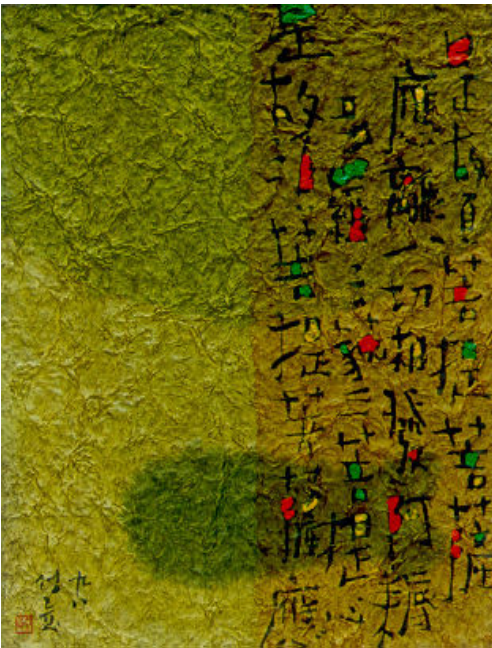


Book Review

Journal of Global Buddhism 7 (2006): 8 - 14



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*I*t must be ten years ago, by coincidence I met a fellow from my school days. He was known to be a rigorous handball player, tough and uncompromising. At some point in our conversation he mentioned that he had read bits of my work on Buddhism, as he himself now is a practicing Buddhist. This was completely unexpected. Adding to my surprise, he explained that he had joined the Soka Gakkai, chanted “*Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo*” every morning and served as contact person of a Soka Gakkai regional chapter. How remote this was from what I had known of him before. I also noted the change in his manner—his style of speech was softened, and his body language was smoother. As we departed I remained slightly perplexed by these changes and by the obvious impact of Soka Gakkai on him.

Richard Hughes Seager's book is a broad and well researched guide to reducing this kind of perplexity. Seager, a historian of Religions at Hamilton College, New York, and author of *Buddhism in America* (1999), traveled to Japan, Singapore, Brazil, and sites in the U.S. to gather information and develop a picture of the movement. For critics, the Soka Gakkai (SG), a Buddhist group originating in Japan in the 1930s, is a new religious movement embroiled in financial and political controversies and commanded by a messianic leader. Though it is one of the many Asian spiritualities much heralded in Western countries, SG has often been seen as quite distinct from other forms of Buddhism, sometimes being regarded as a "foreign cult," far removed from either traditional Western religious sensibilities or from forms of Buddhism emphasizing meditation. *Encountering the Dharma* takes on these issues of otherness and the allegations — founded and unfounded — against the organization, as well as the appeal and success of the SG in post-war Japan. Seager also aims to provide an informed impression of Daisaku Ikeda, the movement's current president, leader, and teacher. Finally, he attempts to trace the trajectories of the movement's globalization and adaptation to local settings. He achieves these aims and more.

Seager has a passion to write and give his research an entertaining narrative tone. The book tells at least three interwoven stories: the rapid social and national change in twentieth century Japan; the emergence, explosive growth, and globalization of SG; and the change of the narrator's attitude from skeptical interest, through doubt, to appreciation. The stories provide accounts of the modern history of Japan, starting with the 1868 Meiji Restoration; the internal changes the once tiny movement has gone through; and the personal

trauma the author himself faced with the recent passing away of his beloved wife. Seager masters balancing his personal narrative with the descriptive and analytic elements of the text. He skillfully gives voice to his interviewees, from ordinary devotees to top ranking members, and it is often they who tell the story and offer valuable insights.

The story unfolds well, arranged in eight chapters sandwiched between a brief preface and epilogue. Chapter one sees Seager during his first visit to Tokyo, Japan. Longtime American SG member Rob Eppsteiner and translator Rie lead him through the puzzling new environment and arrange visits and interviews. Seager has the privilege of meeting Ikeda and describes his critical stance towards Japanese nationalism and exceptionalism. Next is information on Nichiren, the uncompromising thirteenth century critic and reformer of Japanese schools of Buddhism. This historical exploration provides the background for understanding the centrality of the *Lotus Sutra* and the chant “*Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo*.” This mantra, which is the sutra’s title in Japanese, is held to embody the essence of the teaching. According to Nichiren and the evolving Nichiren traditions, the invocation of the title forms the central spiritual practice in this age of degeneration (Jap. *mappo*); it is the only remaining path to attain enlightenment.

The next chapters introduce the leading figures and religious concepts of SG. In 1930, teacher and Tokyo school administrator Tsunesaburo Makiguchi founded the Value Creating Education Society. To foster values, happiness and benefit — not necessarily religious in tone — was of primary interest to Makiguchi in view of Japan increasing militarization and its entry into World War II. His resistance to

venerating the emperor and State Shinto brought him into conflict with the imperial government. Makiguchi was imprisoned and died a year before the war ended. His successor was Josei Toda who transformed the disbanded group of educators into a mass movement and strengthened ties with the priestly Nichiren Shoshu sect. The SG grew rapidly in post-war Japan, as Toda emphasized the transformative force of Buddhism in culture and politics. During this time (1950s) SG's evangelical style of proselytizing emerged. Youth divisions and other organisational units carried out campaigns to empower voiceless people such as working-class men and women, small-business owners, shopkeepers, and housewives. "Often traditional in background and instinct, these people had been displaced by war and rapid social change. They were also neglected by big government, unions, and business and plagued by the *kyodatsu* condition [state of post-war depression]. To these people the Gakkai gave meaning, motive, and community [...]" (p. 78). Toda and his people worked to raise consciousness and to engage actively in the transformation of life on both individual and social levels.

Among the activists working with Toda was Daisaku Ikeda (b. 1928), Toda's successor and third president from 1960 to present day. Ikeda promoted SG's outreach from Japan with his journeys to the Asian mainland, the Americas and Europe from 1960 onwards. Consequently, in 1975 Ikeda established the globally operating wing of SG, Soka Gakkai International (SGI). Ikeda promoted his ideas and the ideal of "Buddhist Humanism," working for reconciliation with mainland Asian nations and emphasizing the importance of creating peace through culture and education. During the 1970s Ikeda

encouraged members to moderate their aggressive missionizing style and to adapt Nichiren Buddhism to local settings. A spirit of openness, egalitarianism, and democratization pervaded the SG, embodying and giving new life to the idea of self-empowerment. In 1991, these liberalizing developments led to the split between the Japan-oriented, priestly Nichiren Shoshu and the lay-based, globalized SGI. The conservative priesthood excommunicated the SGI, depriving it of its central place of pilgrimage, the Taisekiki temple. It also stopped issuing *gohonzons* (Jap., object of worship) to SGI members. Now standing on its own feet, the SGI developed new religious places of central importance, like the Makiguchi Hall in Tokyo, and legitimated the prime objects of worship through its Tokyo headquarters and through another Nichiren high priest.

The final two chapters provide informative snap-shots of SG's global outreach and adaptive localization. Seager interviewed rank-and-file members, children, and leading officials in Singapore, the U.S., and Brazil. In all the different settings, he observed ambitions both to preserve the essential spirituality and intention of SGI, shaped in Japan by Japanese, and also to form new modes of expression adapted to new cultures. In the U.S. SGI has succeeded in attracting African Americans and Hispanics, in contrast to most Buddhist groups and traditions. Ideas of empowerment, community, patriotism, and the liberalizing spirit of inner transformation generate interest in this movement. Similarly, in urbanized Singapore the movement is constituted overwhelmingly by Chinese people attracted to the movement by its dynamism and ideals such as optimism, happiness, personal empowerment, and social responsibility. In Brazil the story of adaptation and success is

linked to stimulation of self-esteem, hope, responsibility, and achieving personal ends. “Benefits from practice are inconspicuous but highly tangible — improvements in speech, conduct, and grooming, all of which contribute to their sense of well-being, their happiness, and their upward mobility.” (p. 192)

Seager is a talented writer and provides vivid impressions of his encounters, interviewees, and journeys. The book contains end notes, a helpful glossary of Japanese terms, a bibliography, and a detailed index. The narrative style, containing autobiographical elements, might have prevented Seager from attempting more analytical achievements and theoretical insights. Since Seager is trained as a comparative historian of religions, I wondered why he did not analytically deepen the general topic of the preservation of tradition and innovative adoption of a transplanted religion. How much “Japaneseness” is possible in Brazil or the U.S., and at what point will the SGI become co-opted by society and deprived of its “empowering spirit” as interviewees called it? What can we infer from other globalized religions with regard to the tension of maintenance and acculturation? Also, Seager classified the SG as an expression of “Buddhist modernism,” applying a term from the late Buddhologist Heinz Bechert (p. 32). What exactly, however, does he imply by “modern” or “modernist” in the case of Japan, and does this apply also for the U.S., Singapore, and Brazil? Furthermore, modernity has not only the supposedly positive side of happiness, freedom and liberty, but also the dark “under-side” of suppression, mass-exploitation, and gargantuan world wars. Seager does not explore an under-side of “Buddhist modernism,” however. Finally, Seager convincingly shows that much of the

dynamism and appeal of the SGI is related to the idea of personal and communal empowerment. This is an important point and presents a new perspective on the movement, counting about twelve million members in the early twenty-first century. It would have been worthwhile to compare the approach of the SGI with other grass-roots movements of empowerment, such as Ambedkar Buddhism in west India and Christian Liberation Theology in South and Latin America. What is specific to the SGI and what is common to such movements of empowerment? And, do not religious empowering movements inevitably violate the separation between religion and politics, a reproach critics voice against SG in Japan?

Despite these minor reservations, *Encountering the Dharma* successfully attains its goal of stripping away the remoteness and strangeness of Soka Gakkai spirituality for those unfamiliar with it. It makes intelligible the appeal of the movement, with its central teaching of empowerment of self and others for achieving happiness. My perplexity encountering my old schoolmate and his new religious orientation mirrors how we ignore the ongoing flow of change in religions, persons, and perceptions. Seager's book admirably remedies this condition with respect to Soka Gakkai.