

THE SŌKA GAKKAI IN CAMBODIA

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This study began in 1999 when I was writing a broader book, *The International Expansion of a Modern Buddhist Movement: The Soka Gakkai in Southeast Asia and Australia* a work that includes chapters on research on SGI in Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Hong Kong-Macau and Australia. I heard about a budding SGI movement in Cambodia and did some extensive interviewing with Joan Anderson and other SGI officials in Tokyo who provided me with several life “Experiences” produced by Cambodian members. I published a short section in my book based on these interviews and “experiences” and vowed to one day make a trip to Cambodia to see for myself. That opportunity came in 2006.

The Japanese-based Sōka Gakkai is a Buddhist New Religious Movement that bases its teachings and practices on the 13th century Japanese scholar and monk Nichiren. Since the 1960s the Sōka Gakkai has gathered what it claims is a domestic following of eight million as well as two million foreign members in more than 190 countries and territories worldwide.¹ Sōka Gakkai International, or SGI, the international wing of Sōka Gakkai, has made significant gains in reaching out to the native populations in each of the jurisdictions it has penetrated. Its greatest successes have been in South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and in Southeast Asia, where SGI has attracted tens of thousands of ethnic Chinese followers. SGI has also done well in the United States and South America and has smaller chapters across Europe, sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania.

The subject of this brief study is the rapid growth of SGI in Cambodia. The Gakkai had existed as a small movement consisting primarily of foreigners in Cambodia before the rise of the Khmer Rouge in the mid-1970s, but then it completely disappeared. Today SGI has returned to Cambodia growing from a small handful of followers in the late 1990s to over a thousand faithful in early 2007. Cambodia remains a deeply Buddhist country with its native practices and temples fully intact, so it is interesting to ask why a Japanese-based New Religion has established a viable foothold here and to find out who is joining.

Overview of Buddhism in Cambodian History

The Khmer Rouge, who ruled Cambodia from 1975-79, took a terrible toll on traditional Cambodian Buddhist institutions and clergy. They closed and then dismantled virtually all monasteries, using the rubble for building materials. Every effort was made to destroy every aspect of Buddhism: Buddhist clergy were executed in mass numbers and libraries containing any Buddhist works were destroyed. When the Vietnamese captured Phnom Penh in 1979, there were only about 100 ordained Cambodian monks in existence, most of them in Thai or Vietnamese exile. Since then, there has been a modest recovery as temples and monasteries have reopened and growing numbers of young monks have been ordained.

¹ These numbers are provided by Sōka Gakkai International and cannot be verified independently. They are accessed in January 2007 from <<http://www.sgi.org>>.

It is apparent, however, that not all young Cambodians are returning to tradition Khmer Buddhism. When I asked groups of educated young Cambodians in Kampong Thom who worked for Japanese and other NGOs or as health workers about their re-religious practices, most replied that they had no use for traditional religious practices. Although there was no apparent Sōka Gakkai presence in this region, these young educated Cambodians very much resembled the younger and young-middle-aged educated SGI members I interviewed in Phnom Penh.

Virtually all interviewed SGI members said that their families had stopped practicing Buddhism during the disruptive Khmer Rouge years and that part of their attraction to SGI is that it is itself a Buddhist group as they felt a yearning for a Buddhist presence in their lives. The fact that Japan has such a good image in Cambodia because of the massive Japanese aid effort there was also an attractive feature.

Perspectives on SGI's Universal Growth

SGI in particular has succeeded in developing a strong following in many countries because, as Peter Clarke notes, “though a very Japanese form of Buddhism, it appears capable of universal application: no one is obliged to abandon their native culture or nationality in order to fully participate in the spiritual and cultural life of the movement.”² Soka Gakkai leaders, while maintaining the essential elements of their faith, have released their form of Buddhism from its inherently Japanese roots by skillfully adapting their religious practices to each culture that they seek to penetrate. They recruit local leaders who direct the foreign chapter free of any direct control from Tokyo, conduct all religious exercises and publish all documents in the native languages, and emphasize those traits that are important to the host culture. Sōka Gakkai spiritual leader Ikeda Daisaku³ is revered and studied in every Gakkai chapter I have visited from Staunton Virginia to Phnom Penh. This dramatic respect and loyalty to the aging Ikeda plays an important role in uniting the Soka Gakkai worldwide.

Cambodia is very different from any of the other countries where I have studied SGI. Few countries in the modern era have experienced the trauma of genocide that the Khmer Rouge inflicted on its own people, taking the lives of almost two million of the nation's eight million citizens. Virtually all of the country's doctors, teachers and intellectuals died or fled the country. Thirty years of civil war from the late 1960s to the mid-1990s brought further ruin and misery to the whole nation.

I interviewed many Cambodians from all age groups while traveling through the country in May 2006.⁴ One factor emerging from these discussions is a need for hope for a

² Peter B. Clarke, “‘Success’ and ‘Failure’: Japanese New Religions Abroad” in Peter B. Clarke, Ed., *Japanese New Religions in Global Perspective*, (Curzon Press: Richmond, Surrey, England: 2000), p. 281.

³ Ikeda Daisaku (1928-) served as the third president of the Soka Gakkai from 1960 to 1979 and is currently the Honorary President of SGI. He is the spiritual leader of Soka Gakkai constantly visiting Sōka Gakkai chapters in Japan and abroad. His many writing on Buddhism are studied by Sōka Gakkai members throughout the world.

⁴ See Daniel A. Metraux, “Cambodia Today: The Slow Road Back From the Inferno and Killing Fields Revisited” in *The Southeast Review of Asian Studies*, Vol. XXVIII, 2006. Available in hard copy and at <<http://www.uky.edu/Centers/Asia/SECAAS/Seras/2006/2006TOC.html>>.

better future. Many Cambodians admitted a sense of hopelessness in their lives. Everybody I met had lost close family members; family life had been destroyed, their homes and villages obliterated, and they felt betrayed by their own government and abandoned by the outside world. Yes, life is gradually improving for many Cambodians and on the surface everything looks quite normal, but the mental and physical scars of three decades of turmoil are very deep and very real. I was told over and over by older Cambodians that when one loses one's family, home and village, there is a sense of desperate rootlessness and instability that pervades their world views.

There is also the fact that virtually everybody in Cambodia today is quite poor. True, there is little real starvation; most young Cambodians look healthy and children are working hard in primary and secondary schools across the country, but there are very few prospects for high school and college graduates. Outside of tourist areas around Angkor Wat and Phnom Penh, there are no industries and very few jobs that lead to a meaningful career. Many educated Cambodians have no real hope for a productive professional life. This fact adds to a pervasive sense of gloom among many well-trained Cambodians, who often see no alternative but to leave their native land. They are caught in a quagmire of depression.

The Return of Sōka Gakkai to Cambodia

There was no Sōka Gakkai activity during this period of Khmer Rouge rule and Vietnamese occupation, but with the reopening of Cambodia after 1988, many Cambodians who had been living abroad during this difficult period returned and a growing number of foreigners, many of them involved in relief work, traveled to Cambodia. Two of these people were devout Sōka Gakkai members, Seng Vuthi, a Cambodian businessman who had been living in southern California during the worst years of Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese rule and Joan Anderson, a British relief worker who had been chanting for four years when she first visited in 1990. When asked in 2006 why he returned to his impoverished homeland after developing a successful life while in California, he replied, "I am Cambodian and it is my duty and resolve to do what I can to help my people recover from the disasters of the recent past."

When Anderson returned to Cambodia for a four-year stay starting in 1993, she found a group of about seven people chanting. They had begun to meet once a week to chant and study Buddhism together. Vuthi and Anderson made contact in 1994, by which time Vuthi had introduced several colleagues and members of his extended family to the practice. Several other Cambodians living in the United States and France also told their family members about the practice and encouraged them to try it. By mid-1998 there were approximately 50 actively practicing members, virtually all of them native Cambodians. There was then no organized Cambodian SGI-chapter and no discernable assistance from SGI headquarters in Tokyo other than Gohonzon⁵ brought from Bangkok and occasional study materials. Some external support came from a Cambodian committee within SGI-USA based in Los Angeles, which had been translating guidance and study material from SGI-USA and sending it to Cambodia.

During the early 1990s, however, there was some degree of Soka Gakkai activity in the country. The Sōka Gakkai Youth Division in Japan collected and sent two hundred and

⁵ The Gohonzon is a mandala said originally to have been inscribed by Nichiren (1220-1282) himself.

eighty thousand used radios in response to a request by the United Nations. The hope was that the radios would be distributed to every village to be utilized for educational purposes during the 1993 elections to let people know about the new election system and the virtues of democracy. SGI Youth in Kyushu Japan collected and sold used postcards to raise enough funds to build two elementary schools in Cambodia that were subsequently named after Sōka Gakkai founder Makiguchi Tsunesaburo. Sōka Gakkai aid was part of a massive still on-going effort by many Japanese individuals, corporations, organizations and government to provide assistance to Cambodia.

Rapid growth in membership started around 2000, so much so that in 2002 SGI built its Cultural Center in Phnom Penh and received a charter from the Cambodian government recognizing it as a legitimate religious organization. I was told in May 2006 that there were 1006 members in Cambodia, some based in the capital, but many others spread out in rural villages forming an arc around Phnom Penh. I observed very few elderly members, but a substantial number in their late 20s, 30s and early to mid 40s. There were many very young members as well, in many cases the children of older members. There are said to be some scattered communities with Soka Gakkai members in the interior of Cambodia as well, but I only interviewed members from greater Phnom Penh.

By and large, Sōka Gakkai's basic structural model has been faithfully reproduced in Cambodia. There is the usual organization with divisions and departments that separate adherents by sex and age such as a Men's Division, a Women's Division and a Youth Division. There are rituals centered in prayers (*daimoku*, *gongyō*) before the sacred object (*gohonzon*); there is the custom of "discussion meetings" (*zadankai*) as a feature to attract new members and keep the constituents cohesive; there is also the ever-present invigoration of Ikeda's leadership.

SGI Cambodia like most of its counterparts in Japan and elsewhere is a distinctly lay movement that works without the participation of any priests or formalized temple.⁶ There are no salaried workers except one office manager. Everybody works on a voluntary basis and follow active everyday lives outside of Sōka Gakkai but meet on a frequent basis either at the cultural center or in smaller community gatherings.

Interviews with SGI Cambodia members

During my visit to Cambodia I visited the SGI Cultural Center in Phnom Penh where I attended various SGI functions and interviewed several SGI leaders. Overall I interviewed about 20 SGI members and read perhaps as many printed "experiences." The clearest statement of SGI objectives came from one of its leaders at the culture center: "We have three key principles: To develop a sense of compassion, to relieve the suffering of others, and to help others find happiness. Each one of our own human revolutions (our individual transformations of character) helps to make Cambodia a happier country."

The Sōka Gakkai insists that the very core of its Buddhism is the "human revolution" (*ningen kakumei*) that the believer will experience through his or her deep faith and practice. The practitioner will become stronger, more self-confident, and better able to achieve his or

⁶ The Singapore Soka Association is the only exception to this rule. There is a small temple and priest to meet the spiritual needs of older members who grew up with a tradition of Buddhist priests and temples.

her goals. SGI-C member Che Boramy describes what happened to her when she experienced this “revolution:” “Although I chanted very little each morning and evening, I began to feel some form of relief [from earlier “sadness” and pain during the Khmer Rouge era] within myself. I overcame my inherent shyness and became a stronger person.” She credits her religious practice with bringing her new close friendships, a new and closer relationship with her family, and, most importantly, a sense of optimism. She was no longer without any direction in life.

It was a collective meeting with five young middle-aged school teachers at the SGI Culture Center that told me most about the spirit and drive of SGI in Cambodia and provided clues as to why SGI has begun to develop roots in Cambodian society. The following is a composite of the interviews with these teachers using their own words. They all proudly provided their names, but I have chosen to retain their anonymity.

Teacher 1 (Young Woman, Primary School Teacher): I was introduced to SGI by a friend who is a member. We Cambodians live in a highly stressful and conflicted society. Nobody trusts anybody and there is a sense of rage everywhere. But we cannot continue living in a world like this. Since joining I have chanted nam-myoho-renge-kyo for many hundreds of hours. I have found a melting of old hatreds in my heart and a growing sense of compassion for others. I have found so many like-minded people in SGI—there is a new spirit here of people genuinely wanting to help and care for others. None of us have much money, but together we can forge a new nation—we have a real sense of hope for a better future. I want to teach these values to my students.

Teacher 2 (middle aged male school principal): When the Khmer Rouge genocide occurred in my boyhood, people became desperate and each person had to fight for his own survival. The whole sense of community collapsed. Everybody was suffering and we all lost our families. We had to struggle on our own to survive and we learned to trust no one. Life was little more than a daily struggle just to survive. We really saw each other with bad eyes. But Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism teaches us to live in the present, to overcome the suffering of the past. I want to train a new generation of young Cambodians to love and respect each other.

Teacher 3 (middle-aged woman, primary school teacher): I was influenced to join this Buddhism from an aunt who had learned about it in France. As a form of Mahayana Buddhism, it is superior to the Buddhism that we traditionally practice here in Cambodia. There are fewer rules about how we are supposed to lead our lives and a much greater emphasis on compassion. The true Law of Life is that people need to have compassion for each other—which is something really lacking in Cambodia today. I used to be impatient for change and always focused on my own misery, but now I realize that everybody in Cambodia is suffering and I find so much more satisfaction in life helping my students. We are doing good because of our fervent chanting for peace!

Teacher 4 (Young Woman, primary school teacher): We learn through this Buddhism that we have to take responsibility for our actions. If we just all sit around considering our own misery, nothing will ever change in my country, but as a teacher I can teach my students how to help themselves and help others. We have to start somewhere. Many foreigners have come here to help us, but the truth is that we must learn to work together and help ourselves.

I even got my own parents to join—and they have become far more communicative and compassionate in their nature.

Teacher 5 (Young female primary school teacher): It used to be that everybody I knew was in a bad mood. Everybody was obsessed with his or her own misery and with their moving ahead in life on their own. I want to teach my 30 to 40 students to be considerate of others....I don't preach this Buddhism in class, but recently two students came to chant with me.

These interviews reflect themes found in other interviews as well as published "experiences." Wherever one goes in Cambodia, there is a pervasive sense of despair. But, at least in the minds of SGI members interviewed by this writer, there has been a real reversal of this process. There is a true sense of hope that things have already gotten better and will get a lot better in the future. It is a slow and arduous process, but by working together with other Cambodians, they can achieve a better life.

This very strong sense of empowerment centers on the individual as an active actor in history and life. It is a "this-worldly" orientation that emphasizes self-improvement and a "do-it-yourself" attitude that is a common theme in Soka Gakkai doctrines taught everywhere. There is an emphasis on the centrality of the individual, that he/she has the power to change his/her own destiny through one's own actions and that one must assume responsibility for one's life.

The need for empowerment

Cambodians need a lot more than foreign aid to revive their country. Foreign medical supplies, money, and school books are useful, but to survive Cambodians need to begin believing in themselves again. They need to put the past behind them, begin working together to rebuild their lives, families, and communities. They need a strong dose of self-confidence that working on their own they can succeed as a culture and country. They need to learn to trust each other and have faith that they can move away from the past towards a more promising future. So often Cambodians today seem to be walking around in a daze, preoccupied with the question of sheer survival.

The key to Sōka Gakkai Buddhism, as it is with much of Japanese Buddhism, is an emphasis with the here and now. Bad karma has brought suffering to the world, but closely adhering to the precepts of Buddhism can help practitioners develop a better life almost immediately. This is especially true in the form of Nichiren Buddhism sponsored by the Gakkai. Many interviewees and "experience" writers in Cambodia agree that changing their karma is the key to their practice and that karma changed in this life can bring great rewards, both tangible and intangible.

SGI Cambodia members remark that Cambodia suffered terribly from the thrust of negative karma during the latter half of the twentieth century; they further believe that their chanting and community work have allowed them to move beyond the horrors that afflicted their country. Members noted that they felt that chanting gives them more control over their destinies and by changing one's own karma, they can gradually remove the overwhelmingly dark karma that has brought such misery to Cambodia. No matter how bad things were in the past, the SGI faithful in Cambodia see a bright future now for those who demonstrate strong

faith, work hard for their own career development, demonstrate compassion, and offer a helping hand to others.

The key is a positive attitude towards life and a sense that they can achieve any goal because every person is master of his own destiny. Adversity is caused by bad karma, but because of the power of this Buddhism can help one overcome this barrier, there is hope for happiness and success in life even for the most wretched Cambodian.

SGI Cambodia members like those interviewed above feel a sense of real liberation. They have freed themselves from the stress, frustration, anger and mental deprivation of the past. They may not be that better off materially than some of their non-SGI member peers (although most members I met had steady jobs, were well educated and lived better than most other Cambodians), they demonstrate a very strong sense of self-confidence. They have clear goals in life and are fully confident that they can attain them within the scope of a normal life. As one member noted, becoming an SGI member was like emerging out of a cold dark tunnel into the bright sunshine

Fulfilling a Spiritual Void

Another theme evident in some interviews and “experiences” is that Sōka Gakkai Buddhism found a greater relevancy in the minds of some believers. I was often told that the old forms of Cambodian Buddhism, the “religion of the elders,” were not terribly relevant to the needs and desires of young Cambodians. They claim to have found little solace through their traditional Buddhism and were attracted to this new Buddhism because of its emphasis on individual empowerment and its clear explanations of the causes of life’s tribulations.

A Sense of Community

Another factor leading to the success of SGI Cambodia, as is the case in other Southeast Asian countries, is that Soka Gakkai is very skilled in fostering a sense of community – important especially in Cambodia where the sense of community was so badly shattered by three decades of civil war. The concept that the Sōka Gakkai in Cambodia is every member’s “extended family” is extremely important. One sees in every interview and “experience” that the heart of the movement is a system of nurturing where each member is in essence responsible for the health and welfare of other members. The following statement from another primary school teacher, a young woman, places the important sense of community into clear context:

Our culture traditionally honored family and community, but the Khmer Rouge ripped apart our families and destroyed our communities. I once felt alone in the world and felt a sense of anger that I should suffer in this way. But SGI-C is all about a community--I now have genuinely kind friends who care about me and who let me care about them. The truly beautiful thing about this Buddhism is that it teaches us about understanding others and caring about our country. I remember so well when this country had no peace, but now we devote a lot of our time together chanting for peace. It is this sense of solidarity and true companionship that I like most about SGI-C.”

She made reference to Nichiren’s famous 1260 tract, *Risshō Ankokuron* [On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land] that is in a talk by Japan-based SGI President Ikeda Daisaku and published in a SGI-C brochure. The passage states: “If you

care anything about your personal security, you should first of all pray for order and tranquility throughout the four quarters of the land, should you not?" She added, "Our daily prayers for peace will radiate out from our hearts and cross the land and will help end the awful nightmare our country has experienced."

SGI's tradition across Southeast Asia of forming small community chapters is a vital part of its Cambodian operation. Members of these local groups often meet in each other's homes thereby creating a tightly bonded group of members who socialize together on frequent basis. The new member of SGI therefore finds a ready-made group of friends that can become a very important source of community strength for the individual.

Cambodian SGI members feel emboldened to work hard for themselves and their country, as is evident from the following "experience" proudly handed to me by Neth Vorleak, the office manager of the Phnom Penh cultural center. Neth was born in a peaceful and prosperous Cambodia in 1959, but tragically lost both her parents and other family members. She survived the harsh life in a Khmer Rouge commune and eventually moved to Phnom Penh where she worked in a government office and met Joan Anderson who introduced her to Nichiren Buddhism. After some hesitation she started chanting and soon found herself in a good paying job. She credits Nichiren Buddhism and her life as an SGI member for releasing her from the bondage of her earlier life:

Throughout my years of faith, I have realized that this practice advocates that women are not inferior or unclean beings [as found in our traditional Buddhism]. Nichiren declared the absolute equality of men and women in realizing the innate Buddhahood nature within our lives. This is an encouraging fact for women like me, especially for the women of Cambodia today.

This practice of Nichiren Buddhism has also made me realize that I want to work for the peace and happiness of all Cambodian people....I totally agree with what my favorite Gosho, "On Establishing the Correct Teaching," states: "When a nation becomes disordered, it is the spirits that first show signs of rampancy. Because the spirits become rampant, all the people of the nation become disordered." Another passage from the same Gosho reads: "If you care anything about your personal security, you should first of all pray for order and tranquility throughout the four quarters of the land, should you not?" As such, I am very determined to strengthen my faith, and share Nichiren Buddhism with more people in Cambodia, so as to enable more people to practice this wonderful Mystic Law and enable true peace and security in Cambodia.

Proselytization

Another factor in SGI Cambodia's successful start is that it has not tried to grow too big too fast. Today the Sōka Gakkai in Japan as well as SGI chapters abroad focus entirely on building a smaller viable organization of dedicated members. Proselytization most often takes place by members talking to friends, neighbors and colleagues. Typically, one family member will join SGI-C for whatever set of reasons. His or her rapid increase in happiness, health, self-confidence or a major improvement in job prospects convince others in the family, typically parents, spouses, and other siblings to join. A young member will then persuade her best friend of the benefits of this Buddhism and then the friend will spread the faith to others in her family. I heard of some cases where a member would invite a friend,

colleague, or relative to a SGI-C meeting. On occasion the guest might decide to try the new faith, and so on. Nevertheless, it takes some daring to convert from a native to a foreign faith, even if the base religion is the same. As one member noted, "It is not so easy to convert to Nichiren Buddhism, as it involves facing up to one's own weaknesses and taking responsibility for one's life."

Of course, not all new members stay or maintain their enthusiasm. There is a long history of defections and drop-outs, but the fact that SGI-Cambodia grew from only a small handful of members when I first investigated them in 1999 to well over a thousand today is evidence that many new members do stay. The group of members that I interviewed in Phnom Penh consisted of men and women in their 30s, 40s and 50s who had been members for 6 to 12 or more years.

SGI's Friendly Ties with the Cambodian Government

Another key reason for SGI's success in Cambodia appears to be its friendly ties with the Cambodian government. SGI Cambodia leaders stress the importance of these ties, noting that these "good feelings" date back at least to the early 1990s when the Sōka Gakkai in Japan donated the 300,000 radios and other funds to Cambodia. The goal of SGI Cambodia is to win the respect of government and community leaders as a worthy organization because of its active service and its participation in community and patriotic events.

In 2002 when SGI opened its Phnom Penh culture center and received its government charter, Sōka Gakkai representatives from Tokyo, led by Soka Gakkai Vice-President Takehiko Sato met then-Cambodian King Sihanouk and Queen Norodom Monineath Sihanouk at the Royal Palace. The delegates presented the King with a letter from Ikeda Daisaku and a commemorative photograph of Ikeda's meeting with the King in Beijing in 1975. In his letter, Mr. Ikeda acknowledged that the King's strenuous efforts on behalf of the people throughout modern Cambodia's tumultuous years deserved high admiration and respect. Mr. Ikeda closed his letter with a vow to make further efforts to help foster Cambodian youth and to contribute to the country's resurgence and development.⁷

Concluding Notes

SGI attempts to provide members with a clear spiritual package that is easy to understand, but complex enough to require continued study. Its well-coordinated organizational structure and socialization process brings members together frequently, helping thereby to create a sense of belonging. SGI also attempts to instill a sense of confidence in many members through group affirmation and support. These positive feelings, it seems, further ensures their loyalty to the group and to the organization that is liberating them from the horrors of seemingly endless civil war.

Members were virtually unanimous that the quality of their lives had improved greatly after joining SGI Cambodia. Most said they had become calmer, more self-confident and happier in their work and relationships. Significant numbers said they had become more optimistic and were better able to make clear and informed decisions. Virtually everyone interviewed said they had chanted to realize a goal or set of goals, and they had achieved many of their desired results. Several members said chanting gave them more control over

⁷ Soka Gakkai Newsletter, 25 May 2002.

their destinies and positively affected the lives of their neighbors. By changing their own karma as well as that of others, members felt they were contributing not only to the betterment of their own lives, but also to the betterment of their respective communities and country.

SGI stresses that each member has a strong responsibility not only for his/her destiny, but also that of fellow Cambodians. They can take their personal and their nation's destinies into their own hands and they are no longer dependent on other people, authorities, or religions for their survival. This feeling is very liberating for members, for it gives them a whole new worldview and a new way of leading their lives.