

AN ESSAY BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA THE ATSUHARA PERSECUTION: DISCIPLES JOIN THE STRUGGLE

‘The Atsuhara Persecution is the story of great disciples coming forth to fight in the spirit of the oneness of mentor and disciple,’ explains SGI President Ikeda. ‘Up to that time, Nichiren Daishonin alone had borne the brunt of the persecution.’

In 1979, as the last of the Seven Bells of the 20th century was drawing to a close, we greeted May 3—a day that should have been one of the most joyous of celebrations—with the Soka Gakkai facing persecution for the sake of the Law. This persecution was perpetrated by corrupt priests, just as Nichiren Daishonin had predicted when he said: “An immeasurably great multitude of monks...will gather and denounce the votary [of the Lotus Sutra] to the ruler of the country, causing him to be banished and ruined” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 892).

It was a contest between a corrupt, tradition-bound religious authority in league with the ruling powers, and a new, invigorating force for truth and justice rooted in the lives of the people. Throughout history, whenever there has been a religious revolution, this pattern has been evident. Resentful of any burgeoning popular movement, the old powers devise a host of plots and schemes to suppress it. This was true during Shakyamuni’s lifetime, and even more so during the Daishonin’s life.

The tumultuous time before and after my resignation as Soka Gakkai president threw many of our members into confusion and doubt. Given this situation, I looked to the history of the Atsuhara Persecution as a guide. The three martyrs of Atsuhara were beheaded in 1279. It was truly a mystic coincidence that the priesthood’s cruel persecution of the Soka Gakkai, a “spiritual beheading,” should have begun exactly 700 years later.

In “The Selection of the Time,” the Daishonin warns, “It is the priests themselves...who will destroy the Buddha’s teachings” (WND, 577). Corrupt priests also caused the Atsuhara Persecution. Temples of the Tendai School of that time, which should have been doing their utmost to protect and transmit the true teachings of Buddhism, had turned into dens of intrigue.

The spirit of the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai, founder of the T’ien-t’ai school in China, and of the Great Teacher Deng-yo, founder of the T’ien-t’ai (Jpn Ten-dai) school in Japan, had been lost, and the top positions at influential temples were occupied by the scions of the aristocracy. Temples had ceased to be places of pure religious practice, degenerating into empty institutions where the “authority of the robe” was used to control and dominate the people.

The high-ranking priests of leading Tendai school temples in the Fuji District of Suruga Province [now part of Shizuoka Prefecture, where the village of Atsuhara was located]

were all hopelessly corrupt. This was the case in such temples as Jisso-ji, which the Daishonin visited to do research in its sutra library; Shijuku-in, where Nikko Shonin had studied and practiced as a boy; and Ryusen-ji [in Atsuhara Village itself, where the persecution of the Daishonin's followers took place].

A young Nikko Shonin rigorously criticized the transgressions of these priests. This is the spirit of Nikko Shonin, who founded the head temple Taiseki-ji, and the spirit of the

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Soka Gakkai. That is why during the World War II, our first president, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, sharply rebuked the priesthood for its betrayal of the Daishonin's teachings. He declared: "Of all the Nichiren schools today, Nichiren Shoshu is the one that most resembles the Tendai school of the Daishonin's day."

While Nikko Shonin devotedly served and supported the Daishonin in Izu and Kamakura, he remained registered as a priest of Shijuku-in and used that temple as a base to convert other Tendai priests. In 1268, when he was 23 years old, Nikko Shonin boldly presented a 51-article petition to the military government, outlining the transgressions of Jisso-ji's chief priest.

According to Nikko Shonin's petition, the chief priest neglected to make repairs to the temple buildings, including the main hall and the sutra library, even when they were severely damaged. The actions of Nichiren Shoshu, which capriciously destroys priceless architectural works constructed with the sincere donations of pure-hearted believers, are even more reprehensible than this.

Another article of the petition accused the chief priest of chopping down a venerable cherry tree on the temple grounds. Nikko Shonin criticized the chief priest for wantonly cutting down a single tree. Realizing from this history how dearly Nikko Shonin must have loved cherry trees, I donated countless cherry saplings to be planted at the head temple to beautify its grounds. Nichiren Shoshu has since brutally cut down those cherry trees. Nikko Shonin also strictly rebuked the chief priest of Jisso-ji for licentious behavior, citing him as entertaining prostitutes at his private quarters and generally leading a dissolute life. How far worse it is when the high priest of an entire Buddhist school has actually been found by a court of law to have engaged the services of a prostitute! This deplorable situation is unprecedented in the history of Buddhism.

Gyochi, the deputy chief priest of Ryusen-ji and the central figure behind the Atsuhara Persecution, was a member of the powerful Hojo family and wielded his authority with

impunity. He was guilty of all manner of evil deeds and transgressions against the priestly code of the day: appropriating the prestigious temple's assets for his own personal use, hunting deer and other wild game, and poisoning the fish in the temple's pond and selling them for profit.

He became deputy chief priest because of his powerful family connections, but he was really a villain whose behavior went beyond all bounds of decency and common sense. Ryusen-ji was occupied by what the Daishonin had aptly termed "an animal dressed in priestly robes" (WND, 760).

After the Daishonin retired to Mount Minobu, Nikko Shonin became increasingly active in propagating the Daishonin's teachings in the Fuji District, gradually building a strong force of followers of the Mystic Law. Not only did three priests at Ryusen-ji—Nisshu, Nichiben, and Nichizen—convert to the Daishonin's teaching one after another, but many of the farmers of Atsuhara Village, where Ryusen-ji was located, also followed suit. Gyochi and other high-ranking priests in the area perceived this as a serious threat to their power. Exploiting their religious authority, they lived lavishly on the offerings they received from local samurai families. The growth of the Daishonin's followers, who

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upheld the supremacy of the Lotus Sutra, jeopardized the authority and with it the livelihood of these "Law-devouring hungry spirits" (WND, 191).

Gyochi responded by forming an "anti-Lotus alliance" in the area to contain the activities of the Daishonin's followers. Joining forces with the regional representatives of the ruling Hojo clan, the officials of the Shimogata Manor Administrative Office, he began his persecution. Together, Gyochi and his cohorts denounced the local followers of the Daishonin who upheld the Lotus Sutra, calling them "non-Buddhists" and "here-tics." They demanded that they recite the Nembutsu [the name of the Buddha Amida, the practice of the Pure Land School of Buddhism]—an unbelievable contradiction, considering that Gyochi and the other priests were all supposed to uphold the teachings of the Tendai School, which is based on the Lotus Sutra.

How similar this is to the perversion of the corrupt and jealous priests of Nichiren Shoshu in recent years, who, though they call themselves the Daishonin's followers, disparage the idea that faith should be directly connected to the Daishonin and based on his writings.

The Soka Gakkai song, "The Three Martyrs of Atsuhara," goes:

*In these latter days, the water is muddy:
 The confusion in Buddhism is like tangled strands of hemp,
 And bitterness and futility fill people's hearts.
 Among the farmers of Atsu-hara Village
 Were brave young men who deplored this.
 Their names were Jinshiro of Atsuhara
 And his younger brothers Yagoro and Yarokuro.
 Though it had been but a short time
 Since they embarked on the path of faith,
 They advanced with pure-hearted youthful ardor
 To propagate the teachings,
 Their lives a glorious paean to the Law.*

These three brothers, leaders of the Atsuhara farmers who embraced the Mystic Law, had only become the Daishonin's followers in about 1278. Today, in the area that was once known as Atsuhara, our noble and valiant members of the Fuji Justice Sub-prefecture of the Soka Gakkai organization in Shizuoka Prefecture are exerting themselves energetically for the sake of kosen-rufu.

Jinshiro and his brothers were said to be accomplished in both learning and the military arts, brave men of integrity and intrepid spirit who were trusted and looked up to by people in their community. Their conversion had a big impact on those around them. "Do not fear the powerful" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 177).

"Each of you should summon up the courage of a lion king and never succumb to threats from anyone" (WND, 997).

"Be prepared for the worst. Do not expect good times, but take the bad times for granted" (see WND, 998).

Genuine disciples who would respond to the words of the Daishonin, even at the risk of

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their lives, at last appeared among the common people. These heroes of the ordinary people courageously demonstrated the spirit of faith of "not begrudging one's life" taught in the Lotus Sutra.

This event led the Daishonin to decide that the time had come to inscribe the Dai-Gohonzon for the sake of all humanity into the infinite future.

The Atsuhara Persecution is the story of great disciples coming forth to fight in the

spirit of the oneness of mentor and disciple. Up to that time, the Daishonin alone had borne the brunt of the persecution. In the Gosho, he writes: "If they were people who understood their obligations or were capable of reason, then out of two blows that fall on me, they would receive one in my stead" (WND, 828).

The Atsuhara Persecution was a momentous struggle in which the Daishonin's disciples for the first time stood up to take on those blows.

To be continued