



**“A response to questions from Soka Gakkai practitioners
regarding the similarities and differences among
Nichiren Shu, Nichiren Shoshu and the Soka Gakkai”**

This letter was first published on a Buddhist web message board by Rev. Tarabini answering a question from a Sangha member about the differences between Nichiren lineage's. It has been edited to include only the sections concerning the differences and remove personal references.



I will now explain some fundamental similarities and differences between 1) Nichiren Shu (and most other basic Nichiren Schools), 2) Nichiren Shoshu and 3) the Soka Gakkai. In just one simple e-mail, however, I cannot possibly explain all the similarities and differences. I must point however, that they are all believers of the Lotus Sutra, recite this sutra and chant the Odaimoku of Namu Myoho Renge Kyo. Furthermore, all read the sacred writings of Nichiren Daishonin (called *Gosho* or *Goibun*). Within Nichiren Buddhism, there are a number of lineage's and schools which have derived from the original temples established by the six senior most or principle disciples of Nichiren Daishonin.

In Nichiren Buddhism, there are 2 basic divisions - the "**Itchi**" and "**Shoretsu**" lineages. From here, other sub-divisions and movements grew and developed, such as the *Happon-ha* (Eight Volumes lineage), the *Fuju Fuse* (Don't receive from nor give alms to non believers lineage) and others. However, I won't discuss those schools or movements now.

In brief, the "Itchi" lineage read, study and recite (chant) the entire Lotus Sutra, with special emphasis placed on the significance of the 2nd and 16th chapters. However, all chapters are considered valid, and therefore all are regularly recited and thoroughly studied. In the case of the "Shoretsu" lineage, however, they place credence solely in the 2nd and 16h chapters. They recite only and study primarily these chapters.

Nichiren Shoshu and the Soka Gakkai are extremely similar, because their origins

are the same- their basis of faith and practice are founded on the way of observing Nichiren Buddhist faith as established by Taisekiji which up until recently was the Head Temple of both groups. Both Nichiren Shoshu and the Soka Gakkai (also know as the SGI) are derived from the Shoretsu lineage.

Between the various Shoretsu schools, however, there is a further division. Taisekiji and consequently the whole of Nichiren Shoshu are derived from the lineage of one of Nichiren Daishonin's major disciples, Nikko Shonin. The original group of Nikko derived schools and temples (called the "Fuji Monryu" or Fuji lineage), however, is much larger. Not all these temples are part of Nichiren Shoshu. Some are part of Nichiren Shu, some are part of other schools, and some are today independent temples.

The Nikko temples, which are either connected or derived from Taisekiji temple, namely Nichiren Shoshu, Shoshin Kai, Kensho Kai and the Soka Gakkai all believe that Sakyamuni Buddha is merely an historical figure in the overall spectrum of Buddhism. They do not truly revere him as the original teacher or master of Buddhism. The only True or Original Buddha for this lineage is Nichiren Daishonin. Therefore, as a result, for this lineage Nichiren Daishonin's writings become even more important than the Lotus Sutra itself. This derivation in tradition is quite problematic. Although no one denies the great respect and veneration due Nichiren Daishonin, the near elimination of the Buddha goes directly against what Nichiren Daishonin preached. Nichiren Daishonin risked his entire life to bring the Buddhist world of Kamakura Japan back to orthodoxy. He was especially critical of the Pure Land doctrines, because they had abandoned Sakyamuni Buddha and replaced him with Amida Buddha as the Buddha of veneration. Nichiren spent his entire life trying to encourage the Buddhist schools and people of Japan of his era to return to basics - to return to faith in the Buddha Sakyamuni and his ultimate teaching of the Lotus Sutra. Therefore, replacing the Buddha Sakyamuni with Nichiren Daishonin goes directly against what the Daishonin spent his entire life trying to do, risking numerous persecutions, exile, starvation and countless attempts on his life.

In Nichiren Shu, the Lotus Sutra is central to faith, practice and study. However, the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin are also highly revered and thoroughly read and studied too. The writings of Nichiren Daishonin, called Goibun or Gosho, teach us how to approach and maintain faith. They also continually guide us back to the prime point of our Buddhist faith and practice – the Eternal Buddha Sakyamuni and the heart of his teachings and his enlightenment – the Lotus Sutra.

This particular train of thought of Nichiren Daishonin taking precedence over the Original Buddha, Sakyamuni, was initially brought to Taisekiji in the 1400s under its Ninth High Priest Nichiu Shonin (1409-1482) but further made into a truly central part of doctrine and a tradition of Taisekiji by their 26th High Priest, Nichikan Shonin (1665-1726), centuries later. The origins of this line of thought, however, began at a temple (now independent) near Taisekiji called Nishiyama Honmonji temple founded by one of Nikko Shonin's disciples, Nichidai Shonin (1294-1394). However, this unique way of thought, which differs greatly from the traditional lineages of the Nikko or other Nichiren schools, was adopted primarily by Taisekiji.

When Taisekiji adopted this tradition, it began to cause friction between itself and other Nikko temples. The other Nikko temples felt that Taisekiji was straying and starting to create its own form of Nichiren Buddhism that had never been taught either by Nikko Shonin or by Nichiren Daishonin. This new Taisekiji trend was followed with an insistence on exclusiveness, saying that only their temple maintained the validity of Nichiren Daishonin's teachings. Not such an uncommon thing amongst the various Nichiren temples. Many competed with each other out a sense of rivalry to insist they had the best temple, facilities and teachings. However, in the case of Taisekiji, this competitiveness further developed into a new doctrine of "kechimyaku" or the lifeblood of faith. This new doctrine insisted that only Taisekiji and its successive High Priests had inherited the true teachings of Nichiren Daishonin. All temples that did not align themselves with Taisekiji would be branded heretics. To further convince others that their claims were true, they created two new writings of Nichiren Daishonin which had never been recorded either by Nikko Shonin or Nichiro Shonin (two of the master's six major disciples) nor by Nichijo Shonin (who had been Toki Jonin, but received the precepts and became a priest) who collected, documented, catalogued and stored as many of Nichiren Daishonin's writings as he could. These two "new" writings called the Minobu and Ikegami Transfer Documents directly contradicted Nichiren Daishonin's directive which appointed six major disciples (Nissho, Nichiro, Nikko, Niko, Nitcho and Nichiji) and final wishes his disciples to collaborate together and equally share the responsibility of maintaining Nichiren Buddhism and propagating the master's teachings.

This finally culminated in Taisekiji's creation of the "Daigohonzon" from which Taisekiji claimed all other Mandala Gohonzon (the object of veneration and worship in Mandala form created by Nichiren Daishonin) gained their power and validity. According to this new doctrine, even a Mandala Gohonzon written by Nichiren Daishonin himself, if it was not in possession by Taisekiji or a temple directly affiliated with Taisekiji, did not hold the life of the Buddha and could not be considered valid. Furthermore, this new variation in doctrine insists that only through a temple, priest, or Gohonzon directly linked to Taisekiji could a person reach salvation. Although the Daigohonzon in itself is a valid Mandala Gohonzon, this concept of a super Gohonzon that empowers all the others blatantly contradicted Nichiren Daishonin's teachings and consequently, created a great feeling of mistrust with other Nikko temples. This lead up to a rift and finally a division between Taisekiji and other temples of the Fuji lineage. Even between Taisekiji and other schools or groups derived from the Taisekiji lineage, this Daigohonzon has been a hotly debated issue. In further appears that recently some circles within Taisekiji itself may be researching and questioning this subject. Because of your letter, I began reading a number of Soka Gakkai publications and internet websites. I came across the *Kawabe Memo* written by a Nichiren Shoshu priest as a memorandum of a conversation between himself and Taisekiji's present 67th High Priest, Nikken Shonin. Although no one in Taisekiji, Soka Gakkai or even other Nichiren schools for that matter, distrust the validity of this Mandala Gohonzon as such - a Mandala Gohonzon, this particular memorandum calls into question the authenticity of the Daigohonzon in terms of being a Mandala Gohonzon genuinely

inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin. In fact, Taisekiji's Daigohonzon is carved in wood which is something Nichiren Daishonin never did. All of his Mandala Gohonzons were drawn with brush and ink on paper.

Nikko Shonin founded Taisekiji, but stayed there only briefly, leaving it in charge to one of his most trusted disciples, Nichimoku Shonin. Nikko Shonin then established nearby another temple and Buddhist seminary, called the Omosu Danjo (today it is called Kitayama Honmonji temple, -not- to be confused with the similar sounding Nishiyama Honmonji temple). The original Nikko school or Fuji lineage (before the Taisekiji break in tradition) was comprised of the main or head temples of: Taisekiji, Kitayama Honmonji, Shimojo Myorenji, Koizumi Kuonji (originally the Renzobo temple within the Taisekiji compound), Nishiyama Honmonji, Hota Myohonji and Izu Jitsujoji temples. There are many other Nikko or Fuji Monryu temples, these are just the eight major ones that were originally all affiliated with each other. Today, these main temples of the Fuji Lineage are affiliated in the following manner:

Taisekiji - the Head temple of Nichiren Shoshu (from this temple were derived: the Shoshinkai, Myoshinko, Kenshokai, Soka Gakkai and SGI)

Kitayama Honmonji - Nichiren Shu

Koizumi Kuonji - Nichiren Shu

Hota Myohonji - Independent temple

Shimojo Myorenji - Nichiren Shoshu

Nishiyama Honmonji - the Head Temple of Honmon Shoshu

Kyoto Yoboji - the Head Temple of Nichiren Honshu

Izu Jitsujoji - Nichiren Shu

Interestingly, even though the Taisekiji line of schools and groups believe Nichiren Daishonin to be the True Buddha, Nikko Shonin considered Sakyamuni Buddha to be the Tathagata and Original Master of Buddhism, and Nichiren Daishonin as a Great Bodhisattva, leader of all the *Jiyu no Bosatsu*, or the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. However, after Taisekiji adopted its own unique stance with the elimination of Sakyamuni Buddha from the centre of Buddhism, the creation of the Daigohonzon and its new concept of *kechimyaku* (as the only true orthodox lineage and affiliation) flowing solely through Taisekiji, their stance became much more staunch and narrow-minded, and no longer permitted the feeling of a Nichiren brotherhood of believers which had previously existed. Under their 54th High Priest, Nichiin Shonin, Taisekiji broke away from the other Nikko temples and formed for the first time in 1912, a new and fully independent school called Nichiren Shoshu. The remaining Nichiren Buddhist lineages, however, continued in maintaining a feeling of brotherhood, even though their individual philosophical concepts and style of religious observance slightly differed.

Schools and groups derived from Taisekiji and Nichiren Shoshu also maintain as doctrine, the same feeling of exclusivity. In other words, each one of these groups believe

that only -they- possess the true orthodox teachings of Nikko Shonin and Nichiren Daishonin. They even sometimes go as far as saying that the other Nichiren or even Taisekiji derived schools are heretics. One must point out that this is again, a very interesting phenomenon. During the 1500s in Kyoto, there were a total of 22 Head Temples (and of course a myriad of branch and other temples) from the various Nichiren lineages. Nichiren Buddhism came under attack by outlying temples from other schools due to their zealousness and success in propagation. These other temples declared war on Nichiren Buddhism and wished to eliminate it from Kyoto. In fact, at the time, propagation of Nichiren Buddhism had reached a great height. Almost the entire city had converted to Nichiren Buddhism, was reciting the Lotus Sutra and chanting the *Odaimoku* of Namu Myoho Renge Kyo. When the armed warrior priests (from Mt. Hiei and other schools) entered Kyoto, they burned down many temples and killed thousands upon thousands of Nichiren clergy and believers. Consequently, all the Nichiren schools (including what constitutes today's Nichiren Shu, Honmon Shu, Nichiren Shoshu, Kempon Hokke Shu, etc..) banded together to protect and support each other. Consequently all of these different Nichiren schools and lineages strengthened their bonds as a Nichiren brotherhood. This spirit has lasted for centuries. Even though each lineage will protect their own particular school's traditions, heritage, and at times independence as a separate school, the overall feeling of a Nichiren brotherhood still remains. After all, we all embrace faith in the Lotus Sutra, and we all chant the *Odaimoku* of Namu Myoho Renge Kyo while following the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin. Furthermore, until only very recently all Nichiren priests (regardless of the school, even the Taisekiji priests) studied at Rissho University, which was founded and is owned by Nichiren Shu. Rissho University is currently considered the largest centre in Japan, if not the world, for the study and research of the Lotus Sutra and Nichiren Buddhism. A few years ago, before its split with the Soka Gakkai, Taisekiji formed its own university in Tokyo for its priests called Nichiren Shoshu University and so its priests no longer attend Rissho University. The Soka Gakkai also founded its own Soka University many years prior.

Finally, let's look at **The Three Treasures of Buddhism**, the fundamental basis in the observance of Buddhist faith, understanding and outlook in all Buddhist schools and traditions, regardless of country of origin:

The Three Treasures of Buddhism:

- 1) **the Buddha**,
 - 2) **the Dharma** (the law or doctrine followed by the school), and
 - 3) **the Sangha** (the priests, nuns and followers of the Buddhist community).
- These three basic elements are observed by all Buddhist schools and traditions in all countries, but can vary according to the school or lineage. Now, let's look at how they differ between Nichiren Shu and two of the Shoretsu schools of Nichiren Shoshu and the newer religion of the Soka Gakkai.

Nichiren Shu:

- 1) **Buddha:** The Eternal Buddha Sakyamuni
- 2) **Dharma:** The Lotus Sutra, Namu Myoho Renge Kyo.
- 3) **Sangha:** Nichiren Daishonin (leading all the priests, nuns and believers)

Nichiren Shoshu:

- 1) **Buddha:** Nichiren Daishonin
- 2) **Dharma:** The Lotus Sutra, Namu Myoho Renge Kyo.
- 3) **Sangha:** Nikko Shonin and successive High Priests of Taisekiji Temple.

Soka Gakkai (2 types):

(A) Official doctrine in theory:

- 1) **Buddha:** Nichiren Daishonin
- 2) **Dharma:** The Lotus Sutra, Namu Myoho Renge Kyo.
- 3) **Sangha:** Nikko Shonin

(B) The reality that is observed and practiced:

- 1) **Buddha:** President Ikeda
- 2) **Dharma:** The teachings and writings of the President and of the Soka Gakkai
- 3) **Sangha:** The organization of the Soka Gakkai and all its members.

The above can be divided into 2 divisions - 1) the General ("So" in Japanese Buddhist terminology) and 2) the Specific ("Betsu") application of that doctrine. In the case of the Soka Gakkai, I have divided this into A and B, A being the General with B being the Specific applications.

As a consequence of this application of the Three Treasures of Buddhism into the actual observance of religious faith, Nichiren Shu (as is the case with most Nichiren Schools other than the Taisekiji derived lineages) recites the entire Lotus Sutra, studies the

entire 28 chapters of the Lotus Sutra, the other basic tenets of Buddhist thought preached by Sakyamuni Buddha and taught also by the Great Master of the Dharma, T'ien T'ai of China, and all of Nichiren Daishonin's writings. Nichiren Shoshu concentrates its recitation of the Lotus Sutra to solely the 2nd and 16th chapters. It studies mainly these chapters, but also other areas as well, plus the teachings of T'ien T'ai, but its primary import in the area of religious study is the *Goibun* (also referred to as *Gosho*) or writings of Nichiren Daishonin. In the case of the Soka Gakkai, their area of recitation of the sutra is identical to Nichiren Shoshu, and they do study somewhat the Lotus Sutra, T'ien T'ai doctrine and Nichiren Shonin's writings, but its primary import in the area of religious study is placed on the writings of its 3rd and Honorary President Ikeda and other articles produced by the Soka Gakkai Study Dept.

I sincerely hope that this general background of Nichiren Shu, Nichiren Shoshu and the Soka Gakkai will serve you. I hope through this poor explanation, you can see how the Soka Gakkai and Nichiren Shoshu way of observing Buddhism came into being and how it differs or is similar with the rest of the schools of Nichiren Buddhism.

What is most important is to practice our faith and study as the Buddha Sakyamuni and Nichiren Daishonin taught us, so that we can grow, truly understand Buddhism, practice and live it just like the Buddha and Nichiren Daishonin did; and so that we and all those around us can be freed from suffering, become satisfied with life, become happy, and attain perfect enlightenment just as the Buddha.

It is not necessary to harbor ill feelings towards the Soka Gakkai, nor towards anyone else for that matter. Maybe everything they taught you was not entirely correct, but their help has nourished you up until today. Maybe they have strayed from the main path of Buddhism. But they did introduce you to Nichiren Daishonin's teachings and the Lotus Sutra. They opened a door for you. They have also created some doubts or profound questions in your life about Buddhism. For all of this, you should be grateful.

If you are having some doubts about the Soka Gakkai or question its validity for your own Buddhist faith, I suggest you return to basics... think about why did you originally take faith? What were your original expectations for Buddhism? Examine the facts of history and doctrine. Ask yourself, "What are true and correct teachings? What accurately corresponds to history and Nichiren Daishonin's own documented writings? Has what I have been believing and practicing, has it really been Buddhism? What was the Buddha's real intention and spirit? If Nichiren Daishonin were to come back today, what would he say? Would he be happy at what he sees? How do Sakyamuni Buddha and Nichiren Daishonin really want us to observe our faith and practice? How should a Buddhist live? Who can truly teach me real Buddhism?" These are all issues you may have to take a serious look at. I think we can begin to accurately understand these issues simply by sincerely reciting the sutra and chanting the *Odaimoku*, together with reading the Masters' living words - through the words of each of the 28 chapters of the Lotus Sutra and Nichiren Daishonin's writings. Each chapter of the Sutra and each of Nichiren Daishonin's writings has a message to convey to you, something to teach you, something to help you grow. Don't interpret or alter anything, saying, "this phrase is written in this way, but it

really means this...” Just open your heart, read the words and try to understand what is written there. Let the Buddha Sakyamuni and Nichiren Daishonin communicate their message to you. In chapter 15, *Bodhisattvas from Underground*, Sakyamuni Buddha stated in prose form:

Arouse your power of faith,
And do good patiently!
You will be able to hear the Dharma
That you never heard before.

Now I will relieve you.
Do not doubt me. Do not be afraid!
I do not tell a lie,
My wisdom is immeasurable.
The highest dharma that I attained
Is profound and difficult to understand.
Now I will expound it.
Listen to me with all your hearts.

Chant the *Odaimoku* to understand and become closer to the Buddha and Nichiren Daishonin. You will discover a whole new world and a great joy ... the world of the Buddha awaits you. Please become a true Bodhisattva and earnestly search the road for Buddhahood. Take the courageous step to deepen your faith of many years, and permit the Buddha to step back into your life. If you genuinely wish to meet the Buddha and experience his life and enlightenment, you can. It all starts from the heart and from your own sincere faith - one step at a time. It is just as the phrase from the *Juryo* (16th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra that reads, “Earnestly wishing to encounter the Buddha, they did not begrudge their lives.” Not begrudge one's life means to not hold back.

As a priest, I am here to help you in any way I can, just as are all the other Nichiren Shu priests throughout the world. We want to help you to experience faith, grow and be happy. We want you to truly experience Buddhism. I will close with my hands folded in prayer form (Gassho) towards you, in profound respect. I bow and pray to the Buddha inside you.

Namu Myoho Renge Kyo
Rev. Shoryo Tarabini

If you have any questions or would simply like to talk about Buddhism, please call me or stop by at the Boston Temple.

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