25).

Deeper Dimensions and Higher Ideals

My reportage up to now may have given the reader impression that the N.C./S. G. confrontation amounts to a high-spirited but low-class slugfest, but that is certainly not how the S. G. wants things to appear. I shall now pay special attention to the wider horizons and deeper concerns that make their appearance amidst the polemics. In summary, we could say that the S. G. wants its believers, and the world at large, to see the following goal as what is truly at stake in the battle: A highly needed “religious reformation,” not only of the N. S. but of Japanese Buddhism as a whole (and, concomitantly, of the Japanese spirit), and even of world religion, by a return to Nichiren, to original Buddhism, and to genuine religious endeavor. From early on, we see these themes creeping into the polemics of which we spoke above. To give only two examples:

The existing discrimination between the priesthood and the laity is a betrayal of the founder, Nichiren, who preached the equality of monks and lay people” [C. N., 92-1-9]. Behind the struggle between the N. S. and the S. G. lies the problem of the hierarchical order of priests and laity, which concerns the core of Buddhism and of human rights. [C. N., 91-2-20]

The big word *reformation* appears (for the first time?) in a talk by president Akiya, reported in the S. S. of 4 November 1991. It is clear from the beginning that Luther’s reformation represents the main model, later complemented by the “reformations” wrought by the Mahāyāna movement and by Nichiren himself.

In a new age the metamorphosis from the old into the new is a law of nature. In other words, religious reformation can be called an historical necessity. In Christianity, too, Martin Luther rose up to reform an authoritarian and decadent church, and he too was excommunicated by the church. Luther stressed that faith is a matter of the inner self, of the soul, and not of ritual and liturgy; and he negated squarely the infallibility and absolute authority of the pope. Also, he made Scripture the basis of everything. Moreover, he claimed that all believers are priests and equals; in other words, that there is no distinction between clerics and laity.... The actual shape of the leadership of the sect resembles in detail that of the medieval papacy before Luther’s reformation! [applause] If practicing the True Dharma is [the purpose of] the N. S., then the S. G. is the true N. S. and the sect, with its defilement of the Dharma, is heresy.

In the press conference mentioned above (8 Nov. 1991), president Akiya took up the theme again. The C. N. reported his words under the title “That’s It! The Religious Reformation of the Heisei Era!”

During the modernization of Europe a religious reformation took place, but there has been no [corresponding] reformation in Buddhism. The present movement of awakening to the reality of the sect is a movement of basic reformation within Buddhism.... It is true that the two religions are different, but the present problems of the sect show a close resemblance to the situation of Christianity at the time of Luther's reformation. (C. N., 91-11-12)

The themes that the two reformations have in common are then gradually spelled out:

1. *Decadence of the present religious establishment.* Enough has been said about this already, but I cannot refrain from quoting an interesting remark by President Akiya in the just-quoted talk: "Moreover, in Christianity there was the problem of [selling] indulgences. Corresponding to this, there is in the sect the indiscriminate sale of *tōbas*. It shows a similar pattern."
2. *From a religion of the clerics back to a religion of the [lay]people.*

The S. G. [brings] the Wisdom of the Buddha to the People, Who since the Edo Period Have Been Treated as Ignoramuses. (headline in S. S., 92-2-27)

Mahāyāna Originated as a Movement of Religious Renaissance, wherein Lay People Were the Main Actors. (headline in S. S., 93-4-9)

Nichiren Shōnin treated his disciples equally. When we return to the words of the *Gosho*, it becomes clear that we must move away from the system wherein the *Hossu* is absolute and the clergy forms the center, and toward a full evaluation of the faith of the lay people. (president Akiya, in C. N., 91-11-12)

3. *Sola Scriptura.* Scripture, and not the "tradition" in the hands of the hierarchy, is the basis of our religion.

[Just like Luther,] we too claim that Scripture, the *Gosho* of Nichiren, must be the standard of everything. In today's sect it is not Nichiren who is the basis—it is the *Hossu*. (president Akiya in C. N., 91-11-12)

The N. S. teaches that the *Gosho* is a part (a branch) of the Dharma Gate of Nichiren, and that the totality (the trunk) is possessed by the *Hossu* who receives the transmission. This is a false doctrine and the root of the perversion of the present sect.... True tradition is precisely sticking to the *Gosho*. (S. S., 02-12-5)

The true path of religious reform lies in S. G.'s motto: "The *Gosho* is the basis." (S. S., 91-11-6)

4. *Sola Fides*. Faith, and not outer signs or administrations by priests, is the source of salvation (Buddhahood). We shall see this theme at work below.

A Reformation in the Japanese Context

As already indicated, the S. G. does not see its reformation movement as limited solely to the N. S. Especially within the framework of the S. G. I., the real horizon is world religion.

In Nichiren's view the *kōsen rufu* was to be carried out on a world scale and certainly not to be limited to the puny island of Japan. We are at present progressing in accordance with that view of Nichiren, "with the world as our ally," "with the world as our stage." Our real moment is from now on. The world is waiting; the universe is our friend. (talk by Ikeda, in S. S., 93-3-26)

This, however, does not do away with the fact that the concrete context of the struggle is a "religious decadence" with quite specific Japanese traits, and which is not limited to the N. S. In targeting abuses in the N. S., the S. G. is thus simultaneously hitting at conditions present in all Japanese Buddhist sects. What strikes me as not so much as surprising as ominous is the fact that, to the best of my knowledge, there has scarcely been any reaction from the other sects. It reminds me a bit, *salva reverentia*, of a herd of animals that can watch one of its own being set upon without showing any concern. Be that as it may, among the specific Japanese traits mentioned above the following should be cited:

1. *A priestly caste that has fallen away from the true Buddhist monasticism*

"There is no real (monastic) *sangha* in Japan" (S. S., 91-11-12). The well-known facts are that practically all Japanese "monks" of whatever sect lead married lives, and that the occupancy of temples has become in most cases hereditary, passing from father to son. In view of the generality of the phenomenon, it is rather surprising how prominent in the S. G.'s criticism of the N. S. priests is the role played by the reproach that they do not observe the basic Buddhist monastic rule of celibacy.

One of the three original demands the S.G. directed to the N. S. was "to correct the decadence of the priests and to establish among them a climate of 'having few needs and being satisfied with little'" (C. N., 91-1-8). Subsequently it was made clear that this implied living celibate lives. The N. S.'s accusation that the S.G. leaders were usurping the prerogatives of the priests and behaving like "self-ordained (=illegitimate) monks," was thus turned against the priests by saying, in effect: "You yourselves are no legitimate monks, since you do not keep the precepts."

Nichiren's disciples too may have been considered for a time to be self-ordained (= not recognized by the establishment) monks, but they at least observed the precept of celibacy." (C. N., 91-7-15)

The fundamental problem in the "N. S. upheaval" is that there are no real monks (*shukke*, "people who left their homes") in the sect. For saying this we may be scolded as Hinayanists, but that monks should not be married is the iron rule, common to Hinayāna and Mahāyāna, a rule that has been valid for 3000 years [*sic!*]. (editorial, C. N., 91-8-7)

The Marrying of the Priests Has Caused the Loss of Vitality of the Sect.
(headline, C. N., 91-6-10)

2. *A clericalism, confounded by the "danka system"*

Another feature of the Japanese Buddhist sects that comes under S. G. attack is the so-called *danka-seido*, a system introduced by the Tokugawa feudal regime whereby every Japanese family had to be registered in a temple as a "patron" (*danka* 檀家) of that temple. Although not enforced by law any longer, it still lives on rather strongly in the mentality of the Japanese and ensures most temples a stable basis of support. In a free talk, published by the S. S. under the headline "The Temples Have Been Turned into 'Instruments of Authority' for the Control of the People," Ikeda characterized the *danka* system as follows:

The *danka* system is a deep source of the degeneration in the sect and, socially speaking, has been instrumental in molding the Japanese character into something weak towards authority and tending to conform to the group.... The feudal government instituted the system in order to eradicate Christianity and to control the people. In it the authority of the priests—who were given the right to issue the passes necessary for employment and travel—became absolute, and the only thing the lay people could do was to obey their priest.... Our "religious revolution" is a revolution of the spirit of the Japanese. (S.S., 92-12-9)

Since the Edo Period the *Danka* System Has Signified Not the Temple for the People, but the People for the Temple....For 350 years the *Danka* System Has Suppressed the Spirit of the Japanese..... It Has Been a History of Unending Usurpation and Plunder! (headlines, S. S., 92-2-26)

3. *A lineage-ridden Buddhism.*

Buddhism has always attached much importance to the "lineage" or transmission of the Dharma from master to disciple. In Japanese Buddhism, how-

ever, with its strong sectarianism, this has become formalized in the concept of *kechimyaku* 血脈 (literally, “blood line”): legitimacy by the link to the founder of the sect through the lineage of his successors as heads of the sect. In several cases, this has become a lineage of hereditary succession. Earlier, we saw that Nikken was attacked for his overestimation of this lineage, but the attack would certainly apply to other sects as well.

Weaning the S. G. faithful away from the N. S.

The S. G. originally found its legitimacy as a Buddhist movement and its link with Nichiren through its connection to the N.S. And its converts, who became at the same time members of the N. S., invested part of their traditional religiosity in things that only the priests, and especially the head priest, can provide. Thus the threat of losing its link with the N. S. —something the S. G. leadership seems to have expected from early on—faced the organization with several formidable tasks: rethinking its theological bases and reeducating the faithful away from their dependence on the N. S. The leaders went about these tasks with their usual energy, hammering home in the process the following main points:

1. *S. G. members are linked directly to the founder, Nichiren, and not indirectly through the Hossu lineage.*

We are the children of the Buddha, directly linked to Nichiren Shōnin.

By stepping in between the two, the priests have cut off the connection between the Dharma and the people. Thereby they have committed a doubly mortal offense: betraying the original meaning of the Buddha Dharma and obstructing the desire of the people for the Buddha Dharma. (S. S., 92-2-26)

Belief in the *Hossu* Is a False Doctrine, Contrary to the Buddha Dharma.... The Monopolization and Mystification of the Dharma Lineage, as Practiced by the *Hossu*, is a False View That Obstructs the *Kōsen Rufu*.... Nichiren Shōnin is the Only *Hossu*. (headlines in S. S., 92-11-17)

The gist of the problem is the following: How to link up with the true Dharma lineage, when all around there is only “degenerated transmission” left?

Fortunately, the solution is found in the example of Nichiren himself:

A Dharma Lineage Revolution by Nichiren. (headline)

Nichiren faced the same problem. He chose the third path: neither staying in the rotten establishment nor starting his own lineage but, rejecting the degenerated side-line, linking up with the original mainstream: Sakyamuni, Tendai Daishi, Dengyō Daishi.... Rejecting the historical lineage and choosing the “religious lineage,” that transcends space and time and has the *kōsen rufu* as its center. (S. S., 92-11-25 and 26)

At the same time it is stressed that the real Buddhist sangha (“church”) is not the clerical hierarchy but the community of believers (the “people of God”).

The Dharma Law of Nichiren is something for the people.... They who believe in the Buddha Dharma of Nichiren are all children of the Buddha. When these people come together, they form the community of believers, the real sangha.

However, the N. S. establishment has rejected Nichiren’s Buddha Law of salvation for the people and has fallen into an evil feudal mentality. The N. S. has thereby put itself outside of the community of believers.” (C. N., 92-3-25)

2. *Temples and religious services by priests are not needed for salvation or a satisfactory religious life.*

Like most Buddhists, the S. G. members have a certain nostalgic attachment to their temple, especially on certain “days for the dead.” From the end of 1991, the S. G. leadership has intensified its efforts to convince the faithful that the S. G. halls (*kaikan*) can fulfill these functions.

What is the real temple today? The age of the Buddhism of the people is the age of the *dōjō* 道場 [a place where lay people gather for religious purposes].... S. G. halls are the contemporary *dōjō* = temples. (S. S., 91-12-13)

And in preparation for the Obon festival (the principal feast for the dead) of 1992, the S. S. announced

On the 15th of the Month, Each S. G. Hall Will Hold a Ceremony of *Sūtra* Recitation for the Benefit of All Deceased S. G. Members. (headline)

The Buddhahood (=salvation) of the deceased is certainly not made possible by offerings to the priests. What is important is the practice of faith by the person who prays for the deceased. The condition for attaining Buddhahood is personal faith during one’s life, but observances for the dead by the surviving family members are certainly important. (S. S., 1992-7-9)

3. *Priest-centered funeral rites are not necessary to lead the deceased to Buddhahood and transform them into ancestors.*

“Funereal Buddhism” Is a Relic of the Past; We Want a Buddhism That Gives the People “Strength to Live.” (headline for a speech by Ikeda, recorded in the S. S., 91-11-6)

In April 1992, the C. N. carried the following remark:

Since the excommunication in November last year, the opposition between the N. S. and the S. G. has steadily escalated. What has decisively cut off the relations between the two, however, is the introduction by the S. G. of a way of holding funerals proper to the S. G., called “friends funerals” or “companions funerals” [without priests]. (C. N., 92-4-24)

Indeed, when I first became aware of this development, my impression was, “This time the S. G. is really going for the jugular vein!” For if anything binds the Japanese—for whom the ancestors represent the greater part of the sacred—to the temples, it is the funerals and memorial rites for the deceased of the family. It is the linkage of Buddhism with these rites that popularized Buddhism in Japan and keeps the temples financially alive, but that also earned Japanese Buddhism the name of *sōshiki bukkyō* 葬式仏教 (funereal Buddhism or Buddhism of the dead). Roughly speaking, the idea behind this linkage is the following: Through the ministrations of the priests, the spirit of the deceased is pacified, gains posthumous enlightenment, and is turned, after so many years, into a full-fledged ancestor. The ministrations of the priests consist mainly in conducting the funeral itself and, later, the memorial rites, bestowing a *kaimyō* 戒名 (a posthumous name as a disciple of the Buddha) and, specific to the N. S., putting up at the funeral site a special copy of the *Gohonzon*, called a *dōshi honzon* 導師本尊 (*honzon* that leads the way to Buddhahood).

In its campaign, the S. G. has attacked all elements of the linkage, together with the ideas behind them, as un-Buddhist, fatal for Buddhism, and not corresponding to the needs of the contemporary age. As early as June 1991, the C. N. declared the following:

To Pray for the Enlightenment of the Deceased, a Formalistic Funeral Is Unnecessary—A Personalized Funeral Is Even Preferable.... Why Stick to Relics of an Authoritarian Regime? (headlines)

It is as if the evil practices of the *danka* system, imposed by the Tokugawa regime and existing only in Japan, have penetrated to the very marrow of the bones of the Japanese.... Now, however, terms like “friends funeral,” “music funeral,” etc., are beginning to be used.... As if responding to this trend in the world at large, there originated also in S. G. a movement that could be called a “reformation or renaissance in funerals.” (C. N., 91-6-17)

The Priests Claim That the Deceased Cannot Reach Buddhahood Without a Priest-Centered Funeral. (headline, C. N., 91-7-8)

Among the points of doctrine that has been twisted by the priests is the following: They present the funeral and memorial services, together with the *kaimyō*—all things that originated in the Muromachi and Edo periods (long after Nichiren)—as immovable aspects of Nichiren’s Buddha Dharma. They speak as if the funeral is a rite for attaining Buddhahood. However, in Nichiren’s writings one cannot find a single passage wherein funerals and the attainment of Buddhahood are linked.... Why do they present these things, which were initiated only later, as essentials of the Buddha Dharma? It is because the income gained by these ceremonies has become the mainstay of the upkeep of the temples. (C. N., 92-1-9)

As to the *kaimyō*, the C. N. of 24 April 1992, carries the headline: “The *Kaimyō* Is a Japanese Invention That Has Nothing to Do with the Buddha Dharma,” and quotes, disapprovingly, a N. S. declaration on the matter: “The great significance of the *kaimyō* lies in the fact that it erases the sins committed by the deceased from time immemorial and leads the deceased to Buddhahood.” And on the *dōshi honzon*, the C. N. reports:

In the N. S. it is customary, when priests preside at the funeral of a believer, to put the *dōshi honzon* in the ceremony hall. The sect now says that it is a great defilement of the Dharma not to put up the *honzon* at a funeral, and claims that in consequence the deceased will go straight to hell.... But the S. G. counters that, in fact, the *dōshi honzon* put up by the priests is a counterfeit, not from the hand of Nichiren. (C. N., 92-3-19)

What it all comes down to is the claim that people cannot reach Buddhahood without the intervention of those possessing a special religious rank, the priests. A basis for this claim absolutely cannot be found in Buddhism. It is a private doctrine whereby decadent priests step between the people and the true Buddha. (C. N., 92-3-24)

At the end of 1991, the S. S. printed the following headlines: “The Friends Funeral Is the Revolution in Funerals That Society Had Been Waiting for” (91-11-12).” “A Buddhism of Funerals Is the Funeral of Buddhism” (91-12-12). And recently Ikeda declared:

Nichiren’s Buddhism is certainly not a “funereal Buddhism” or a “Buddhism of ritual”.... It is a “Buddhism of faith” whereby, through their own faith, lay people attain Buddhahood for themselves and for their parents.... By your own fervent faith your ancestors also attain Buddhahood, and these ancestors who have already attained Buddhahood, in turn, protect you as if they were very near you. (S. S., 92-10-13)

4. Also the *Gohonzon* is finally a matter of faith

As already mentioned, the S. G. has in its history attached much importance to the material, or better maybe, “sacramental” reality of the *Gohonzon*, as “manifested” by Nichiren himself, faithfully preserved in the head temple, and, in the form of copies, made present in the homes of the believers. Excommunication, however, would cut the S. G. off from this sacramental reality. Where to turn in this emergency? The reports somehow convey the impression that, on this point, the S. G. leadership has wavered between two theological positions: (1) the right to copy and distribute the *Gohonzon* does not belong to the *Hossu* but to the community of believers; and (2) the material *Gohonzon* is not important; the real *Gohonzon* is a matter of heart, a matter of faith. From before the excommunication, the C. N. reported:

It has become clear that Nikken *Hossu* is thinking of using, as one of the measures to curb the S. G., the refusal to bestow the *Gohonzon* on them.... However, the *Gohonzon* has been manifested for the happiness of all the people of the world, and certainly not for Nikken and a portion of his priests only. (C. N., 91-10-16)

The way of reproducing the *Gohonzon* has been brought into question:

Up to now, the copying of the *Gohonzon* has been deemed the prerogative of the *Hossu* as heir to the Dharma lineage. However,...the imminent propagation of the Dharma over the entire world means that, with the present method of dissemination, many faithful will not get a chance to receive the *Gohonzon*. Still, in the doctrine of the *kōsen rufu*, the propagation of the *Gohonzon* is central. This makes it necessary to put the traditional way of copying into question.... In principle, the copying of the *Gohonzon* is of such a nature that it must be based on the strict discipline of the *sangha* as the community of believers. (C. N., 92-3-24)

Recently, I am sometimes asked what Nichiren’s disciples worshipped during Nichiren’s time, especially before the *Gohonzon* had been revealed (1271), and what kind of religious practices they had. Well, it seems that in the years from 1253 (the founding date of the sect) till 1271 only the recitation of the *Daimoku* was practiced. But even then the basic meaning was to recite the *Daimoku* to the *Gohonzon*. In the time of Nichiren and Nikkō Shōnin, the founder of the N. S., it was certainly not the custom to bestow the *Gohonzon* on all the disciples. (president Akiya, in S. S., 92-3-16)

But it is only fitting to leave the last word to Ikeda Daisaku, S. G.’s honorary president, who declared in three different speeches, recorded in the S. S.:

The *Gohonzon* too is a *Gohonzon* of “viewing the heart [*kanjin* 観心],” a “*Gohonzon* of faith.” Its merits are determined by our faith. (S. S., 92-10-13)

The *Gohonzon* Resides in My Breast.... The *Gohonzon* of Viewing the Heart.
(headlines)

In any religion the *Gohonzon* is the most important thing. Now, what is the basic meaning of the *Gohonzon* in the Buddha Dharma of Nichiren Shōnin? Nichiren himself said the following: “Do not look for this *Gohonzon* somewhere else. It is nowhere but in the ‘ball of flesh’ in our breasts, the breasts of sentient beings who uphold the *Lotus Sūtra* and recite the *namu-myōhō-rengē-kyō*” (*Goshō*, p.1244). And Nichikan Shōnin wrote: “When we believe in the *Gohonzon* and recite the *Daimoku*, our body (person) will be identical with the *Gohonzon* of three thousand worlds in one moment, identical with Nichiren Shōnin. (S. S., 93-4-6)

Buddhahood Is Self-Awareness of the “*Gohonzon* of One’s Own Heart.”
(headline)

The *Gohonzon* of Nichiren Shōnin is a “*honzon* of viewing the heart.” Phrased simply, “viewing the heart” means “seeing one’s own heart as it is,” “knowing oneself.” Its aim is to become aware that “I myself am the Buddha.” It is a *gohonzon* for the sake of the awareness that oneself is the Buddha. It is a matter of faith. (S. S., 93-4-13)

Conclusion

We have reviewed a battle of which not so much the outcome as the significance is still unclear, and are left with important questions: Will the Sōka Gakkai really commence a reformation in Buddhism, at the least in Japanese Buddhism? Will it thereby produce, maybe for the first time in history, a true lay Buddhism? And will it then feel the need to have in its midst a truly monastic order, one that does not dominate but serve? Only the future can tell.*

* As these pages were going to press, the morning edition of the Japanese *Asahi Shimbun* (21 April 1993) announced that at the end of 1991, the S. G. requested the registration office to recognize the following as the new “brand name” of the S. G. (to be used for publications, etc.): Nichiren Sekaishu (World Sect of Nichiren). Spokespeople of the S. G., however, maintain that this was done only out of fear that they would not be allowed any longer to use the old name of “Nichiren Shōshū,” and does not imply the intention of changing the name of the organization, “Sōka Gakkai,” or of becoming a new Buddhist sect.