

# The Nichiren Shoshu priesthood issue in South Africa

## Questions and answers

There are two kinds of wisdom, correct and perverse. No matter how wise a person may appear, if his assertions are warped you should not listen to him. Nor should you follow priests merely because they are venerable or of high rank. But if a person has the wisdom to know the true meaning of the Lotus Sutra, no matter how lowly he may appear, pay respect to him and make offerings to him as though he were a living Thus Come One. Thus it is written in the sutra.

– Nichiren Daishonin, WND I, p. 1028

Includes –

- *A brief history of the priesthood issue*
- *President Ikeda's own account of how the SGI was excommunicated*
- *Discussion of the priesthood's demolition of the grand temple called the Sho-Hondo*
- *A table summarising key differences between the practice of Nichiren Buddhism by SGI and the priesthood*

# The temple/priesthood issue – a brief summary

The Nichiren Shoshu priesthood, which “excommunicated” 10 million SGI members in 1991, says all Nichiren Buddhists need their help to attain Buddhahood, and that lay believers can never be equal to priests.

To make this argument, the priesthood has distorted Nichiren Daishonin’s teachings, reinterpreting Nichiren’s Buddhism to entrench its own authority. They further claim that the Nichikan Gohonzon, inscribed in the 18th century by 26th high priest Nichikan based on those inscribed by Nichiren and now copied and issued by the SGI to its members, is invalid.

In South Africa, the priesthood members, rather than finding their own supporters, are intent on undermining the faith of SGI members, spreading rumours and slandering SGI and President Ikeda.

SGI’s position is that the priests’ interpretation of Buddhism is authoritarian; distorts and betrays the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin; and is locked in ritual, resisting adaptation to the time, place and people of the modern world. Such adaptation is in fact part of the living tradition of Buddhism, as Shakyamuni himself taught.

SGI believes that all believers are equal and able to attain Buddhahood through their own efforts without unnecessary ritual, that a Gohonzon is a Gohonzon, without mystery, and that Nichiren’s Buddhism is today as always best pursued in a deeply humanistic practice and supported by an organisation without hierarchy or coercion.

## *Glossary of terms*

Dai-Gohonzon – Great Gohonzon inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin, dedicated to kosen-rufu, and formerly enshrined in the Sho-Hondo at the Nichiren Shoshu Head Temple.

Gohonzon – The scroll or mandala representing our potential as Buddhas, to which SGI members chant. The first Gohonzons were inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin and were in subsequent generations copied by priests. The SGI respectfully issues copies of a Gohonzon inscribed by the reforming 26<sup>th</sup> high priest, Nichikan Shonin.

Nichiren Shoshu – “The Orthodox School of Nichiren”, also referred to as the priesthood, or the temple sect.

Sho-Hondo – The Grand Main Temple in the Nichiren Shoshu Head Temple complex, Taiseki-ji, near Mt Fuji in Japan. It was completed in the early ‘70s, largely with SGI funding, but later demolished by the priesthood.

# Table of contents

<b>The temple/priesthood issue – a brief summary</b>	<b>2</b>
<i>Glossary of terms</i>	2
<b>Table of contents</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Basics of the priesthood issue</b>	<b>4</b>
<i>What are the key differences between the SGI and Nichiren Shoshu?</i>	4
<i>How do the priests view Buddhahood or enlightenment?</i>	4
<i>What is the background to the priesthood/temple issue?</i>	5
<i>Why is the split with the priesthood still an issue for SGI?</i>	6
<i>Why should I believe what the SGI tells me? After all, SGI is biased.</i>	7
<i>What attitude do you suggest we have towards the priesthood members?</i>	7
<i>Is it okay to chant with priesthood members?</i>	7
<i>We all chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, so what's the difference?</i>	8
<b>The true nature of the Gohonzon</b>	<b>9</b>
<i>The priesthood says that SGI Gohonzons are forgeries ...</i>	9
... and even that chanting to these 'false Gohonzons' brings misfortune?	10
<i>If all Gohonzons are valid, why did SGI members turn in their Nikken Gohonzons in the 1990s?</i>	10
<b>The destruction of the Sho-Hondo</b>	<b>10</b>
<i>Why does the priesthood say SGI lies about the demolition of the Sho-Hondo?</i>	10
<b>SGI and other religions</b>	<b>13</b>
<i>Isn't SGI now just yet another sect fighting with other sects? Isn't this religion at its worst?</i>	13
<i>Surely all religions are basically the same? And if so, what difference does it make whether we belong to the SGI or Nichiren Shoshu?</i>	14
<i>Is there a simple way to understand SGI's relationships to other religions and the priesthood?</i>	14
<i>Surely if we're going to criticise the priesthood, we should be criticising all other religions as well?</i>	15
<i>Why is the priesthood sect dishonourable?</i>	15
<i>I feel this is all a bit overwhelming. I didn't join SGI to get involved in religious quarrels.</i>	15
<i>Are you saying all priesthood members are evil?</i>	16
<i>What do non-Buddhists think about all this?</i>	17
<i>Is there an upside to all this?</i>	18
<b>President Ikeda's experience of the split with the priesthood</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>A table of the differences between the SGI and the priesthood</b>	<b>20</b>

## Basics of the priesthood issue

*What are the key differences between the SGI and Nichiren Shoshu?*

The priesthood claims special authority over lay believers and insists that priests and lay believers have different roles. Since the priests also claim to be the only ones who know the “true teachings” they are claiming that all power and authority in the Buddhist community must go to the high priest and other chief priests.

In SGI, there is no monopoly on the truth, and all lay believers, or SGI members are equal, irrespective of age, experience or responsibility.

The priesthood has dramatically distorted the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin to suit their purposes, saying that one can *only* attain Buddhahood with the assistance of the priests.

In SGI, we follow Nichiren Daishonin in insisting that anyone can realise Buddhahood anywhere at any time through faith and chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

The priests say that the Gohonzon distributed by the SGI (which was inscribed by the 26th high priest, Nichikan) is a fake because it is not printed and distributed by the priesthood.

The SGI emphasizes that Nichiren Daishonin never said the validity of a Gohonzon depends on who wrote it. Nor has the SGI responded to the priesthood’s charge by saying priestly Gohonzons are invalid.

A Gohonzon is a Gohonzon, irrespective of who inscribed it. It does not need special rituals to make it “valid”. To believe this is in effect to believe in magic.

**To summarise:** the priesthood says that to attain Buddhahood you need the assistance of priests, that lay believers are inferior in status to priests, and that any Gohonzon which does not have the current priesthood’s stamp of approval is invalid.

*How do the priests view Buddhahood or enlightenment?*

Nichiren Daishonin’s teachings made it clear that it is our personal faith and practice that determines how and when and how we attain Buddhahood. Nichiren wrote: “Never seek this Gohonzon outside yourself” (WND I, p. 832). He also wrote: “It is the heart that is

important” (WND I, p. 951). And he wrote: “What is most important is that by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo alone, you can attain Buddhahood. It will no doubt depend on the strength of your faith. To have faith is the basis of Buddhism” (WND 1, p. 832).

But the priests now teach something completely different. They claim that attaining Buddhahood depends on having the right Gohonzon, and on who “sanctioned” that Gohonzon:

The sanctioning of the object of worship by the High Priest, who is the only person to be bequeathed the Daishonin’s Buddhism, is what makes the attainment of Buddhahood possible . . .<sup>1</sup>

Believers should have single-minded faith in [the high priest] as the living body of Shakyamuni (Nichiren).<sup>2</sup>

The place where the Heritage of the Law is entrusted to a single person [the high priest] exists in the noble entity that is inseparable with the Dai-Gohonzon.”<sup>3</sup>

Note that the priests not only claim that we should be dependent on the high priest to attain Buddhahood, but that the high priest has some unique right to Buddhism: “the only person”; “entrusted to a single person”. There is absolutely no basis in the writings of Nichiren Daishonin for these claims.

### *What is the background to the priesthood/temple issue?*

After Nichiren Daishonin died, those disciples charged with passing on his teachings immediately fell out, leading to the establishment of several different Nichiren sects. One school, Nichiren Shoshu, preserved the tradition closest to Nichiren’s own teachings, though Nichiren Shoshu’s history includes many deviations from Nichiren Daishonin’s teachings.

When it was established in the 1930s, the Soka Gakkai began to support Nichiren Shoshu. For years, the SGI was the priesthood’s key source of income, restoring its very tattered fortunes through huge contributions from members. But in 1991, apparently jealous at SGI’s success and influence, the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood charged the

---

<sup>1</sup> *Refuting the Soka Gakkai’s “Counterfeit Object of Worship”: 100 Questions and Answers*. 1996. West Hollywood Nichiren Shoshu Temple, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Nichiren Shoshu Monthly*, September 2008, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Nichiren Shoshu Monthly*, October 2008, p. 17.

Soka Gakkai with “blasphemy”, disrespect and other misdemeanors. It alleged that SGI was distorting Nichiren’s teachings. We believe the reverse is true, and the evidence is in this document.

At that time, 1991, SGI members already constituted the great majority of Nichiren Shoshu supporters. The priests, under then high priest Nikken Abe, excommunicated the SGI. They expected that members would then leave SGI and give their allegiance to the priesthood. But this did not happen. Instead, the overwhelming majority of SGI members remained loyal to the true teachings of Nichiren Daishonin, to our mentor President Ikeda, to the egalitarian traditions of the Gakkai and to each other.

Here in South Africa, a few SGI members have since 2006 left the SGI and given their loyalties to the priesthood. They continue to encourage other SGI members to join them while slandering the SGI and President Ikeda.

### *Why is the split with the priesthood still an issue for SGI?*

There are a couple of powerful reasons why SGI can’t just happily wave the priesthood goodbye:

- The priesthood is distorting the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin, which the SGI is determined to defend because his teachings have such great power to create value in the world. In the hands of the priests, this great practice changes from being humanistic, compassionate and egalitarian, to being authoritarian, superstitious, bogus (contradicting Nichiren’s own teachings) and corrupt.
- The priesthood is trying to persuade SGI members to join them. Of course we do not wish to see our numbers shrink, but we’re even more concerned that individual members do not trade in their great mission as members of SGI for the dishonourable path offered by the priesthood. This booklet explains why we consider it a dishonourable, lesser path, and why the priesthood sect is bogus (distorting Nichiren’s teachings) and superstitious (for example, adding unnecessary mystery to the nature of the Gohonzon).

*Why should I believe what the SGI tells me? After all, SGI is biased.*

Yes, we are biased in the sense of having a strong view, but we believe there are very good reasons for our “bias”, reasons based entirely on the real teachings of Nichiren Daishonin.

But no-one should just believe the SGI perspective based, say, on reading only this document. Please read more elsewhere, especially the Goshō, and ask as many questions as you need to. The best way to resolve your doubts, the way Nichiren himself demonstrated, is to ask questions and study this issue in depth yourself.

This is a deeply important issue, and if you do not understand it fully while having doubts or concerns about it, it may slowly erode your faith. If you do understand it clearly, you will be far, far closer to understanding the heart of Nichiren’s teachings.

*What attitude do you suggest we have towards the priesthood members?*

Of course, the priesthood members absolutely have the right to practice the faith of their choosing. They deserve respect as individual human beings. We should chant for their great happiness.

But we cannot ignore their distortion of Nichiren Daishonin’s teachings. The Buddha Shakyamuni did not hesitate to speak out against those who abused their power. Later, Nichiren Daishonin spent his life fearlessly defending the true teachings of Buddhism, strongly criticising sects that trampled on those teachings and those priests who sought only material gain. As his disciples, we cannot (should not) hesitate to do the same.

Defending Nichiren’s teachings does not for a moment imply any violence or abuse towards others – but it does mean unhesitatingly standing up for the truth.

*Is it okay to chant with priesthood members?*

This is really something you have to decide for yourself – SGI will not tell you what to do – but it definitely is *not okay* in terms of the correct practice of Nichiren of Daishonin’s Buddhism. For chanting with priesthood members suggests that you think you are actually practising the same faith, or that you are not concerned by the priesthood’s betrayal of Nichiren’s teachings. The chant may sound the same, but the spirit behind it is completely different.

If someone comes to chant with you, that implies that they are joining you in your practice. Similarly, if you chant with a priesthood member, that action suggests that you're okay with their slander of Nichiren's teachings. Nichiren Daishonin made this clear:

If even a good priest sees someone slandering the Law and disregards him, failing to reproach him, to oust him or to punish him for his offense, then that priest is betraying Buddhism. But if he takes the slanderer severely to task, drives him off or punishes him, then he is my disciple and one who truly understands my teachings. Never forget this admonition against ignoring another's slander of Buddhism.<sup>4</sup>

If you see the enemies of the Lotus Sutra and fail to reproach them, fail to bring their slander to the lord of the country, and remain quiet out of fear of others' reaction, you will fall into the hell of incessant suffering.<sup>5</sup>

If even a good monk sees someone destroying the teaching and disregards him, failing to reproach him, to oust him or to punish him for his offense, then you should realize that that monk is betraying the Buddha's teaching.<sup>6</sup>

In his Twenty-six Admonitions, Nikko Shonin (the first-ever high priest) stated, "Do not follow even the high priest if he goes against the Buddha's Law and propounds his own views."<sup>7</sup>

These quotes make it perfectly clear that Nichiren Daishonin did not hesitate to identify and refute doctrines that were misguided or taught by those who were corrupt. We need to challenge ourselves to find the best way to carry forward his spirit. That way is to be clear with those who support the priesthood that we strongly disagree with them, and being ready to explain why.

*We all chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, so what's the difference?*

Nichiren Daishonin explains this very clearly, on the very first page of the Goshō:<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Admonitions Against Slander, *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 165.

<sup>5</sup> *Goshō Zenshu*, p. 1077.

<sup>6</sup> *Rissho Ankoku Ron*, MW2 [2nd ed.], p. 25–26.

<sup>7</sup> *Goshō Zenshu*, p. 1618.

Nevertheless, even though you chant and believe in Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, if you think the Law is outside yourself, you are embracing not the Mystic Law but an inferior teaching.

The priesthood's claims that attaining Buddhahood is not just a function of our own faith, but of relationships with priests, pilgrimages to Japan, and having the "right Gohonzon" all contradict the principle that the Law is in fact "inside us".

## The true nature of the Gohonzon

*The priesthood says that SGI Gohonzons are forgeries ...*

The Gohonzon distributed by the SGI is a copy of the Gohonzon inscribed by the great reforming high priest Nichikan Shonin who lived 300 years ago. So if they insist that it is a forgery, the priests are suggesting that a Gohonzon inscribed by one of the greatest figures in their own lineage is invalid.

Gohonzons do not have magical powers, as the priesthood seems to suggest, and it is superstitious to imagine that particular rituals or "eye-opening" ceremonies determine the "power" of Gohonzons. Historically, branch temples of Nichiren Shoshu often issued Gohonzons without having conducted "eye-opening ceremonies".

Most importantly of all, Nichiren Daishonin taught that "you should not seek this Gohonzon outside yourself." In other words, your Buddhahood is not going to be compromised by chanting to the "wrong" Gohonzon, so long as your intention is pure. (And if your intention is not pure, no special ritual for validating a Gohonzon is going to help you!)

The priesthood dismisses the SGI Gohonzons as being invalid, but SGI, which handles the copying and issuing of the Gohonzon with great respect, has never claimed that the priestly Gohonzons are invalid.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Writings of Nichiren Daishonin I*, p. 3.

*... and even that chanting to these 'false Gohonzons' brings misfortune?*

It is wrong to say that misfortune follows from chanting to the “wrong” Gohonzon. The priesthood sect has suggested that, when SGI members suffer a setback or misfortune in their lives, this is a result of our chanting to the wrong Gohonzon. However, Nichiren Daishonin was persecuted, nearly executed, beaten, frequently nearly starved, and suffered awful illness during his lifetime. Perhaps the priesthood thinks Nichiren was chanting to the wrong Gohonzon?

This is an important point, as it shows the priesthood’s basic and superstitious misunderstanding of Buddhism. Buddhism does *not* eliminate misfortune from our lives. Buddhism offers us a way to *transform our experience of misfortune*, from suffering and negativity into victory and joy.

*If all Gohonzons are valid, why did SGI members turn in their Nikken Gohonzons in the 1990s?*

In the 1990s, SGI members who had received Nikken Gohonzons before 1991 started to ask if they could swop the Gohonzons issued by high priest Nikken for the Nichikan Gohonzon now being issued by SGI. This was a movement started by members, not leaders. It was based on a simple preference for a Gohonzon not associated with a corrupt high priest; it was not based on a belief that the Nikken Gohonzon was invalid.

## **The destruction of the Sho-Hondo**

*Why does the priesthood say SGI lies about the demolition of the Sho-Hondo?*

The Sho-Hondo was the Grand Main Temple at the Taiseki-ji temple complex near Mount Fuji in Japan. Taiseki-ji was founded on land donated by one of Nichiren Daishonin’s key disciples, Nanjo Tokimitsu, who appears in the Goshō.

The Sho-Hondo was completed in 1972, funded almost entirely by the sincere contributions of eight million Soka Gakkai members. But in 1998, the priesthood demolished it, claiming that it was structurally unsound.

Now, priesthood members claim that the SGI is lying when we say that in fact there were no structural problems with the Sho-Hondo.

But SGI is not alone in arguing that the Sho-Hondo was demolished out of bitterness, and not because of flawed construction. Its demolition was severely criticised, not just by SGI members, but also by a great many eminent people outside the SGI. The priests refused independent inspections to confirm the alleged structural damage. Even the architect of the Sho-Hondo, who was himself a priesthood member, disputed the need for its demolition, as the *Washington Post* related at the time:

“I am sad; I am angry and I have a terrible feeling of losing something precious,” says Kimio Yokoyama, the project’s chief architect. Though a Nichiren Shoshu member, he has not yet been able to discuss the planned destruction with the leader of his group, Abe.

“How can this happen?” Yokoyama says. “They say it is in danger of crumbling. That is wrong . . . It is as if they are saying there is a blemish on the skin so they must end the life of the person.”<sup>9</sup>

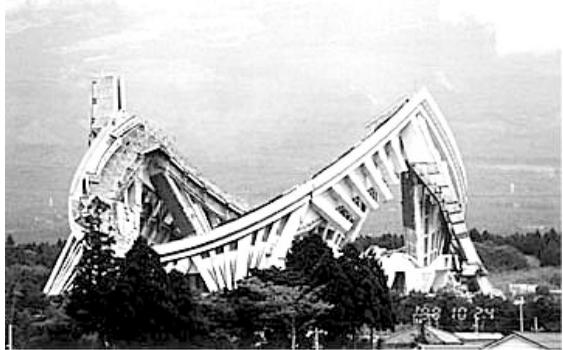
It is incredible to think that Nichiren Shoshu [priesthood] is planning to demolish the building . . . Whatever reason they may have, it is

beyond my comprehension . . .

. The Sho-Hondo is the

crystallization of the sincerity of eight million believers. At the same time, from the viewpoint of those of us involved in its

construction, it is a building with architectural and cultural significance not only to Japan but also to the rest of the world. Destroying the Sho-Hondo, therefore, would be to disregard people’s feelings and efforts as well as their history and culture.



The demolition of the Sho-Hondo

---

<sup>9</sup> A Major Eruption At the Foot of Fuji, *The Washington Post* Foreign Service, 14 June 1998.

– Kimio Yokoyama, chief architect of the Sho-Hondo

Others who had helped to build the Sho-Hondo also raised their voices in protest at its destruction:

The Sho-Hondo is one of the best structures built in Japan, and, I believe, it is also a global rarity . . . The Sho-Hondo, as long as it is maintained properly, was built to last well over five hundred years or possibly up to one thousand years . . . If Nichiren Shoshu destroys the Sho-Hondo, whose architectural significance is of worldwide importance, after only twenty-some years of use, it would invite, through its own impropriety, criticism from society, especially from the construction industry.<sup>10</sup>

Those critical of the demolition by the priesthood included international architects:

The Sho-Hondo, a Buddhist Temple at the foot of Mount Fuji and a significant architectural landmark of the Modern Movement in Japan is being threatened with demolition by the Reverend Nikken Abe, the High Priest of Nichiren Shoshu. Reverend Abe claims that the building is structurally unsafe, *but hundreds of architects and preservationists have rallied to ask that it be repaired as needed in order to ensure its preservation* [our italics].

The Sho Hondo was designed by Kimio Yokoyama and completed in 1972 to a budget of \$10 million contributed by 8 million people worldwide. The monumental building has a unique suspension roof designed to symbolize a crane in flight. Its huge plaza in the shape of a lotus blossom accommodates up to 60,000 worshippers. Recently, the Reverend Abe stated that the building must also come down because most of the original construction funds were donated by Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist lay organization of 12 million people that was excommunicated by him in 1991. *Requests for independent structural inspections have all been denied* [our italics].

US/ICOMOS member and former Intern David Anthone, Chairman of the newly-formed International Committee to Save the Sho-Hondo (ICSS), has written that the Sho-Hondo is significant as one of the finest representatives of

---

<sup>10</sup> Yoshimune Zaitzu, representative of the general contractors for the construction of the Sho-Hondo.

post-war architecture in Japan. “The proposed demolition . . . would be recorded as one of the great architectural losses of the 20th century,” Mr Anthone added. He is also Chair of the DOCOMOMO US Group.<sup>11</sup>

Prior to the demolition of the Sho-Hondo, the priests had also cut down a great many very beautiful cherry trees donated to the Head Temple at Taiseki-ji by SGI members. In that case, they claimed the trees were diseased.

## **SGI and other religions**

*Isn't SGI now just yet another sect fighting with other sects? Isn't this religion at its worst?*

Actually, this is religion at its best. This is religion taking the rational view that the beliefs by which we live deeply influence our happiness, and so it is important that we choose those beliefs most consistent with our happiness and that of others.

If SGI just ignored the priesthood, it would mean that we don't particularly value the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin, and certainly, that we never understood them: a great part of Nichiren's actions and writings were devoted to refuting errors in Buddhism.

If you think that Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is just another religion or philosophy, with no unique or wonderful qualities, then it's easy to dismiss this as just another sectarian spat. But most SGI members believe that Nichiren's philosophy is almost unique in its optimism about the potential of the individual human being, its emphasis on the preciousness of life and the profound equality of all people. Of course, these are values that transcend Buddhism – yet Nichiren's Buddhism offers a simple and accessible practice that embeds these values not just in our minds, but also deep in our hearts and behaviour.

We defend Nichiren's Buddhism not to vindicate our sect, but because it is a treasure for all humanity, as demonstrated by our movement for peace.

---

<sup>11</sup> Newsletter (1998, no. 3) of the International Council on Monuments and Sites.

*Surely all religions are basically the same? And if so, what difference does it make whether we belong to the SGI or Nichiren Shoshu?*

The modern, secular view of religion is often that it's all basically the same. In practice, we know that it is not, because the way that people practise or express their religions can cause great suffering or great happiness.

In his dialogues with people of other faiths, President Ikeda has demonstrated that ultimately it is not the doctrines of a particular faith that are important, but whether those doctrines are expressed in deep respect for life and the fundamental equality of all believers.

Nichiren Shoshu, however, insists that lay believers are of lesser status than priests within the community of believers, which is a profound deviation from Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

The priesthood's understanding of the nature of Buddhahood, as something that they control, is also completely different to Buddhahood as described in the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin.

*Is there a simple way to understand SGI's relationships to other religions and the priesthood?*

Consider this comparison. If there are two doctors (two religions) with different abilities, we would never consider the less capable doctor to have lesser human rights – but we would choose to consult with the better doctor.

Similarly, just because all honestly practised religions deserve equal legal and social respect, this does not mean that they necessarily all have equal power to make people happy.

Now imagine that there is a third doctor. But this doctor is not just less capable, but actually misrepresents his qualifications or abilities. We would not hesitate to denounce this doctor.

The priesthood is like the third doctor. It claims to follow Nichiren's teachings, but misrepresents them.

Nichiren Daishonin spent his life denouncing other sects in Japan. He did this not out of jealousy but because those sects were betraying the teachings of the Buddha and causing great unhappiness amongst the people.

Ideas have great power. Ideas determine whether people believe in themselves, or give up power to tyrants. Ideas determine how well people eat, how they take care of their health, how they treat their families and fellow citizens, how they vote, whether they are

prepared to go to war, how they regard the environment. Religious ideas, if practised sincerely, affect our behaviour in all these realms.

So we cannot say that it does not matter what beliefs we choose – it matters more than anything. The many terrible problems that beset our world are functions of our beliefs. This is one of the most profound teachings of Nichiren Daishonin, which he famously expressed in his Goshō, *On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land* (WND1, p. 6).

*Surely if we're going to criticise the priesthood, we should be criticising all other religions as well?*

No, other religions are not distorting the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin. Other religions do not constantly seek to undermine the faith of SGI members.

In Nichiren's time, vigorous debate between different schools of Buddhism was normal and accepted. Those who lost debates would immediately switch from one school to another. Our time is different, and SGI is now a part of the global movement for inter-faith dialogue.

*Why is the priesthood sect dishonourable?*

It is dishonourable because many of those now supporting the priesthood would never have heard of Nichiren Daishonin's teachings had it not been for the SGI. There was no need to demolish the Shōhondo built with the contributions made by SGI members.

Nichiren Shoshu is a lesser path because the priesthood now teaches a distorted form of Nichiren's teachings. For example, Nichiren taught a practice that allows you to achieve Buddhahood anywhere, at any time – but the priesthood now says that to realise Buddhahood you *must* visit Japan.

*I feel this is all a bit overwhelming. I didn't join SGI to get involved in religious quarrels.*

None of us did. All that is being suggested is that we should make sincere efforts to clearly understand the differences between SGI and the priesthood, developing in faith, study and practice. If the issue worries you, understanding it better will be liberating – it has been for many others.

If having reached deep understanding of Nichiren's teachings, you decide to speak up for them, then that would be wonderful. But

no-one in SGI expects you to speak against the priesthood unless you are able to do so comfortably and with deep sincerity. This is not an organisation in which one is required to slavishly agree with everyone else or follow some “party line”.

Of course, any kind of conflict, or suggestion of conflict, is unpleasant. As Buddhists, we seek peace, not conflict. SGI seeks only to establish the truth about Nichiren Daishonin’s teachings; it absolutely does not seek to create personal misfortune for the priests and their followers.

Despite their betrayal, the priests and their followers remain worthy of respect as potential Buddhas. Indeed, in the 1950s, second Soka Gakkai president Toda even gave money to a priest who had betrayed him and first president Makiguchi during the war, and then fallen on hard times. He gave that money even though the priest, whose actions had contributed to the death of Mr Makiguchi, had not yet repented or apologised.

But clearly identifying and condemning what is wrong is absolutely part of the practice of Buddhism, just as it is part of any struggle for human rights. The Buddha was betrayed by his cousin Devadatta, who tried to lure believers away from the Buddhist order just as the priesthood sect is trying to do now. In response, he publicly rebuked Devadatta, saying, “You are a fool who licks the spits of others!” Similarly, many of Nichiren Daishonin’s writings are devoted to refuting the erroneous teachings of other sects.

### *Are you saying all priesthood members are evil?*

No. Many priesthood members do not understand or appreciate the heart of Nichiren Daishonin’s writings, and if they do not understand Nichiren’s writings, how can they properly understand how badly those teachings distorted by the priests?

On the other hand, even though they may not understand these issues, such priesthood members are supporting evil, in the same way that many white South Africans supported apartheid by voting for the National Party without personally witnessing or getting involved in human rights violations.

Some who have left SGI for the priesthood have done so not because they disagree over doctrine, but seemingly out of bitterness at some interpersonal conflict, ignoring the very good relations that exist between most members. SGI and SGI-SA are not perfect organisations – we all bring our own karma into the organisation – but they are wonderful organisations, truly teaching Nichiren Daishonin’s

Buddhism in an environment of equality, tolerance and humanity. Very few other religious organisations in the world match SGI for equality and friendship amongst members, for diversity, for implacable opposition to war and violence, and for equal respect for everyone, regardless of gender or sexual persuasion.

The best response to “having issues” with SGI is to speak out openly and work to improve the organisation, for the sake of other members. To respond to difficulties by gossiping, complaining, leaving and trying to undermine SGI shows no understanding of the Buddhist principle of the unity of believers (*itai doshin*), and no commitment to the happiness of other members.

### *What do non-Buddhists think about all this?*

As one example, the British sociologist Brian Wilson, who has studied the SGI in the UK, has written about the SGI’s split with Nichiren Shoshu as follows:

The priesthood was a conservative body, small, secluded, and with horizons narrowly circumscribed by centuries of Japanese insulation from the external world. SGI was a movement of revitalization, adapted to modern conditions, pursuing from the outset a policy of expansive growth, and quickly acquiring an international clientele and orientation. The priesthood was characteristically authoritarian, status conscious, and hierarchic; the lay organization was populist, egalitarian, and unwilling to concede the sort of status differences, which were endemic in conceptions of priesthood.

The SGI maintains that Nichiren recognized no distinction in capacity or faith between priests and lay persons, and that his fundamental intent was to encourage all people who sincerely seek to follow his teaching. As a result, there seems to be a permanent rupture between the SGI and the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood — they operate as fully independent entities.

Given this reality, the SGI independently began to issue the Gohonzon to its members in late 1993. The Nichiren Shoshu priesthood insists that the SGI has no right to disseminate or interpret Nichiren Buddhism or provide the means for individuals to take up their practice of Buddhism, while the SGI continues its worldwide efforts to inform people about this faith

and to promote mutual respect and understanding among individuals and communities.

*Is there an upside to all this?*

Yes! Before the split with the priests, many of their confused ideas circulated in the SGI organisation. The practice was more regimented, and the understanding of the essence of Nichiren Buddhism amongst members not so deep.

The split with the priesthood has been an incredible liberation for SGI, liberation from unnecessary formalism, ritual and authority. It has led to deeper understanding of the true essence of the Daishonin's Buddhism – deep respect for life, and profound equality amongst believers based on the Mystic Law. Before the split, many members wondered quietly why priests were necessary. The split with Nichiren Shoshu, and SGI's subsequent growth, has proved that they are not.

## **President Ikeda's experience of the split with the priesthood**

*"A Revolution Dawns"*<sup>12</sup>

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is that great musical genius's roar that proclaimed, "At the end of suffering, there is joy!" It is a sublime and eternal hymn that links all humanity as brothers and sisters, a rousing paean of the people.

On Dec. 12, I was fortunate to enjoy once again the Soka University students' performance of the Ninth Symphony, which has now become an annual tradition. It was this same symphony that was performed on Oct. 3, 1990, as a song of victory to celebrate German reunification, finally attained after such a long, hard struggle.

It was a few months later, in mid-December of that same year, 1990, that a document from the Nichiren Shoshu Administrative Office titled "Questions Regarding the Speech of Honorary President Ikeda at the 35th Headquarters Leaders Meeting" was delivered to the Soka Gakkai Headquarters. Among other things, the document claimed that singing Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" — the Ninth Symphony's choral section — in German was slander of the Law because it was tantamount to praising non-Buddhist teachings, to venerating

---

<sup>12</sup> Excerpted from the *World Tribune*, 5 February 1999.

Christianity. The priesthood took exception to my suggestion at that meeting that we present a large-scale choral performance of “Ode to Joy” in the future.

The document from Nichiren Shoshu criticized me for saying things I never said, and was an attempt to brand me with the labels of slanderer of the Law and of the high priest.

We sought to discuss these claims with the priesthood, but the cowardly priests hid and refused to come forth and talk with us. Then, at the end of the year, under the pretext of revising the school’s regulations, they eliminated the position of head of all Nichiren Shoshu lay organizations, the post I held, and effectively dismissed me.

Their aim was clear. They wanted to get me out of the way, destroy the Soka Gakkai, and, under the cloak of priestly authority, control all the Soka Gakkai members as if they were their personal slaves. Nichiren Shoshu began propounding erroneous doctrines found nowhere in the teachings of the Daishonin. They declared, for instance, that the high priest and the Dai-Gohonzon are “two indivisible entities of the object of fundamental respect.” Their plan was to create a hierarchy of power and control, with the high priest at the apex, followed by the rest of the priesthood, who stood above the lay believers as their superiors. This completely violates the Daishonin’s teachings, which uphold the principles of the dignity and equality of all human beings and state that we are all Treasure Towers and children of the Buddha.

Further, discriminating in this irrational way against art and culture — an expression of our shared humanity — is no different from the Nazis’ actions in Germany. It signifies a terrible kind of witch-hunting that totally rejects humanity. If we allowed the priesthood to do this, the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin would become a false religion serving only as an instrument of oppression and harm.

It also soon became clear that Nichiren Shoshu was guilty of an astonishing number of violations of Nichiren Daishonin’s teachings. For example, Nikken, the high priest, had erected a new ancestral tombstone in a Zen-temple cemetery. Stories of the greed of the clergy in selling their funeral services and memorial tablets for the deceased, along with an astonishing number of incidents of corruption and degeneracy, including profligate spending and licentious behavior, surfaced one after another.

For the sake of kosen-rufu, we of the Soka Gakkai simply could not allow the Daishonin’s teachings to be trampled in this manner. Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism exists for all the world’s people. We

rallied to defend the Daishonin's spirit, and we arose as one. It marked the dawn of a new religious revolution.

On Nov. 28 of the following year, 1991, Nichiren Shoshu excommunicated the Soka Gakkai. What madness! It was the Soka Gakkai that had always upheld the Daishonin's teachings to the letter. The priests' masks were ripped away by this action, and their true nature as the minions of hell was revealed. But the Soka Gakkai members did not quail.

We knew, from our reading of the Daishonin's writings, that this madness was an example of the Devil of the Sixth Heaven having entered the body of a high-ranking priest in an effort to destroy Buddhism.

How wonderful it is, in every age, for a person to have a true teacher!

Mr. Toda often used to say about traitors: "Leave those lowly losers be. Betraying the Soka Gakkai is betraying the Daishonin. In the end, they'll receive the punishment of the Buddha [negative retribution in accord with the strict workings of the law of cause and effect], you'll see."

Right human conduct means fighting against evil and cutting it off at its root. The tricolor Soka Gakkai banner of victory waves in the skies of the new century and a song of joy resounds throughout the heavens. The grand march of a new year, of a new century of Soka, has begun.

## **A table of the differences between the SGI and the priesthood**

There are many serious differences between the interpretations of Nichiren's teachings by the priesthood and in the SGI.

These differences are not always quite so easy to see in South Africa, because here there is no temple and no priests. So the priesthood members may seem like just another SGI group, meeting and chanting to the Gohonzon. But they have a completely different philosophy – their version of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism has been distorted to give priests authority over lay believers and implies the Gohonzon is a thing of magic (that it only "works" when validated by priests and ritual). This table lays out some of the differences between the SGI and Nichiren Shoshu.

The issue	What Nichiren said and the SGI upholds	What the priesthood says
How and where we attain Buddhahood	<p>Buddhahood arises from the heart, and so can be realised anywhere. It is us as individuals, and us alone, who determine our spiritual destinies.</p> <p>Nichiren Daishonin wrote: “Faith alone is what really matters. No matter how earnestly Nichiren prays for you, if you lack faith, it will be like trying to set fire to wet tinder. Spur yourself to muster the power of faith” – MW1, 246</p>	<p>Attaining Buddhahood depends on you visiting Japan (see “the place where we attain Buddhahood”, below).</p> <p>The priesthood also says: “[The] Head Temple and each local Temple conduct traditional services and ceremonies in order to reveal the profound doctrines of the Daishonin’s Buddhism. By participating, even without our conscious awareness, we are deeply absorbing their influences ... If we separate ourselves from this source, we will not gain truly great benefit no matter how much we exert ourselves in Gongyo, shakubuku, or study.”</p>
Equality	<p>‘Shakyamuni who attained enlightenment countless aeons ago, the Lotus Sutra which leads all people to Buddhahood, and we ordinary human beings are in no way different or separate from each other.’ – Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, p. 216</p> <p>“... becoming a Buddha is nothing extraordinary. If you chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with your whole heart, you will naturally become endowed with the Buddha’s thirty-two features and eighty characteristics. As the sutra says, ‘hoping to make all persons equal to me, without any distinction between us,’ you can readily become as noble a Buddha as Shakyamuni.” – WND, p. 1030</p>	<p>“To talk about the priesthood and the laity with a sense of equality is an expression of great conceit.” – Nichijun Fujimoto, a Nichiren Shoshu general administrator.</p> <p>“The sanctioning of the object of worship by the High Priest, who is the only person to be bequeathed the Daishonin’s Buddhism, is what makes the attainment of Buddhahood possible . . .”</p> <p>“Believers should have single-minded faith in [the high priest] as the living body of Shakyamuni (Nichiren).”</p>

The issue	What Nichiren said and the SGI upholds	What the priesthood says
<p>The validity of the SGI (Nichikan) Gohonzon, which was originally transcribed in 1720 by the 26th high priest Nichikan Shonin</p>	<p>Copies of the Nichikan Gohonzon, are true and valid Gohonzons for these reasons:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "Whether or not your prayer is answered depends upon your faith." – Nichiren Daishonin</li> <li>2. No "eye-opening" ceremony is needed (this is a traditional ritual which honours the Gohonzon but is not needed to validate it). Nichiren emphasized repeatedly that our own faith is most important in deciding whether or not the Gohonzon "works".</li> <li>3. In the past, Nichiren Shoshu branch temples often copied Gohonzons without worrying about the high priest's permission or eye-opening ceremonies. So when Nichiren Shoshu insists it must license Gohonzons, it denies its own history.</li> </ol>	<p>Nichikan (SGI) Gohonzons are counterfeit:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "The Nichikan Gohonzon are not authorized by the high priest."</li> <li>2. "The Nichikan Gohonzon have not received the eye-opening ceremony."</li> <li>3. "The Nichikan Gohonzon are not issued by the head temple."</li> </ol>
<p>Our master or mentor in faith</p>	<p>While SGI members strongly encourage each other to consider SGI President Daisaku Ikeda a mentor, there is no insistence that one does so. What's more, Daisaku Ikeda has a clearly visible track record in propagating Buddhism and supporting members, before one even begins to consider his other achievements.</p> <p>We consider President Ikeda our mentor not because he is SGI president, but because of his achievements as SGI president.</p>	<p>The priesthood says: "We [lay believers] must recognize the High Priest at the Head Temple as the True Master and respect the chief priest of the local Temple as the direct master, the High Priest's proxy."</p> <p>In other words, the priests demand that one respect the office, irrespective of the good or bad qualities of the person occupying it.</p>
<p>The place where we attain Buddhahood</p>	<p>Nichiren says we can attain Buddhahood anywhere and anytime, depending only on the</p>	<p>The priesthood says we need to go on pilgrimage to Japan to attain Buddhahood:</p>

The issue	What Nichiren said and the SGI upholds	What the priesthood says
	<p>strength of our faith and practice:            “You, yourself, are a Thus Come One who is originally enlightened and endowed with the three bodies. You should chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with this conviction. Then the place where you are dwelling will become the dwelling place of the treasure tower. The sutra reads: ‘If there is any place where the Lotus Sutra is preached, then my treasure tower will come forth and appear in that spot.’ ”            – On the Treasure Tower, WND I, p. 299</p>	<p>“Tozan, (translated as ‘to climb the mountain’), is the pilgrimage to Taisekiji, the Head Temple of Nichiren Shoshu at Mt. Fuji in Japan. It is part of the essential practice in Buddhism, and is the basis of daily Gongyo, shakubuku, visits to your local Temple, and other aspects of practice.”</p>
<p>Authority</p>	<p>No-one in SGI is required to have strict obedience to anyone else.</p>	<p>Believers in Nichiren Shoshu are to have “absolute faith and strict obedience” toward the high priest. – Dai-Nichiren Special Edition, The Correct Way of Faith in Nichiren Shoshu, p. 13</p>
<p>The Gohonzon</p>	<p>The SGI believes the Gohonzon is wonderful, but not magical.</p> <p>Nichiren Daishonin taught that the real essence of the Gohonzon is in our own hearts: “Never seek this Gohonzon outside yourself” – The Real Aspect of the Gohonzon, WND I, p. 832</p>	<p>The priesthood implies that the Gohonzon is an almost magical thing: “If we think that all Gohonzons are the same, and do not seek the Dai-Gohonzon, we will not be able to receive benefits and attain Buddhahood. It is like a branch that has been cut off, losing all access to nutrients, and thereby withering away. The Dai-Gohonzon of the High Sanctuary is the source of all Gohonzons.”</p>
<p>The Heritage of the Law</p>	<p>“Shakyamuni Buddha who attained enlightenment</p>	<p>“The Heritage of the Entity of the Law is the face to face</p>

The issue	What Nichiren said and the SGI upholds	What the priesthood says
	<p>countless kalpas ago, the Lotus Sutra that leads all people to Buddhahood, and we ordinary human beings are in no way different or separate from one another. To chant Myoho-renge-kyo with this realization is to inherit the ultimate Law of life and death.” – Nichiren Daishonin<sup>13</sup></p>	<p>transmission to a single person of the lifeblood and entrustment of Nichiren Daishonin’s True Buddhism from Nichiren Daishonin, to Nikko Shonin (Second High Priest) to Nichimoku Shonin (Third High Priest) down to the present High Priest in an unbroken succession. All those who uphold this heritage and sincerely follow the High Priest, who has inherited the Heritage of the Law, will thereby be within the Heritage of Faith.”<sup>14</sup></p>
Prayers for those who have died	<p>Anyone can pray for the lives and happiness of the deceased, and all such prayers are equally effective. SGI members and leaders willingly assist each other in commemorating the lives of those who have died, without seeking payment.</p>	<p>Prayers for those who have died must be led by a priest – and paid for by lay believers.</p>

© SGI South Africa 2009

<sup>13</sup> The Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life, *Writings of Nichiren Daishonin I*, p. 216.

<sup>14</sup> Nichiren Shoshu Basics of Practice. 2003. West Hollywood: Nichiren Shoshu Temple, p. 125.