

TECHNO-RITUALIZATION

THE GOHONZON CONTROVERSY ON THE INTERNET

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The Internet is transforming the way people *do* religion. This essay explores the techno-ritual use of the Internet by American Nichiren Buddhist Independent Movement. American independents are primarily former members of two organizations who trace their origins to Nichiren Daishônin (1222-82): Nichiren Shôshû² and Sôka Gakkai International (SGI-USA).³ Like other new religious movements in America dating from the 1960s, Nichiren Shôshû and SGI-USA, while attracting many members, also suffered from high attrition rates. Some of this attrition was caused by members, who joined temporarily; they just experimented with Nichiren Buddhism before moving to something new. But others chose to leave organized Nichiren Buddhism in order to continue their religious practices privately. Indeed, some studies have suggested that independently practicing Nichiren Buddhists may well outnumber North America Nichiren Buddhist sectarians today.⁴

In particular, many independents left Nichiren Buddhist organizations after the bitter “temple wars” that led to the acrimonious split between Nichiren Shôshû and SGI in 1991.

¹ I would like to thank Tony Meers, General Director SGI Canada SGI-USA, and John Paxton, SGI Ottawa for their kind assistance in the course of my research.

² The “True” sect was originally founded at Taiseki-ji near Mt. Fuji by one of Nichiren’s early disciples, Nikkô Shônin, now has six American temples led by priests and supported by perhaps 1,800 lay members mainly from the Asian-American community. Hurst 1998, 80-81, 85. Hurst 1992, 167-68. Lay supporters are organized into support groups called Hokkekô.

³ Sôka Gakkai (Society for the Creation of Value) was founded in 1937 by Makiguchi Tsunesaburô and Toda Jôsei, and initially affiliated with Nichiren Shôshû as its lay Buddhist association. Now known as Sôka Gakkai International, SGI-USA is one of the most successful post-60s North American new religious movements, with 50 to 150 thousand members and seventy community centers. Schupe 1993, 232-23; Hurst, 1998, 80-81. A third important Nichiren sect is Nichiren Shû that thrives among Asian Americans in Western states as the Nichiren Buddhist church of America.

⁴ In the case of SGI USA, according to Hammond and Machacek, “[T]he actual number of active members is much lower than the official tally. According to those results, up to 90 percent of the people who received Gohonzons in the United States are no longer active in SGI. It should be noted that this attrition estimate is probably high, since the definition of membership used in this study is relatively strict. Nonetheless, attrition from SGI-USA has been high, as would be expected.” (Hammond & Machacek 1999, 56). Hammond and Machacek argue that SGI established its independence from the priesthood by emphasizing the individual’s relation to the Gohonzon. By doing so, they “removed the primary reason for members to participate in the collective life of the organization.” Indeed, as they observe: „once one has learned to chant, there is no necessary reason to continue participation in organized activities. The practice of Soka Gakkai Buddhism is oriented, foremost, to individual spiritual growth.” (Hammond & Machacek 1999, 62). See also Hurst 1992, 243-55. It should be noted that attrition rates for SGI Canada probably are much lower than in the U.S.A.

The war began over the Gohonzon, the “object of fundamental respect or devotion” this is key for Nichiren Buddhist worship. Gohonzon are calligraphic mandala scrolls symbolically representing the realm of the Eternal Buddha Shakyamuni in which the Lotus Sutra unfolds. Written in Chinese and Sanskrit script with the *daimoku*, the title of the *Lotus Sutra* (*Hokke-kyô*) at the center, Nichiren personally inscribed several copies from 1271 to 1282 to aid his most faithful disciples in their practice.⁵ However, for the Nichiren Shôshû tradition, one of these, inscribed on October 12th, 1279, is considered the only “true object of worship.” Called the Dai Gohonzon (or “Great Gohonzon”), it is currently enshrined at their head temple, Taisei-ji. According to Fuji school doctrine, Nichiren, as a living Buddha, created the Dai Gohonzon to save humanity during the dark age of the Latter Day of the Law (*mappô*). As one Nichiren Shôshû priest describes it: „one becomes a Buddha through the practice of this [Great] Law established in the Dai Gohonzon.”⁶

The dispute over the Gohonzon began in February 1989 when the 67th high priest, Abe Nikken, increased the obligatory fees for worshipping the Dai Gohonzon and for official home-altar copies. This led to protests led by Ikeda Daisaku, the charismatic head of SGI, over what he considered was the priesthood’s heavy-handed policies. The crisis came to a head on March 5th 1991, when Abe formally removed Ikeda from office and, by November 29th 1991, excommunicated all SGI members. Thereafter, SGI members could no longer visit Taisei-ji to worship, nor could they receive the priests’ officially “eye opened” copies of the Dai Gohonzon for their home altars.⁷ Since September 7th 1993, SGI has had to have their own Gohonzon reprinted from a copy transcribed in 1720 by Nichikan, the 26th high priest.⁸ As the temple wars continued with each side blaming the other of distorting Nichiren’s Buddhism, many decided to leave both organizations to become independents.⁹

According to Tony Meers, General Director SGI Canada SGI-USA, it is around 10% or less. Tony Meers, Private Communication (tmeers@sgicanada.org) (July 27, 2005).

⁵ Kubota 1994, 42. See also Hurst 1992, 95.

⁶ A Netscape Communicator browser on a Macintosh OS 10 platform accessed all Websites noted in this article. Reverend Yosai Yamada (1986): “The Essence of the Lotus Sutra – The Great Law The Essence and Form of the Great Law in the Latter Day – The Dai-Gohonzon”, on Website of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism. Domain holder: Craig Bratcher. Retrieved on July 15, 2004, from: <http://www.cebunet.com/nst/gongpage.html>.

⁷ A symbol of the bitterness of their religious strife is Nichiren Shôshû’s destruction of the Sho-Hondo in 1999, an architectural wonder built as the high sanctuary to house the Dai Gohonzon with SGI funds. For a detailed timeline of the split, see Hurst 1992, 121-125.

⁸ “Behind the SGI’s Decision to Issue the Gohonzon”, on Website of Sokaspirit.com. Domain Holder: SGI-USA. Retrieved on July 15, 2004, from: <http://www.sokaspirit.com/nichika05.htm>.

⁹ As noted, this acrimony motivated many to become independents. For example, in Gerald Aitken’s Website “Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism Practiced Independently.” Aitken left because he felt that the “nasty, ugly feud” detracted from his “experience of practicing Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, which should be positive, uplifting, humanistic and compassionate.” Website of “Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism Practiced Independently.” Domain Holder: Gerald Aitken. Retrieved on May 25, 2005 from <http://www.dsunlimited.com/grp/grhome.html>. The “mother” (according to independent Don Ross) of the

What makes the Gohonzon so important? Nichiren is a key figure in Japanese Buddhist history. Born an impoverished fisherman's son, Nichiren entered the Tendai Buddhist order, only to abandon it in 1253, at the age of 32 when he discovered a simplified form of Buddhist doctrine and practice centered on the *Lotus Sutra*. Nichiren saw himself as an enlightened teacher who could liberate people during the time of the Degeneration of the Law (*mappô*), a time when the earlier teachings of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni were no longer spiritually efficacious, believed to have started in 1051. Nichiren was controversial. Although sharing the Mahayana faith that all beings have the Buddha-nature, he emphasized an exclusive faith in the *Lotus Sutra*, the essence of which was the supreme enlightenment of the Buddha.¹⁰

Nichiren's the keys to spiritual salvation are the three great secret laws (*sandai hihô*) that he discovered hidden in that sutra.¹¹ The first is the high sanctuary (*kaikan*) of True Buddhism that he prophesized would be built during the *mappô* period. The second is the *daimoku* or "title" of the *Lotus Sutra*, *Nam myôhō rege kyô*. "Mystic Law" (*myôhō*) refers to the universal law of cause and effect that is a creative force within human life. The "lotus flower" (*rege*) symbolizes the supreme enlightenment that is the pure unity underlying all things. Nichiren offered this simple mantra for everyone to practice. Through chanting, people could unite with the universal law of cause and effect and thereby change their karma in spiritually beneficial ways.¹² The third secret law is the mandala or Gohonzon that Nichiren inscribed for his disciples out of his desire to lead them to enlightenment. Causton explains that the Gohonzon is important because it symbolically represents the ideal state supreme enlightenment.¹³ It is not some god or magical talisman that grants wishes: „but simply an object which draws out from deep within us our Buddha Nature.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, it is important because it is as an enlightened having no other motivation than to bring happiness to all, Nichiren offered this Gohonzon as a way for universal salvation. The Gohonzon,

independent movement, Carmen Thielemann, sums up the feelings of many who left: ...“the humanism we were all fighting so hard for seemed to go right out the window with the separation of SGI and the Temple. For the first time in my life, I was ashamed of the people of my religion. As an independent, I tried to maintain my practice keeping good will and an open door to all peoples.” See her “In Search of Truth: Soka Gakkai vs. Nichiren Shoshu” January 23, 1998.

¹⁰ See Hurst 1998, 82.

¹¹ See Causton 1995, 226.

¹² See Hurst 1998, 94.

¹³ See Ingram 1977, 216-20. Causton 1995 notes that the Gohonzon is a “figurative representation” of the “ceremony in the air” in the *Lotus Sutra* when Shakyamuni is joined Taho Buddha in a treasure stupa that springs from the earth in response to the Buddha's true teaching. This allegory is recounted from the second half of the eleventh to the twenty-second chapter), 235-238.

¹⁴ Causton 1995, 229.

therefore, is not just a symbol, but is imbued with Nichiren's enlightened spirit.¹⁵ The Gohonzon is often compared to a "clear mirror ... which perfectly reflects the state of Buddhahood inherent in life, and which could then enable all people, regardless of their circumstances, or ability, to draw out and manifest this Buddha nature that is within them."¹⁶ As such, there is a mystical quality to chanting before the Gohonzon. Such an "assiduous practice" (*gongyo*) forms a bridge of sound and vibration fusing subject and object together by attuning life to the law of the universe and the chanter's inherent Buddha-nature.¹⁷ It is no wonder, then, that the Gohonzon is the "single most important object" in Nichiren Buddhist practice.¹⁸ Nichiren Shôshû priests and the SGI organization give copies to new members, who enshrine them at their home altar. Faith means believing in the Gohonzon as a vehicle of salvation. Practice means regular chanting before it at one's home altar for materialistic benefits, psychological and physical health, enlightenment, as well as for world peace. One SGI informant told me that the Gohonzon is important to her because it provides a focus for your energy and determination for change and action. It is a representation of an enlightened state of life, with all the functions of the universe positioned where each creates the most value. There is a definite fusing of our life force and energy with the Gohonzon when we are chanting before it. It is a very powerful feeling that we experience as a sacred object expressing the ultimate truth of enlightenment and devotion to Nichiren.

I stumbled upon my topic two years ago when an SGI friend visited my Japanese religions class. He was explaining to my students that, as a sacred object of worship, the Gohonzon is never publicly displayed¹⁹ when one of my students interrupted, saying that she had seen a Gohonzon on the Internet. Sure enough, she passed around a photocopy of what she had found, a "Prayer Gohonzon" downloaded from an American Independent Movement Website of Don Ross called Nichiren's Coffeehouse.²⁰ When my SGI friend saw this Internet Gohonzon, he was not very happy. He quickly told us that he thought it was "sacrilegious" because the Gohonzon is too sacred to be displayed so casually. For me, it was a valuable lesson of the power of the Internet to transform religious practice in radically new, and,

¹⁵ This is noted in his letter to Mistress Kyôô: "I. Nichiren, have indeed written it by letting my soul dipped in ink flow forth. The very heart of the Buddha is the *Lotus Sutra*, the soul of Nichiren is nothing other than Nam myôhô renge kyô." Kubota 1994, 4.

¹⁶ "Soka Gakkai Today: Philosophy – The Gohonzon – Observing the Mind", on Website SGI-USA.org. Domain holder: SGI-YSA. Retrieved on July 15, 2004

from: http://www.sokagakkai.info/html3/sg_today3/philosophy3/gohonzon3.html. See also Causton 1995, 229.

¹⁷ Hammond and Machacek 1999, 30.

¹⁸ Causton 1995, 227.

¹⁹ The altar is opened twice a day for a morning and evening recitation of two chapters of the *Lotus Sutra* followed by devotional chanting of the *daimoku* (known as *gongyo*). Causton 1995, 13.

²⁰ See Nichiren Shonin Gohonzonshu on Website of Nichirenscoffeehouse.net. Domain holder: Don Ross. Retrieved on September 26, 2004, from: <http://nichirenscoffeehouse.net/GohonzonShu/037.html>.

indeed, controversial ways. I soon discovered several other independent Websites that displayed Gohonzon on their pages. One example is Yahoo! Groups GohonzonInfo, a site that describes its purpose as “distributing information about Nichiren Daishōnin in a non-sectarian manner.” It archives one hundred twenty-eight extant Gohonzon that Nichiren personally inscribed for his disciples. It distributes them by providing downloadable Gohonzon high-resolution (1200 dpi) images. All one has to do is to find the Gohonzon that “‘speaks’ to you.”²¹ Another independent Website offering a similar service is Gerald Aitken’s “Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism Practiced Independently.” A key part of the site is his “Gohonzon Restoration Project,” a collection of digitally restored Gohonzon on zip files available for downloading in a high quality print format.²² Sites like the Gohonzon Restoration Project, GohonzonInfo, and Nichirenscoffehouse.net use the Internet to challenge the exclusive authority of Nichiren Buddhist sects to disseminate Gohonzon. Indeed, independents see no need for any institutional middlemen between Nichiren’s Gohonzon and the potential worshipper. Aitken, for example, claims that his site “links you to everything you need to practice Nichiren Daishōnin’s Buddhism by yourself”²³ You can obtain not only a Gohonzon, but Nichiren’s writings (*Gosho*), a translation of the *gongyo*, and a links page to contact other independent Nichiren Buddhists. Another independent, Greg Dilley, argues on GohonzonInfo that “since every organization or sect demands membership and exclusive loyalty before they will bestow their particular Gohonzon on someone, one may very well wish to have a Gohonzon “free of power” and without having to fulfill someone else’s requirements of loyalty.”²⁴

Brazen words such as these have caused enormous controversy within the Nichiren Buddhist world. How controversial is indicated in Yahoo! Groups Gohonzon Forum home page. The forum offers a monitored discussion of “the theology and theory, info on how to receive different Gohonzons and experiences related to Gohonzon acceptance and transfers.” If postings cannot be “conducted with courtesy and respect,” it offers a link to its sister forum

²¹ The site, which has, as of October 19, 2003, 312 members, also provides a mail order service for a nominal fee of ten dollars per Gohonzon. Rjm12212 (rjm12212@yahoo.com) (June 30, 2004): “Ordering High Resolution Gohonzons.” Website of Yahoo! Groups GohonzonInfo. Retrieved on September 27, 2004, from: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/GohonzonInfomessage/13>.

²² Website of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism Practiced Independently. Domain Holder: Gerald Aitken. Retrieved on May 25, 2005 from: <http://www.dsunlimited.com/grp/grhome.html>. Aitken emphasizes that these Gohonzon have not been altered in any way from the original. The only change is “the digital removal of centuries of stains caused by incense smoke and neglect.”

²³ See Website of “Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism Practiced Independently.” Domain Holder: Gerald Aitken. Retrieved on May 25, 2005 from: <http://www.dsunlimited.com/grp/grhome.html>.

²⁴ Rjm12212 (rjm12212@yahoo.com) (September 22, 2004): “Re: assistance for a group member requested.” Website of Yahoo! Groups GohonzonInfo. Retrieved on September 27, 2004, from: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/GohonzonInfomessage/24>.

called “GohonzonWars.”²⁵

This leads to two important questions. First, why do Nichiren Shôshû and SGI find Gohonzon on the Internet sacrilegious? Second, why do American independents go to such great efforts to provide high-resolution images for anyone to download for their home altars? What does Greg Dilley mean that re-presenting the Gohonzon digitally makes one “free of power”? Answering these questions is important in order to understand the current Gohonzon war on the Internet. My thesis is that what divides independents from institutional Nichiren Buddhists is a different understanding of how technology can be used ritually. Sectarian Nichiren Buddhists believe that officially administered “rites of institution” are essential for transmitting “true” instead of “counterfeit” Gohonzon. American independents, by contrast, see the Internet as the latest techno-ritualistic means of fulfilling Nichiren’s dictum of “practicing for others” (*kosen-rufu*). By distributing Gohonzon images electronically, they use cyberspace as an “expedient means” to achieve Nichiren’s compassionate goal of universal salvation. Digital downloading, instead of personal transcription, wood-block printing, or photocopying, becomes the latest technology for spreading enlightenment to all humanity.

Digital Reproduction as a Loss of “Aura”

Internet Gohonzon is a concern for both Nichiren Shôshû and SGI. As Lorne Dawson notes, a “worry to religious organizations is the relative loss of control over religious materials...The medium is just too fluid and dispersed to permit complete control, through the courts or otherwise...This opens new opportunities for both the exposure and the manipulation of guarded secrets, or the fashioning of competing syncretic systems.”²⁶ The relativizing and democratizing effect of computer-mediated-communication is especially worrying to religions with a strong centralized authority.²⁷ What can Nichiren Shôshû and SGI do to prevent independents from reproducing images on the Internet? The power Internet to circulate images, according to Brenda Basher: „simultaneously makes religious diversity uniquely accessible and threatens to undermine the value of the original and unique persons, places and things associated with religions.”²⁸

Both SGI and Nichiren Shôshû, condemn the virtual display of the Gohonzon on-line. For

²⁵ See Website of Yahoo! Groups GohonzonInfo. Retrieved on September 27, 2004, from: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/GohonzonInfo>.

²⁶ Dawson 2000, 43-4.

²⁷ See Dawson 2003, 286.

²⁸ Brasher 2001, 20.

example, a non-official Nichiren Shôshû site posts a lecture by Rev. Shoshin Kawabe (a priest at Myogyoji, West Chicago) on “Care and Enshrinement of the Gohonzon.” In his talk, Rev. Kawabe notes that, as a sacred object of worship, the Gohonzon merits special care:

“We must not begrudge our efforts to keep the Gohonzon in good condition. For example, we should be careful not to splash wax or water on the Gohonzon. Writing or painting on the Gohonzon is absolutely prohibited. We should also exercise precautions to prevent any accidents caused by children or pets. The Gohonzon should not be exposed to direct sun light. Unless you are conducting Gongyo chanting Daimoku or cleaning the altar the doors or the altar should be closed to protect the Gohonzon. Furthermore, the following conduct is strongly prohibited: sketching or painting and [making] image[s] of the Gohonzon, photographing the Gohonzon, videotaping the Gohonzon, and photocopying the Gohonzon.”²⁹

Roughly the same position is also stated on official SGI sites. “Soka Spirit,” a site whose purpose is “educating people about Nichiren Daishônin’s teachings,” posts a “featured article of the month” by Dave Baldschun (SGIUSA Study Dept) entitled: „Are All Gohonzons the same?” In that article, Baldschun argues that,

“[a]t a time when copies of Gohonzon, some inscribed in Nichiren Daishonin’s own hand, are available over the counter or from the Internet, these examples offer a valuable lesson. Even though a Gohonzon is a Gohonzon, the source is important. We should be aware of those offering Gohonzon and teachings under the guise of Nichiren Buddhism but who are, in fact, propagating views that distort Daishonin’s teachings. In Letter to the Lay Priest Ichinosawa, the Daishonin states, If [sic!] the source is muddy, the stream will not flow clear...”³⁰

SGI has furthered clarified its position in an April 30th 2001 memo entitled “Distribution of Gohonzons.” This document mentions Internet distribution as detrimental to the true spirit of Nichiren’s teachings propagated by SGI. Receiving such a Gohonzon “would only create confusion and disharmony within SGI’s community of believers and thus may serve to undermine one’s own faith and that of other’s.” SGI affirms the policy of “the conferral of Gohonzon only as done within the SGI, the correct body of believers upholding the Daishonin’s teaching today. We do not support or condone the distribution, receipt, or reproduction of any Gohonzon in any other manner.”³¹

True to their word, SGI USA and Nichiren Shôshû do not upload Gohonzon on their official Website. In the case of SGI, the new members area displays a virtual altar for informational purposes only. The page shows flash animation image of a stylized color

²⁹ Kawabe (n.d.): <http://cebnet.com/nst/carego.html>.

³⁰ Baldschun (n.d.): <http://www.sokaspirit.org/welcome/welcome1.shtml>.

³¹ Baldschun (n.d.): <http://www.sokaspirit.org/welcome/welcome1.shtml>.

drawing of an altar with its doors closed. When you click on the doors, they do open. But what is visible is an empty scroll, not a reproduction of the sacred object of worship.³² Even in the “library section” of the same site, the Gohonzon is not displayed. There is only a schematic diagram of the Nichikan Gohonzon (SGI’s particular Gohonzon), described as the “treasure map of life.” However, this diagram is only a schematic without Nichiren’s calligraphy. It is a set of empty boxes along with a key giving an English translation and Romanized equivalents of the contents of the scroll.³³

SGI’s Internet iconoclasm extends to rank and file members as well. According to my survey of one SGI chapter in Ottawa, Canada, over 73.5% of the respondents have a negative opinion about displaying the Gohonzon on the Internet.³⁴ Several respondents thought on-line Gohonzon were “obscene,” a “sacrilege,” or “disrespectful.” For example, one remarked: „The Gohonzon is not an object for gawking at but for respectful prayer.” Another objected: „There is simply no place for a Gohonzon on-line whatsoever. It’s meant to be placed inside a physical *butsudan*, and it’s meant to stay there. There is no question about it and I’d like to know who these people are who do such foolish acts on their own free will.”

Even more interesting are Nichiren Shôshû and SGI members’ reasons for why an Internet Gohonzon is inappropriate. Some see it as a cheapening or devaluing of the Gohonzon. They fear that, if the Gohonzon is reproduced on the Net, it becomes trivialized, losing its religious value by being detached from its “source.” Such a fear is noted in a recent post on *Esangha*, a major Buddhism portal that hosts a Nichiren Buddhism chat forum. Mark, a Nichiren Shôshû lay member, states: “I disapprove of Internet Gohonzons. It’s just as bad as the shops in Japan that sell Gohonzon. It’s just cheap commercialization of what is the True Object of Worship.” Having it on the same network that has hotels.com or e-pornography “diminishes its level of purity” since the Gohonzon is “the deepest source of inspiration and spiritual guidance.”³⁵ Or, as one of my respondents summed it up: “To have it flashed on a screen like its just some ordinary image that you can click off or browse through seems quite disrespectful.”

Another reason is that such a medium, which is open to everyone, is unsupervised, unguided, and open to misrepresentation. According to SGI’s Buddhist perspective, treating the Gohonzon with disrespect could have a negative karmic effect on the ignorant viewer. Therefore, allowing just anyone to look at the Gohonzon without the appropriate guidance is

³² See http://www.sgi-usa.org/thesgiusa/newmembers/the_altar/index2.html.

³³ See <http://sgi-usa.net/buddhism/library/Nichiren/Gohonzon/meaning.htm>.

³⁴ It should also be noted that over 91.2% of those surveyed have computers in their home, 76.5% of them have accessed the official SGI Website (<http://www.sgi-usa.org>), and 52.1% have accessed non-SGI but Nichiren related sites on-line.

³⁵ See <http://www.lioncity.net/buddhism/index.php?showtopic=6582>.

spiritually dangerous. Only with proper practice, learned by becoming a SGI member, can the worshipper realize the beneficial karmic potential of chanting. As one respondent of my survey concluded: „The Gohonzon was inscribed for the purpose of enabling every person to become happy and fulfilled. Depicting the essence of life, it deserves to be treated with respect. To demean the Gohonzon is to demean all life. This would be a most unfortunate consequence for someone...”

A third reason is that the Internet is not the proper “place” for exhibiting a Gohonzon. The Internet is a *utopian* space that emphasizes the value of no place. SGI members see the Gohonzon locatively; it has its own special sacred place that is intimately tied to home, family, and a particular SGI community. It should never be enshrined in the no-place of cyberspace where it can be accessed by anyone at anytime under any condition. This is not good because the “place of your Gohonzon in your home becomes sacrosanct.” One survey respondent notes that, although the Gohonzon is an “object” of worship and not a person, virtual Gohonzon objectify it too much: “I feel the material presence in our home is deeply significant. It seems to have a ‘life’ in our home that is warming and full of beauty. It is our family object of worship.” Another agrees noting that “[t]he important difference could be compared to speaking to a friend face to face or sending email to him. Of course, if you share important personal information its best to speak face to face. So, I think its best to chant before the actual Gohonzon.” In other words, the sacred aura of the Gohonzon, its “life” for the worshipper, is tied to its physical presence within the home and the family who worships it; for these SGI members, the Internet is a cold, impersonal, public space that objectifies the Gohonzon, making it distant from the viewer. It has no personal connection and no potential to fuse subjectively with the chanter, unless it lives in the family *butsudan*.

This leads to a final reason sectarian Nichiren Buddhists often cite for why the Gohonzon on-line is inappropriate. It is outside the group’s legitimate line of transmission. Correct “lineage” means that the member has received the Gohonzon from the designated religious authority, in the case of Nichiren Shôshû, the temple priest or, in the case of SGI-USA, the lay organizational leadership. One survey respondent observes: „Part of the practice is to be given a Gohonzon by the organization, almost as a rite of passage. This display [on the Internet] discourages this and also does not include any other of the important aspects of the practice.” This rationale against the public display of the Gohonzon points to vital role of tradition – the Gohonzon’s institutional, ritual, and social embeddedness – for legitimating its sacred power and authority in practitioners’ lives. It points to a commonality shared by Nichiren Shôshû and SGI that is often ignored due to the bitter conflict between the two

organizations. Both groups antipathy toward Internet Gohonzon reflects ideas that Walter Benjamin develops in his classic essay: „The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1955).

Benjamin argues that mechanical reproduction of images by lithography, photography, and contemporary cinema transforms the experience of a work of art. These media are powerful because they magically create a likeness detached from the object, from its original position in space and time where it has its own unique existence. The technology circulates it freely so that anyone can appreciate it. A photograph of the Dai Gohonzon, for example, frees it from its temple sanctuary at Taisekiji where only priests and pilgrims can see it. The image can then travel via the Internet to America where students in a Japanese religions class can see it on their computer screens. The professor can reproduce it again, downloading an image to use as part of an exam question.³⁶ While Internet technology frees images to approach contemporary consumers, the reproduction always lacks that one essential quality of the original, its quality of presence: “The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced.”³⁷ Benjamin argues that consumer demand to draw objects closer “detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition,” severing it from its unique presence in particular places, and specific historical, cultural, and religious contexts that gave it its particular meaning and value. The consequence of mechanical reproduction, therefore, is “the liquidation of tradition” – the loss of what Benjamin calls the object’s “aura.”

In the case of the Dai Gohonzon, the liquidation of tradition occurs if, for example, a student decides to download it and put her copy on her dorm room wall because she thinks it “looks cool” or brings a copy to a class for show and tell. This is exactly what sectarian Nichiren Buddhists fear. It reflects what Lorne Dawson has theorized as “the shift from the offline world to the online” that results in “two very important social consequences of the Internet: a crisis of authority and a crisis of authenticity.”³⁸

Ritually Framing the “Aura” – Rites of Institution for the Gohonzon

Institutional Nichiren Buddhism’s rejection of Internet Gohonzon is based on the

³⁶ See Benjamin 1968, 222-23.

³⁷ Benjamin 1968, 223.

³⁸ Dawson 2004, 2.

theological premise that real life ritual is essential for instilling the aura of the Gohonzon. It was Walter Benjamin who also noted the power of ritual for creating the aura for, most often, an ancient work of art is also a sacred object: “[T]he earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual – first the magical, then the religious kind. It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value.”³⁹ Despite their differences, Nichiren Shôshû and SGI both agree that the Gohonzon must never be displayed publicly as an object d’art. Both also agree the Gohonzon’s aura originates, in part, from the institutional conditions of its production and reception. In this respect Nichiren Shôshû and SGI share a common faith that what Pierre Bourdieu calls “rites of institution” can generate this aura – their organization’s symbolically powerful ritual practices that “act upon reality by acting on its representation.”⁴⁰ Such rites have an essential “social magic” that draws unambiguous social boundaries at the most basic level between those who are recognized as members of the group and those who are not. Rites of institution consecrate this difference and assign properties of a social nature to it. As an example, Pierre Bourdieu sees circumcision as a typical example of a rite of institution. The act obviously divides before and after - the circumcised child from the uncircumcised one – but, simultaneously, also marks hidden divisions as well, such as between those subject to circumcision (boys and men) and those who are not (girls and women). It is the rite that consecrates and institutes this difference.⁴¹

Nichiren Shôshû and SGI both use Gohonzon rites of institution to draw explicit boundaries between those who follow the “true teachings” and those who do not. As we have seen, it was a dispute over the conferral of the Gohonzon that led to the schism in 1991. After losing Nichiren Shôshû’s clerical support, SGI was forced to create new lay-centered rites of institution for the conferral of the Gohonzon, altar arrangement, maintenance, and the specific procedures for doing *gongyo*. In any case, both Nichiren Shôshû and SGI’s rites restrict access to the Gohonzon thereby protecting its aura while identifying who is a member.

In Nichiren Shôshû, the priesthood presides over its rites of institution. Their sacerdotal authority is based upon “blood inheritance” (*kechimyaku*) of the high priest who traces his descent directly to one of the first disciples of Nichiren, Nikkô Shônin. It is the high priest who directly controls the holy of holies, the Dai-Gohonzon at Taiseikiji. Only the high priest or his officially designated proxies can bestow official copies to the faithful through a special

³⁹ Benjamin 1968, 225-26.

⁴⁰ Bourdieu 1991, 119.

⁴¹ See Bourdieu 1991, 118.

gojukai or conferral ceremony. It is only after performing a special “eye-opening ceremony” that the copies become spiritually empowered with the energy of the Dai-Gohonzon, flowing from the True Object of worship to the faithful.⁴²

This exclusively priestly form of ritual transmission is critical for the aura of Gohonzon and the authenticity of lay religious practice in Nichiren Shôshû. Rev. Shoshin Kawabe makes this clear in his lecture on “The Conferral of the Gohonzon.” “*Kechimyaku*,” he notes: „consists of two characters – “blood” and “vein”. Just as blood circulates through the body giving people life, the beneficial power of the Dai-Gohonzon flows through the faithful. It, bequeathed to the High Priest and housed in the High Sanctuary, is the heart that pumps that life-blood through its vessels, the priests, into the capillaries, the lay believers who receive its spiritual power in their Gohonzon copies.” Kawabe argues that those who deny this line of priestly transmission, who say “I know Buddhism better than the High Priest” [...] “My ideas are the Gohonzon’s ideas. I won’t follow the Gohonzon teachings. However the Gohonzon has to answer my prayers” do not qualify as the faithful.” For them, no benefit exists because they are “severing” themselves from “the life blood” of faith.⁴³ Only through a priest or a Gohonzon directly linked to the high priest at Taisekji, whose “venerable life [...] is one with the Dai Gohonzon of the High Sanctuary of the True Buddhism, is salvation possible.”⁴⁴

Nichiren Shôshû, therefore, sees Gohonzon acquired from any other source as “blasphemous counterfeits” because the Dai-Gohonzon at Taiseki-ji is a *vera icona* embodying Nichiren’s spirit and the reality of complete enlightenment within it.⁴⁵ Such a view ensures that lay pilgrims have an intense experience of the Dai-Gohonzon’s aura at Taiseki-ji.⁴⁶ Through the priestly conferral of the Gohonzon, copies are authentic because of their direct link to the Dai-Gohonzon. It is the aura of the Gohonzon that the priests “pump” to the faithful like life giving blood giving through the *gojukai* rite. As Bourdieu would argue, this rite of institution is vital because it draws boundaries between Nichiren Shôshû members and non-members who may have “counterfeit” Gohonzon. This would include not only SGI, but also independents that use Internet Gohonzon.

After the split with Nichiren Shôshû, SGI had to develop new rites of institution to draw its own distinctive boundaries as a new religious movement (NRM).⁴⁷ Cut off from priestly

⁴² Bocking 1994, 120.

⁴³ Kawabe 1995: <http://www.cebunet.com/nst/skconfgoho.html>.

⁴⁴ SGI-USA Temple Issue Committee 1999, 14.

⁴⁵ See Seager 1999, 81.

⁴⁶ To get a sense of a Nichiren Shoshu American member’s sense of heirophany before the Dai Gohonzon, see the brief account in Seager 1999, 85.

⁴⁷ Some scholars compare the conflict between NST and SGI to the Protestant Reformation against Calvinism. Bryan Wilson, for example, sees SGI as a “revitalization movement” adapting Nichiren Buddhism to modern

Gohonzon conferral, SGI began issuing their own Gohonzon in 1993. This Gohonzon is referred to as the Nichikan Gohonzon, one inscribed by the 26th high priest Nichikan in 1720 and bestowed on SGI by reformist priests from Joen-ji. While SGI has no ecclesiastical hierarchy, it still has Ikeda Daisaku at the head as the model and teacher of members with “quasi-clerical hierarchy” in charge of distributing the Gohonzon. Since the split, SGI has actively tried to discredit Nichiren Shôshû’s priestly conferral rites by arguing that they are not found in scripture. For example, the SGI document „A Historical Perspective on the Transcription of the Gohonzon” argues:

“[t]he priesthood currently asserts that authority regarding the Gohonzon rests solely with the high priest. It alleges that only the high priest can reproduce the Gohonzon for believers, because he alone can perform the ‘eye opening’ ceremony and thereby inject into the Gohonzon the ‘living essence’ of the Daishonin’s enlightened life that only he possesses. However, not only is there no passage in the *Gosho* to support such esoteric rituals; the fact that chief priests at branch temples have transcribed the Gohonzon also completely contradicts this reasoning.”⁴⁸

All that can be found in the writings is that, the “Daishonin bestowed the Gohonzon upon each sincere believer of his teachings. He never intended it for possession by only a few. Nikko Shonin, too, transcribed Gohonzon for believers until the very end of his life – until he was practically too weak to pick up his writing brush.” The goal at the heart of the transcriptions, therefore, is “to accord with the unfolding of *kosen rufu*, spreading salvation throughout humanity.”⁴⁹ In this view, priestly rites and traditional methods of Gohonzon reproduction and conferral are at best understood as an expedient means. They are invented as a means,

“to maintain the delicate balance between maximizing the availability of the Gohonzon for those with strong faith and seeking mind and minimizing the danger of confusion and disrespect toward this precious object of worship, as Nikko Shonin instructed. The reproduction and issuance of the Gohonzon must be handled strictly by the body of believers dedicated to *kosen-rufu*, based on the teachings of Daishonin and Nikko Shonin.”⁵⁰

This quote suggests that the most important principle in Nichiren’s teaching regarding the

conditions against a priesthood that is authoritarian, status conscious, and hierarchical versus SGI’s lay centered movement that is populist, egalitarian and relatively status free. See Bocking 1994, 122-123.

⁴⁸ “A Historical Perspective on the Transcription of the Gohonzon,” on the Website of Sokaspirit.com. Domain holder: SGI-USA. Retrieved on July 15, 2004, from: <http://www.sokaspirit.com/nichia03.htm>. See also SGI-USA Temple Issue Committee (1999): *Confirming Our Path of Faith Temple Issue Handbook*, Santa Monica, CA, 18-19.

⁴⁹ “A Historical Perspective on the Transcription of the Gohonzon,” on the Website of Sokaspirit.com. Domain holder: SGI-USA. Retrieved on July 15, 2004, from: <http://www.sokaspirit.com/nichia03.htm>.

Gohonzon is *kosen-rufu*. SGI makes four points. First, priestly authority over the production and dissemination of Gohonzon is only an “expedient means,” a way to promote the spread of Nichiren faith to sincere believers and to ensure that the conferral is done appropriately and respectfully. According to SGI’s *Temple Handbook*, since Nichiren Shôshû refuses to grant Gohonzon to deeply faithful SGI members, they go against Nichiren’s goal to save all humanity, using the Gohonzon “as an object to manipulate and intimidate believers.”⁵¹ Second: „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.”⁵² As one SGI leader explains it:

“[t]he purpose of the existence of the Gohonzon is to serve people – not the other way around. Nichiren taught the fundamental equality of all people, and further, that the Buddha is an ordinary person. In his writing “The True Aspect of All Phenomena,” he states categorically: „There should be no discrimination among those who propagate the five characters of *Myoho-enge-kyo* in the Latter Day of the Law, be they men or women.” (*Writings*, p. 385) The Nichiren Shoshu priesthood’s assertion of their superiority over lay believers belies this clear statement, and their use of the Gohonzon as an instrument of authority is the expression of this distortion, which was the essential underlying cause of the split with the Soka Gakkai.”⁵³

To understand the SGI position here, it is crucial to grasp their universalistic interpretation of *kechimyaku*.

The meaning of the heritage or “lifeblood” of faith is not based on the priestly passing on of the teachings in an exclusivist manner (and it should be noted that the record of this alleged transmission is riddled through the centuries with inconsistencies, major gaps, and serious doctrinal errors). The lifeblood is based on the community of believers who uphold the correct teaching in a spirit of many in body but one in mind. Again quoting from Nichiren’s writing “The Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life”:

“All disciples and lay supporters of Nichiren should chant *Nam-myoho-enge-kyo* with the spirit of many in body but one in mind, transcending all differences among themselves to become as inseparable as fish and the water in which they swim. This spiritual bond is the basis for the universal transmission of the ultimate Law of life and death. Herein lies the true goal of Nichiren’s propagation.”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ “A Historical Perspective on the Transcription of the Gohonzon,” on the Website of Sokaspirit.com. Domain holder:SGI-USA. Retrieved on July 15, 2004, from: <http://www.sokaspirit.com/nichia03.htm>.

⁵¹ SGI-USA Temple Issue Committee 1999, 16.

⁵² Buddhism: The Story of Human Revolution on Website SGI-USA.org. Retrieved on July 15, 2004, from: <http://www.sgi-usa.org/buddhism/resourceguide/resourceguide.html>.

⁵³ Tony Meers (SGI Canada General Director). Personal Communication (tmeers@sgicanada.org) (July 18, 2005).

⁵⁴ Buddhism: The Story of Human Revolution on Website SGI-USA.org. Retrieved on July 15, 2004, from <http://www.sgi-usa.org/buddhism/library/Nichiren/wnd/concord/pages.view/217.html>.

This is crucial to the analysis, as it is the disciples united with the same mind to carry out the Buddha's vow that make the heritage valid and come to life, and the Gohonzon thereby becomes the "banner of propagation"⁵⁵ that is the symbol of this unity.⁵⁶

Therefore, there is nothing intrinsically wrong if SGI reproduces its own Nichikan copies since it is a community of believers joined in devotion to Nichiren's teachings. Distributing Gohonzon becomes part of its "worldwide efforts to inform people about the faith and to promote mutual respect and understanding among individuals and communities."⁵⁷ Third, the fact of the matter is that priestly rites and procedures for disseminating the Gohonzon have changed with the requirements of *kosen-rufu*. While transcribing Gohonzon by hand for a few disciples may have been appropriate in Nikko Shonin's time, times have changed. Over time: „the method of reproducing the Gohonzon has changed according to societal conditions, such as advancements in transportation, communication, and printing technology – and, more importantly – the conditions and progress of the *kosen-rufu* movement."⁵⁸ SGI's own form of conferral in the form of *okatagi* (literally woodblock, but meaning more generally printed copies) is also an expedient means to reach the greatest number of the faithful for their salvation. These copies have the same power as the original because of the sincerity and faith of those who chant. SGI argues that its distribution of the Gohonzon is a compassionate act that responds "to the seeking spirit of ordinary people of the Latter Days of the Law."⁵⁹ Fourth, Nichiren himself inscribed the Gohonzon for everyone "to make the Gohonzon available to all who sincerely seek to practice his teachings, thus enabling them to establish indestructible happiness through their faith and practice."⁶⁰ SGI, therefore, is particularly critical of what it calls the "insular doctrine of priestly heritage." By exerting clerical control over lay followers, the priesthood goes against Nichiren's injunction to work compassionately for the happiness of humanity by preventing lay followers to share their faith with others (*kosen rufu*) freely. SGI sees its own worldwide proselytizing effort as superceding what they see as Nichiren Shôshû's exclusive rites of institution, exclusive because it prevents people of faith from receiving the Gohonzon.

⁵⁵ Buddhism: The Story of Human Revolution on Website SGI-USA.org. Retrieved on July 15, 2004, from <http://www.sgi-usa.org/buddhism/library/Nichiren/wnd/concord/pages.view/813.html>.

⁵⁶ Tony Meers (SGI Canada General Director). Personal Communication (tmeers@sgicanada.org) (July 18, 2005).

⁵⁷ Buddhism: The Story of Human Revolution on Website SGI-USA.org. Retrieved on July 15, 2004, from: <http://www.sgi-usa.org/buddhism/resourceguide/resourceguide.html>.

⁵⁸ Buddhism: The Story of Human Revolution on Website SGI-USA.org. Retrieved on July 15, 2004, from: <http://www.sgi-usa.org/buddhism/resourceguide/resourceguide.html>.

⁵⁹ SGI-USA Temple Issue Committee 1999, 16.

⁶⁰ Behind the SGI's Decision to Issue the Gohonzon, on Website Sokaspirit.com. Retrieved on July 15, 2004, from: <http://www.sokaspirit.com/nichika05.htm>.

Yet, SGI still insists that “the reproduction and issuance of the Gohonzon must be handled strictly by the body of believers.” This Buddhist community or *sangha* is established through SGI own distinctive rites of institution, rites designed to instill the aura of their Nichikan Gohonzon for new members. Conferral occurs only after a complex nine-step initiation process: You have to be eighteen and fill out membership and Gohonzon application forms, have a “good friend” sponsor who co-signs your application, attend one meeting a month, subscribe to the *World Tribune*, participate in a new members seminar, and meet with chapter and headquarters leaders who review your application for final approval. An applicant finally receives the Gohonzon only after a special conferral ceremony where s/he makes a pledge “to abide by the guidance of SGI as it relates to the practice of faith. ”This signifies that the new member recognizes “SGI faithfully upholds the Daishōnin’s Buddhism...”⁶¹ Having conferral take place within the SGI community ensures that the “delicate balance” between making the Gohonzon’s available for salvation and maintaining respect for it as a sacred object. This detailed conferral process also draws sharp boundaries between SGI member-insiders and outsiders.

For SGI, a “true” Gohonzon is one that is at the center of practice. Copies of the Gohonzon “we pray to each day in our homes, or at our SGI community centers are endowed with exactly the same power of the law inherent in the Dai-Gohonzon.”⁶² They are the same as the original because a Gohonzon’s aura derives from the internal spirituality of the worshipper. SGI’s position follows Nichiren dictum “Never seek the Gohonzon outside yourself.” To do otherwise, according to Daisaku Ikeda, is objectify the Gohonzon as something out there (at Taiseki-ji), rather than understanding its true nature, as a mirror reflecting the supreme enlightenment in the heart of every worshiper. Many of my SGI survey respondents describe the Gohonzon this way. Like the ordinary mirror people use every morning to get ready for the day, the Gohonzon is a spiritual mirror. Using it in daily practice, allows an SGI members to make their life beautiful by seeing the true Buddha nature hidden within. The Gohonzon is viewed subjectively, as an intensely personal and an intimate part of one’s life.⁶³ As one respondent noted:

“It is a physical manifestation of my life. The whole way of enshrining the area around it (i.e. an altar area) is a way of respecting the Gohonzon and hence my life. It’s important to me that it is real and in my home. It’s like talking to a friend in person,

⁶¹ Becoming a Member of the SGI-USA on Website of SGI-USA.org. Domain Holder: SGI-USA. Retrieved on July 15, 2004, from: <http://www.sgi-usa.org/thesgiusa/aboutsgi/membership.html>.

⁶² Kryssi Staikidis June 7, 2002. Moreover, she adds, nowhere is it stated in the *Gosho* that one has to visit the Dai-Gohonzon.

⁶³ See Bocking 1994, 122, 128-129.

rather than on a phone or email. There are many more dimensions to this actual contact for me.”

Such a perspective avoids the objectification, a spiritual pitfall with highly negative karmic consequences. Seeing the Gohonzon as a “wholly other,” leads to the mistaken view that it as an external sacred object that needs priests to serve as its spiritual intermediaries.⁶⁴ The worshipper ends up acting subserviently toward the Gohonzon as if it were a transcendent being or force. Such a practice is deluded rather than enlightened according to SGI.

In sum, SGI draws a line between itself and Nichiren Shôshû by appealing to the higher authority of Nichiren’s writings and the belief that what endows an aura in a Gohonzon is the internal spiritual reality of the chanter realized through personal practice at the home or community center. For SGI it is the chanter’s daily lay ritual of *gongyo* done with deep faith that creates a boundary between SGI members and others. How to do *gongyo* effectively is delineated by SGI seminars, chapter meetings and assorted publications that describe in detail the proper ritual procedures. In addition, the aura of the Gohonzon is also a communal reality as well, created by the “community of believers” are united in their common devotion to Nichiren. According to Tony Meers, General Director of SGI Canada, this aura generated within the SGI community is what makes SGI different from independents:

This community of believers is essentially absent in the “independents” model, making their assertion of a “do-it-yourself” approach at fundamental odds with the practice of Nichiren’s teachings, which advocates practice for self and others as essential for attaining enlightenment. Quoting again from “The True Aspect of All Phenomena”:

“Exert yourself in the two ways of practice and study. Without practice and study, there can be no Buddhism. You must not only persevere yourself; you must also teach others. Both practice and study arise from faith. Teach others to the best of your ability, even if it is only a single sentence or phrase.”⁶⁵

In this context, the manifestation of the Buddha’s vow to enable all living beings to attain Buddhahood can only be brought about by the collective efforts of his disciples, united in this purpose and transcending their differences. The material Gohonzon is less important than the “internal” Gohonzon; however, the material Gohonzon that is used by this collective of disciples comes to represent them and their united efforts, as the “banner of propagation.” The respectful treatment of the Gohonzon and its bestowal by this community of believers, in order to welcome the new believer to that community, is the expression of Nichiren’s

⁶⁴ See Causton 1995, 230.

⁶⁵ Buddhism: The Story of Human Revolution on Website SGI-USA.org. Retrieved on July 15, 2004, from <http://www.sgi-usa.org/buddhism/library/Nichiren/wnd/concord/pages.view/386.html>.

Buddhist practice for self and others. It is ultimately in respecting people, in other words, that one respects the Gohonzon. The use of Internet Gohonzon images totally disregards this essential principle...⁶⁶

So far we have seen how Nichiren Shôshû and SGI's different rites of institution for conferring Gohonzon differentiate them as religious institutions Gohonzon. However, while they attack each other's ritual and ecclesiastical claims of legitimacy, they agree on the issue of Internet Gohonzon. Both refuse to accept Internet Gohonzon as an object of worship, dismissing them as "sacrilegious counterfeits". They do so because they share a common belief that the "aura" of a Gohonzon is instilled through real life ritual. As "traditionalists", they consider digital reproduction technologies to be unregulated, and, therefore, outside the authority and authenticity of their traditions. One way to summarize their belief is to list what they see as the different characteristics of the Gohonzon "original" from an Internet "copy":

<u>Digital Image on Internet</u>	<u>Original Gohonzon (Home Altar)</u>
Inauthentic	Authentic
No ritual/cult	Ritual/cult
No lineage	Lineage (Priests or Nichiren's <i>Gosho</i>)
Many	One (Dai Gohonzon/Nichikan copy)
Close	Distant (Taiseikiji/ Exclusive SGI)
Profane	Sacred
No Aura	Aura
No Tradition	Embedded in Tradition

This list clearly shows institutional Nichiren Buddhism's negative characterization of Internet Gohonzon. Since they are not consecrated or legitimated through rites of institution, Internet Gohonzon are bogus. Like the medium in which they appear, Internet Gohonzon are public rather than private, de-ritualized rather than ritualized, independent rather than institutionalized, and finally sacrilegious rather than sacred objects of worship.⁶⁷ Nichiren Shôshû and SGI's stance underscores James Beckford's assessment that "the most visible and controversial aspects of religion nowadays include religiously-inspired attempts to bring the forces of science, technology and bureaucracy back under human control."⁶⁸ Like scientology and other "initiatory religions," sectarian Nichiren Buddhism favors their own authorized and proprietary rites of institution guaranteeing salvation. As William Bainbridge observes, the

⁶⁶ See Tony Meers (SGI Canada General Director). Personal Communication (tmeers@sgicanada.org) (July 18, 2005).

⁶⁷ An additional point that needs to be clarified is the Gohonzon is also "close" for Nichiren Shôshû and SGI. It is rites of institution that bring the Gohonzon close to the worshipper, endowing the mechanically reproduced copies with their aura.

⁶⁸ Beckford 1992, 21.

Internet threatens these groups organizationally since “[a]n initiatory system would collapse if everybody had free access to all parts of the sacred culture.”⁶⁹ Internet Gohonzon threatens the aura of Nichiren Shôshû and SGI’s object of worship, and, by extension, the viability of the cultic and ecclesiastical organization that distinguishes them as religious institutions.

American Independents and the Internet – The Aura of Digital Gohonzon

American independents have a view of Internet Gohonzon that is radically different from institutional Nichiren Buddhists. They reject their binary model that dismisses Internet Gohonzon as counterfeit imagers. For independents, Internet Gohonzon are authentic and sacred. A key spokesperson for the independent view is Don Ross, webmaster of the most important independent site on the Net, Nichiren’s Coffeehouse. According to its homepage, Nichiren’s Coffeehouse is “an INDEPENDENT Website providing information and resources on the various Lotus Sutra based Movements as well as the study of the Buddha’s teachings from many traditions.”⁷⁰ It is an enormous site containing article and letter archives about Nichiren Buddhism by other independents, links to major branches of Nichiren Buddhism including SGI, Nichiren Shôshû, Nichiren Shû, Reiyukai, etc., the Buddhist Inmate Sangha, Independent community advertisements, explanations of Nichiren Buddhism written in accessible terms (such as Ross’s “A 12 Step Program for Nichiren Buddhists”), *daimoku* screen savers, etc. As an Amazon.com associate, it has had 1,430,580 hits since 1997 and Ross’ Webring Lotus Sutra Net, created June 6th 2001 for “any Website that honors the Buddha Dharma in its many varied forms,” has 148 active sites with 46,356 page views.⁷¹ With its world wide directory of independent groups, it functions as a virtual center for the independent community. It is also important because it offers the most comprehensive “virtual gallery” of downloadable Gohonzon on the Internet. As such “there is no way of knowing, how many people have printed a Gohonzon image off of Ross’ Website, and this alarms his critics” among the institutional Nichiren Buddhists.⁷²

Ross’ spiritual autobiography is crucial to understand why he created his site. It also offers a window into what motivates many independents to access his Website. Ross’ story reflects

⁶⁹ Bainbridge 2000, 62.

⁷⁰ Website of Nichiren’s Coffeehouse. Domain holder: Don Ross. Retrieved on May 25, 2005 from: <http://nichirenscoffeehouse.net/home.html>.

⁷¹ Website of Nichiren’s Coffeehouse. Domain holder: Don Ross. Retrieved on May 25, 2005 from: <http://nichirenscoffeehouse.net/Independent.html>; Webring:hub, Lotus Sutra Net. Ring Manager: Don Ross. Retrieved on May 25, 2005 from: <http://n.webring.com/hub?ring=lotussutra.net>.

in many ways the baby boom generation's restlessly search for a personal force or energy to give meaning and direction in life. Wade Clark Roof argues that for baby boomers like Ross the theme of spiritual quest is at the core of their personal narratives.⁷³ Suspicious of traditional institutions, many of his generation left them behind to search new "spiritual marketplaces," like the Internet, for new suppliers of goods to meet their individual needs. When they speak about religion, they frame it as their personal journey of discovery for a sacred force or energy that will ultimately transform them positively.⁷⁴

Ross posts two autobiographical pieces on his Website that recount his own spiritual quest. In his "Adventures in Consciousness, from Baptist to Buddhist and the Beyond; or Tales of a Spiritual Deviant," Ross talks about his childhood as a Southern Baptist, then a Lutheran, and, by 17 a young man "itching for freedom," who liked "to try everything once or more if it feels good."

As he came out of the closet as gay, he also fell into drug and alcohol abuse, shooting methamphetamine and having unprotected sex that led to his being HIV positive in 1981-2 and, eventually, a mental breakdown. During the next few years living homeless in "the Nether regions," Ross experimented with various new age practices, becoming for a time a psychic/channeler until he discovered his "lamp in the darkness": Nichiren Buddhism.

The second half of his story, Ross entitles "My Song of Human Revolution," referring to SGI president Daisaku Ikeda's idea that a human revolution in a single individual "will enable a change in the destiny of all mankind." His conversion to SGI began with a personal healing miracle. After suffering an epileptic seizure that left Ross in a coma, his doctor, frustrated because he could do nothing to help him medically, decided to chant *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo* over him. Miraculously, Ross woke up well the next day and ultimately joined SGI with his new partner Wes Goetzel in 1984. Although Nichiren Buddhism was central to his life, Ross soon felt ambivalence about his place within SGI. These feelings intensified in 1986 when Ross and his partner both tested HIV positive. At that time AIDS was poorly understood with considerable social stigma attached to its victims. SGI leaders encouraged him to chant the *daimoku* seven hours a day until he reached 25 million by 1992. He credits this chanting with giving him the ability to overcome any illness, especially the remission of his HIV infection. However, Ross also experienced discrimination from the San Francisco leadership who banished him from meetings "to protect the members." With the temple wars heating up in 1991, Ross worked hard to support the Gakkai's position. However, he realized that the more

⁷² See Jones November 27, 2001.

⁷³ See Roof 1999, 16.

⁷⁴ See Roof 1999, 78-83.

he fought for SGI the more his immune system deteriorated. He began to see a connection between his worsening health and the health of the institutions with which he was associated:

“The tendencies to oppress and divide have been present in the world’s religions and politics for a long time. It is human nature. In many ways I see HIV as similar: insidious, it is the virus in the lion’s body which causes disharmony and ultimately, a weakening of the core. It has been my determination to overcome HIV by overcoming these influences, both in myself and in my environment.”⁷⁵

In June 1999, he had the “great good fortune” to be the first SGI member to receive a large copy of an authentic mandala called the Prayer Gohonzon (Medicine Gohonzon) inscribed by Nichiren in 1277 for his first disciple, Nissho. On the Gohonzon are special inscriptions written by Nichiren: “This sutra is truly a splendid medicine for the diseases of people of Jambudvīpa. A sick person who hears this will be immediately cured of his disease. He will not grow old or die before his time.”⁷⁶

Ross received his copy from Bruce Maltz, an independent who, Ross explains: „was instrumental in spreading the truth about Nichiren Buddhism over the internet in the early 90s in order to counteract misinformation spread by the Soka Gakkai and Nichiren Shoshu.”⁷⁷ When he first saw it, Ross’ “heart sang out to it”, and he begged Maltz for a copy. The Japanese priest who copied the mandala for Maltz finally agreed “only because this particular Gohonzon included sutra passages for curing karmic illness and because I have HIV/AIDS. Thus it was this strange quirk of circumstances, which turned his mind from “No” (because I was an SGI member) to a “Yes”, because of his great compassion for me, and all those who have an illness.”⁷⁸ In 1999, Ross decided to print and distribute his own copies for those “who sincerely desired it,” making the Prayer Gohonzon the “banner” under which the Independent Movement would free itself from sectarian Buddhism. Over 1000 copies were distributed to individuals and Buddhist temples around the world, making it “the first Nichiren Mandala to truly cross all sectarian bounds, meeting various degrees of acceptance and rejection.”⁷⁹ Ross also created Nichiren’s Coffeehouse: „the largest interfaith study resource hub for Nichiren

⁷⁵ Ross 1995.

⁷⁶ Website of Nichirenscoffeehouse.net. Domain holder: Don Ross. Retrieved on October 1, 2004, from: <http://nichirenscoffeehouse.net/Kaikan.html>.

⁷⁷ Maltz received it from Senchu Murano (1908-2001) an important overseas missionary of Nichiren Shu before and after WW II with whom he was a student. See Don Ross (campross@flash.net) “How Senchu Murano Secretly Shook the SGI at Its Core in His Very Last Years,” Website Yahoo! Groups: GohonzonInfo. Retrieved on September 27, 2004 from: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/GohonzonInfo/message/21>.

⁷⁸ Don Ross (campross@flash.net) “How Senchu Murano Secretly Shook the SGI at Its Core in His Very Last Years,” Website Yahoo! Groups: GohonzonInfo. Retrieved on September 27, 2004 from: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/GohonzonInfo/message/21>.

⁷⁹ Don Ross (campross@flash.net) “How Senchu Murano Secretly Shook the SGI at Its Core in His Very Last Years,” Website Yahoo! Groups: GohonzonInfo. Retrieved on September 27, 2004

and Tendai Buddhism in the world (which will remain online even if I die).”⁸⁰ Ross notes that the controversy that erupted over his site led to his eventual resignation from SGI in November 29th 2001, the ninth anniversary of the split with Nichiren Shôshû.⁸¹ Yet, it was this very act of independence that also liberated him:

“I find it ironic that the reverse in my immune system coincides exactly with the time when I stopped fighting Nichiren Shoshu on SGI’s behalf and turned my focus instead upon stopping the Temple War within myself and my environment, through the internet, intersectorian dialogue, and providing Nichiren Gohonzon to those who desire them.”⁸²

A key part of Nichiren’s Coffeehouse is the downloadable Prayer Gohonzon, the “Gohonzon of the independent movement” along with almost all (130) of the extant Gohonzon. Nichiren’s Coffeehouse’s “Gohonzon Galleries” include downloadable images from the *GohonzonShu*, a book by Risshô Ankokukai published originally in 1947 with photographs of the 125 extant Gohonzon of Nichiren from 1271 to 1282, including the only published photo of the Dai Gohonzon enshrined in the Hoanden at Taiseikiji. Ross also includes links to other sites where one can get downloadable Gohonzon, such as the Gohonzon Restoration Project and Gohonzon Info), Japanese silk scroll Gohonzon buy through Kaiundo Co., and a virtual altar: „CampRoss-ji Ever-Chanting Cyber Temple,” with twinkling lighted candles, and the *daimoku* chant “*Nam Myoho Renge Kyo*” (“I devote myself to the Mystic Law of the Lotus Sutra”) flashing syllable by syllable on the screen to assist the viewer’s chanting. In a section “How to Acquire a Gohonzon Outside of Sectarian Buddhism,” Ross notes that: “modern technology has come to the place where many homes can now print their own Gohonzon. All one needs is a photo quality printer and photo paper ... Enjoy your sense of freedom and Good fortune to you on your path!”⁸³

How do Ross and other independents understand the Internet Gohonzon as a religious way to practice Nichiren Buddhism? Independents envisage Internet Gohonzon in five important ways.

First, they see cyberspace as an informational tool. Their sites are typical “religions on

from: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/GohonzonInfo/message/21>.

⁸⁰ Ross April 28, 2001.

⁸¹ See Ross, 1999.

⁸² Ross April 28, 2001.

⁸³ Website of Nichiren’s Coffeehouse. Domain holder: Don Ross. Retrieved on May 25, 2005 from: <http://nichirenscoffeehouse.net/Gohonzon/HowTo.html>. The URL for this (<http://nichirenscoffeehouse.net/Kaikan.html>) is important here because “Kaikan” signifies the temple sanctuary that Nichiren prophesized would be the sacred place of enshrinement for the Gohonzon. Here is meant not the physical locale of Taiseikiji, but the virtual space of the Internet. Virtual Gohonzon altars are rare on-line. See also the “Virtual Chanting Room” of Lotus Sutra Org., which features the oral recitation of the *odaimoku* if you click on the Gohonzon. Website of Lotus Sutra.org. Domain holder: Myoho Man. Retrieved on September 26, 2004 from: <http://www.angelfire.com/realm3/lotusorg/Virtualchantingroom.htm>.

line” offering basic information to educate people about what the Gohonzon is all about in much the same way as SGI-USA.org. Where Nichiren’s Coffeehouse and other independent sites differ, however, is their understanding of their sites part of an “online religion.” For example, Ross use the Internet as a means for “human revolution.” Nichiren’s Coffeehouse offers a virtual public space that transcends the divisive sectarian conflict he found in the real world. All Gohonzon from the different sects of Nichiren Buddhism appear on his site equally and harmoniously arranged. His virtual gallery offers a visual theology that reveals, as independent Lisa Jones puts it, that “a Gohonzon inscribed in Nichiren’s own hand, regardless of who makes it available, is as valid as any other Gohonzon...”⁸⁴ Nichiren’s Coffeehouse’s display of the extant Nichiren Gohonzon offers a vision of a universal Nichiren Buddhism, one that counteracts the negative karmic energy of the temple wars.

Second, Ross and other independents go one step further with SGI’s arguments about technologies of reproduction. For independents, the Internet is the newest “expedient means” to spread Nichiren’s salvation to the greatest number. One independent echoes this idea in his comment that “anything can be used as a vehicle I think [...] why not?”⁸⁵ Rjm12212, the webmaster of Yahoo! Groups GohonzonInfo sees the Internet as key to his “mission” “to liberate the Gohonzon from the control of sects. I wanted to make quality Gohonzon available to those who wish to practice independently ... I simply wish to make options available to those who may wish to avail themselves of them.”⁸⁶ Another independent named Robby adds:

“It is amusing that “orthodoxes” see “non-eye-opened” Mandala Gohonzon as only paper. But then they talk about how terrible it is to download an image and print one. Sectarian warriors! Sheesh! That is okay, we are all baby Buddhas. Actually to copy the Mandala is a way of earning merit. Traditionally, one only arranged to have it made if one lacked the skill. Modern printing methods have made that moot. The major sects all have them done at a printers. I have several I use, some I made, some I was given. Believe me, they all work as well as those issued by sects.”⁸⁷

In short, just as calligraphy, transcription, and woodblock printing technologies worked to bring Nichiren’s salvation to those in need, the Internet now has the power to further human revolution. The Internet can fulfill Nichiren’s mission by liberating the Gohonzon from sects that prevent its distribution through their antiquated rites of institution. The Internet delivers Gohonzon to all those who sincerely want to access Nichiren’s means of salvation. Such a use of the Internet substantiates Roof’s observation that the new spiritual marketplace emphasizes

⁸⁴ Jones November 27, 2001.

⁸⁵ Kunga Lhadzom July 22, 2004 .

⁸⁶ Rjm12212 June 30, 2004.

⁸⁷ See Robby May 29, 2004.

“‘accessibility’ a direct relation between the consuming practitioner and spiritual goods in a religiously deregulated and demonopolized world.”⁸⁸

Third, the virtual character of Internet Gohonzon underscores a key teaching of Nichiren according to independents. In *The Real Aspect of the Gohonzon*, Nichiren wrote: “Never seek this Gohonzon outside yourself. The Gohonzon exists only within the mortal flesh of us ordinary people who embrace the Lotus Sutra and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.”⁸⁹ As we have seen, this echoes an SGI teaching not to objectify the Gohonzon as an external force or transcendent god, but to see it as a mirror reflecting “the Buddha nature – that we already inherently possess.”⁹⁰ Mirrors are expedient devices to see who we really are, so likewise, as Engyo, a contributor to an inter-faith on line Nichiren Buddhist forum, concludes: “the Object of Veneration [is] an expedient means; [...] a signpost which directs me to the Eternal Buddha Dharma. I no longer view it as an actual physical manifestation of that eternal Buddhadharma itself.”⁹¹ Another contributor, Dharmajim (who is well-known among Internet Nichiren Buddhists), concurs, [...] “the web is a fact of life and in many ways I think online Gohonzon are just as valid as any other. It depends on how they are used, the relationship a person establishes with them, the intention of the practitioner, that makes the difference.”⁹² As an object for meditation, Internet Gohonzon’s special power, like all Gohonzon is to reveal that universal deeper interior spiritual reality.

Fourth, independents think that Internet Gohonzon remake Nichiren Buddhism into a more dynamic, self-reflexive activity. It involves an active process of meaning making and personal choices that blends symbols, practices, and technologies into the on-line seeker’s deeply personal search for an authentic spiritual identity.⁹³ As Roof notes, in new spiritual marketplace religion is subject to recasting to meet the perceived needs of individuals.⁹⁴ Nichiren’s Coffeehouse, for example, reveals this with its many pictures of independents’ home altars. One sees Ross’s personal page “CampRoss-ji, San Diego, Ca,” with a photograph of his home altar as it developed after his declaration of independence in 1999. The title of the page indicates Ross’ feeling of personal freedom as an independent. His home altar is his temple “ji” for practice, a place that he can design as he pleases without sectarian

⁸⁸ Roof 1999, 69.

⁸⁹ Jones November 27, 2001. Others point to the test of experience. Engyo, another practitioner notes in a posting March 17, 2004 that although he worships different Gohonzon, he does not experience different results from using different versions. Finally, if there is a difference it is “directly attributable to my sincerity and intentions while chanting.”

⁹⁰ Causton 1995, 229.

⁹¹ Engyo July 23, 2004. Indeed, the virtual character of Internet Gohonzon underscores this belief.

⁹² Dharmajim (January 19, 2004).

⁹³ See Roof 1999, 69.

⁹⁴ See Roof 1999, 68-69.

censure. Another example of this new kind of Internet-based personalized religion is the “Native American Buddhist altar somewhere in Florida,” a Gohonzon altar with an inventory of the objects such as an ancient clay Thai Buddha, a pearl of wisdom, sage smudge, sweet grass, medicine bear, and an SGI silver swan candle and rosary.⁹⁵

In other words, Nichiren’s Coffeehouse, like other independent sites, emphasizes the importance of personal preference. One visitor on Esangha “Void,” shows us the liberating power of techno-conferral of Gohonzon. He asks: „I made a laser copy of a Gohonzon on my altar and I have a copy of the eye opening ceremony so now I can do it myself. Is that OK?” The moderator of the chat replies: What matters is you feel right. Since you are an independent, only you can decide what is the correct way to do this for you.” Techno-ritual freedom, therefore, is the new expedient way of being Nichiren Buddhist in the world of the Internet.

Fifth, independents see cyberspace as a sacerdotal tool for *kosen rufu* or “practice for others.” Again this idea extends SGI teachings. Causton, for example, explains that the term “literally means to ‘widely’ declare and spread; in other words, to propagate this Buddhism throughout the world.” Such a practice is “based on the profound compassion of *jihi* - the desire to help others overcome their sufferings and gain lasting happiness through practicing this Buddhism...”⁹⁶ Independents see a primary means of extending this compassion is via the Internet’s “exoteric power” to transmit the Dharma to anyone with a modem and an aspiration to follow Nichiren’s teachings. The Internet is not merely information, a means of teaching others about Nichiren Buddhism, but a techno-ritual means for encouraging religious practice. As we have seen, independents believe that downloadable high resolution images of the Gohonzon on the Internet is an “expedient means,” the basic idea in the *Lotus Sutra* that the Buddhas can employ any “device” to save beings from suffering. The Internet, by definition, is open to anyone, and is therefore a perfect medium for independents like Don Ross that want to spread Nichiren’s “true teachings” in a non-sectarian manner. By providing a spiritually charged downloadable Gohonzon, the Internet also serves as a new spiritual link (*kechimyaku*). The electronic magic of the Internet eliminates all intermediaries, all obstacles between master and disciple, enlightened Buddha and suffering being, Nichiren as savior and Internet user as sufferer in need of salvation. The Internet, therefore, is a sacred tool in the

⁹⁵ See Website of Nichirenscoffehouse.net. Domain holder: Don Ross. Retrieved on July 15, 2004, from: <http://nichirenscoffehouse.net/bodhisattva/frodo.html>. Ross also includes one of his own “Don’s *post modern* multi-cultural* 3D Hokke Honzon in April 2003. There is also a “Lord of the Gohonzon’s” illustration satirizing the temple wars by using the recent Lord of the Rings movie trilogy as an analogy. In the attached story, Frodo and Sam are the independents who “whistling a merry tune” leave the Mordor-like darkness of Sectarian warfare “into sunny lands.”

ritual process of effecting spiritual transformation on both an individual and a global scale. This is certainly Ross' rationale, particularly by making his Prayer Gohonzon available for downloading on the Internet. It is obvious that Ross, an HIV victim himself, a person who has worked for years as an AIDs educator, someone whose life partner died of the same disease while chanting the Daimoku with his last breath, finds disseminating the prayer Gohonzon over the Internet as a way of fulfilling Nichiren's own vision of universal salvation from suffering in a time of the Degeneration of the Law. That the Gohonzon is being propagated this way is a "cause for celebration rather than alarm. Regarding people who may print or download the image without understanding its significance, proponents argue that some relationship with the Gohonzon is better than no relationship."⁹⁷ Internet Gohonzon, therefore, represent a techno-liberating way of making merit and distributing salvation that is at the heart of Nichiren's ritual practice for others and the goal of "human revolution."

To conclude, it is clear that independents' understanding of Internet Gohonzon contradicts Benjamin's own thesis on the "work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction." Digitalization does not "liquidate tradition." It does liquidate institutional Nichiren Buddhist traditions, but, at the same time, it restores what they see as Nichiren's ideal of *kosen rufu*. Detachment and mobility of the image are, for independent Nichiren Buddhists, essential practices for saving others. Moreover, independents do not see mechanically reproduced Gohonzon as lacking an aura. Technology has religious power because it can replicate the Gohonzon, which is itself an expedient means for spiritual transformation. The virtual "objective" reality of the Internet Gohonzon is an expedient means of reflecting a hidden inter-subjective spiritual reality of supreme enlightenment. And yet, Internet Gohonzon are not hyperreal, floating signifiers either. They are as real and authentic as the originals since, as mirrors they reflect the true Buddhahood that emerges from the heart of the chanter. The Internet, therefore, offers a ritual practice to help achieve enlightenment, a sacred technology that liberates in several senses. That is its power and that power will affect Nichiren Buddhism in profound ways in the future.

⁹⁶ Causton 1995, 256.

⁹⁷ Jones November 27, 2001.

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