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The Re-invention of Nichiren in an Era of Globalization: Remapping the Sacred

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R e s e a r c h A r t i c l e

The Re-invention of Nichiren in an Era of Globalization: Remapping the Sacred

Sor-Ching Low

Sōka Gakkai is a do-it-yourself religion. It's your own practice. It is practical for today's busy life—just chant the title of Lotus Sutra—nothing could be more reduced than that. No need for proxy.

(A member from the Young Men's Division, SGI, Hong Kong) ¹

Within the historical continuum that Buddhism has travelled as it moved from one continent to another, it has often astonished us with its capacity for accommodating the different cultures that it encountered, becoming almost one with it as it took on the color and tenor of its adopted home. All this can be readily seen in Buddhism's trajectory across East Asia where the Buddha's teachings have developed into vastly disparate and localized sects. Yet, for individual Buddhist sects that aspire to a global presence, the challenge is one of presenting a single, universal message to a pluralistic world with competing political and economic interests. More often than not, this requires a radical remapping of the religious landscape and a re-interpretation of its traditional past in order for it to make it a mass appeal beyond its borders. But such radical remapping is also, often, a matter of deliberate choice making. Of interest in this essay are the strategies that the lay Buddhist movement Sōka Gakkai (Value Creation Society) uses to remap itself on the global landscape as it moves away from its locative origins in Japan.

Though it started out as a lay movement tied to temple Buddhism, Sōka Gakkai has since made a leap from its locative origins to become a diasporic religion with an extensive global network, and remapped the Buddhist landscape in ways that this essay will explore. Since its inception in post-war Japan, it has gained phenomenal success with 12 million members in 192 countries and though less visible than Zen in America, it has a presence in America with more than 200,000 members.²

This essay will examine how this lay movement with its strong historical roots in traditional temple Buddhism re-invents and remaps itself on the global landscape. After all, there was a time—after the schism from the priesthood Nichiren Shōshū³ in 1991—when its survival had

¹ Interviews held with SGI members in Hong Kong, June 23, 2007.

² All estimates of its membership worldwide are provided by SGI Public Relations, Tokyo, 2008. Also see its official website: <http://www.sgi.org>

³ Nichiren Shōshū, which is one of several sects within the Nichiren school, was founded when Nichiren's disciple, Nikkō (1246-1333) built the sect's head temple, Taisekiji, near Mount Fuji. What followed was a succession of head priests dating back to Nikkō. The current head priest, Abe Nikken, is part of this lineage and thus claims spiritual and administrative authority. In my conversation with Daniel Metraux, Nov 8, 2009, he pointed out that the current view of SGI is to downplay this association.

seemed tenuous. Yet, since 1991, it has charted a new path that has taken it across the globe in unprecedented ways and, in certain continents such as Europe, it has seen exponential growth with an increase from 15,000 in 1991 to 71,000 members in 2009, and in Korea with up to one million members. The strategy of Sōka Gakkai in remapping the Buddhist landscape can be seen in three ways: 1. an artful hermeneutical revisioning of key concepts in Nichiren Buddhism; 2. a process of decentering the traditional center in Japan; and 3. a remapping of the sacred that attempts to blur the classical divide between the sacred and the profane. This three-fold strategy has enabled Sōka Gakkai to extend itself globally without compromising its religious identity as a lay Buddhist group rooted in Nichiren Buddhism.

The historical context for this can be located in the schism between the lay movement and its parent organization, Nichiren Shōshū, whose relationship is, to some degree, analogous to that of a parent-child. This 800-year old practice of “temple Buddhism,” where sacred power is vested in the priesthood and in the temple, came to be at odds with the practice of a lay organization focused on global outreach.⁴ By choosing to look at Sōka Gakkai’s strategies and growth as a global movement within its historical ties with temple Buddhism, I hope to make clear that this process of hermeneutical revisioning and remapping is part of a historical process of re-interpretation within tradition. It is my contention that the unmooring of the lay Buddhist group from the traditional temple Buddhism represented by Nichiren Shōshū may have expedited the former towards its ambitions of global proselytization. At the same time, its rupture from its parent organization also forced a process of hermeneutical revisioning and a process of decentering that enabled the lay movement to proliferate beyond Japan.

This radical turn in its relations with temple Buddhism also led to a strategic blurring of boundaries between what was traditionally deemed sacred and secular. This hermeneutical revisioning, which began in the 1970s and intensified through the 1990s, could be seen in speeches by Daisaku Ikeda, the third and current honorary president of Sōka Gakkai⁵ as well as in publications by the group. In this hermeneutical revisioning, the temple and its custodians, the priesthood, are systematically undermined and the seemingly profane is reinterpreted as sacred. The roles of clergy and laity are similarly redefined. Indeed, Sōka Gakkai appears to have taken to heart J.Z. Smith’s reminder that, “There is nothing that is inherently sacred or profane. These are not substantive categories, but rather situational or relational categories, mobile boundaries which shift according to the map being employed” (Smith, 1982: 55).

There appears, however, to be two contradictory strands in Sōka Gakkai’s strategies: the lay movement wants to assert that its teachings cannot be understood outside of the Nichiren tradition while, in the same breath, claim that its essence is transcultural. Too much of the former will undercut its own claim as the true upholder of Nichiren’s teachings as opposed to Nichiren Shōshū, but to reach the global mass, it must also dilute its particularity and historical roots so that it blends with multiple local cultures. As one of the key religious figures to emerge from the Kamakura Japan (1180-1333), Nichiren (1222-82) wanted to make

⁴ The priesthood-lay movement schism must be placed within the Nichiren history of intra-sect contestations. See Stone (1994).

⁵ Ikeda is the current president of Sōka Gakkai International, formed in 1975 and an offshoot of Sōka Gakkai, which was founded in 1930 by Makiguchi.

Mahayana Buddhism readily available to the people and, thereby, simplified its practices. He taught a doctrine of exclusive devotion to the Lotus Sutra and stressed as a primary practice the chanting of its *daimoku* or title, “*Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō*.” Sōka Gakkai, as a lay movement centered on Nichiren’s teachings, has thus declared itself its authoritative interpreter in modern times.

As this essay contends, Ikeda’s strategy relies on an artful stripping down of Nichiren’s teaching to its essence and revealing them to be no different from the more humanistic—and universal—ideals of culture, philosophy and peace. At the core of Nichiren’s teaching is his best-known tract *Rissho Ankoku Ron* (Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land). Written in 1260, it works on the premise that when Buddhist ideals and governance are aligned, peace and a better world will ensue. A second issue, related to the former, is Nichiren’s vision that someday, a great ordination platform (*kaidan*) would be erected by “imperial edict and shogunal decree,” serving as material expression of the fusion of Buddhism and worldly rule, and the conversion of the sovereign and his people to Nichiren’s teachings (Stone, 2003: 194). For Sōka Gakkai to uphold its claim as the more viable upholder of their founder’s legacy, it must remain faithful to these two aspects of Nichiren’s teachings, and further, in light of its criticism of the temple as not keeping with the times, to interpret them in such a way as to make the teachings relevant and practical for the modern world.

The question of whether this hermeneutical innovation has resulted in a dilution of its religious identity is a point of contention among scholars of this religion.⁶ Some scholars have concluded that this is a move towards greater secularization, but this essay contends that far from becoming secular, Sōka Gakkai has re-asserted its religious identity by re-defining what is “religion” and what is “sacred” and “secular” in the modern global age. Its radical distillation of Nichiren to its essence allows for it to take on the form and color of the different global communities that it enters. In this way, Sōka Gakkai sees itself as pushing forward its program of *kosenruffu* (widely declare and spread Buddhism). Interviews with Sōka Gakkai groups in Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong show that Nichiren’s teachings have been remapped through a rhetoric of culture, peace and education. Before delving into Sōka Gakkai’s remapping strategies, a brief revisit of its place within the history of Japanese religions and, in particular, Nichiren history, is in order.

Nichiren (1222-1282)

Medieval Japan revered the Lotus Sutra, with its message of universal salvation that “all shall achieve the Buddha Way,” as the highest of the Buddha’s teachings reconciling all sects and sutras within itself. Nichiren believed that he was living in the latter day of the law (*mappō*) and that in this final Dharma age only the Lotus Sutra was capable of granting salvation to a degenerate people. As he taught in the *Rissho Ankokuron*, which was submitted to *Bakufu* (warrior government) in 1260, it was the Kamakura Shogunate’s neglect of the *Lotus Sutra* that had brought down on the people the calamities of his day: drought, famine, earthquakes, and the threat of invasion by the Mongols. Conversely, Nichiren held that the spread of exclusive faith in the *Lotus Sutra*—“the one true vehicle”—would banish such disasters and manifest this

⁶ Whether Sōka’s strategies were an effect of Buddhist modernism or of a desire to modernize so as to align better with modern religious sensibilities is a matter much debated. See Dawson, 2001.

world as Buddha Land, an ideal realm (Yampolsky, 1990: 40). Calling for exclusive commitment to the *Lotus Sutra*, Nichiren and his successors practiced *shakubuku* (lit. bend or break), a traditional Buddhist style of refuting errors through vigorous debate, and submitting memorials to government authorities.⁷

A key doctrine undergirding Nichiren's teaching is the Three Great Secret Laws (*sandai hihō shō*) based on the mandala known as the *gohonzon*, the chanting of the *daimoku* (*Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō*), and the high sanctuary (*kaidan*) which is reverently called the *honmon no kaidan*. Nichiren's followers vacillated between an interpretation of the *kaidan* as abstract symbol and as a concrete ordination platform. Among those of his disciples who interpreted it as a concrete embodiment of their mentor's hopes, debates raged over whose head temple would house the eventual *kaidan* structure. For others it became an abstraction of Nichiren's hopes, for as Stone notes, "because the likelihood of realizing this goal seemed so remote, a corollary interpretation emerged in which the *honmon no kaidan* referred simply to that place, wherever it might be, where the follower of Nichiren embraces faith to the *Lotus Sutra* and chants *Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō*" (Stone, 2003: 197). This reading is also closely linked to Nichiren's claim that wherever one chants the *daimoku* of the *Lotus Sutra* is the Buddha land (Stone, 2003: 197). Under the rule of the Tokugawa shogunate in the early modern period (1603-1868), when religious proselytizing was severely restricted, this abstract reinterpretation of the *kaidan* became the predominant one. Not until the Meiji period (1868-1912), with its radical restructuring of Japan's government, would the ideal of a *kaidan* re-emerge as a concrete possibility (Stone, 2003: 197). In a statement attributed to Nichiren:

When the ruler's dharma [obō] becomes one with Buddha-Dharma and the Buddha-dharma [buppō] is united with the ruler's dharma, so that the ruler and his ministers all uphold the three great secret Dharmas of the origin teaching....then surely an imperial edict and a shogunal decree will be handed down, to seek out the most superlative site, resembling the Pure Land of Sacred Vulture Peak [where the *Lotus Sutra* was expounded], and there to erect the ordination platform. (Quoted in Stone, 2003: 196)⁸

For Nichiren, who was marginalized during his lifetime and whose religious community existed outside the official system of ordination, the *kaidan* thus carried and embodied his hopes of eventual official recognition (Stone, 2003: 197). This flexibility in interpreting the *kaidan* and the willingness to see the *kaidan* as symbolic significance rather than material reality within Nichiren doctrinal debates is an important point that we would return to in the essay as it would later influence the lay movement in its interpretation of the *kaidan*.

1. Revisioning Nichiren under Sōka Gakkai

Sōka Gakkai's founder Makiguchi Tsunesaburo (1871-1944) set the tone of independence and defiance when he resisted wartime government efforts to demand all citizens to enshrine the

⁷ Correspondence with SGI Tokyo in 2008 clarifies Nichiren's stance on *shakubuku* further: although Nichiren emphasizes *Shakubuku* during the Mappō age, he does not deny the use of the softer method known as *shōju*. See page (6) 12 of this article for SGI's definition of *shakubuku* today.

⁸ See also Kiyoaki Murata, *Japan's New Buddhism*. New York & Tokyo: Walker/Weatherhill, 1969.

talismans of the imperial Ise Shrine. Makiguchi was arrested, along with other leaders of the society, and died in prison the following year.

The resolute stance against the wartime government and its warring activities, and the tragic death as a consequence, would come to define the tenor of the lay movement.

When Toda Josei (1900-1958) became the second president of the Sōka Gakkai in the new era of participatory democracy in post-war Japan, he saw a way of materializing Nichiren's vision of a state-sponsored *kaidan*. Under him, the term "kōsen-rufu" was redefined as active proselytizing, "*shakubuku* one by one," and the function and roles of Nichiren Shōshū and the lay movement were also recast differently. In a speech designed to distance Sōka from previous and more recent interpretations of the Nichiren's teachings,⁹ he said:

The priesthood's leadership methods and ways of conducting religious affairs in the past will probably be insufficient to bring the True law to the ordinary people of today and tomorrow. Furthermore, the clergy is too limited in number to provide leadership for large numbers of believers. To compensate for these weaknesses, a large lay organization is essential. An organization of lay believers is the most modern and ideal means to carry true Buddhism into all phases of society. Furthermore, such an organization can naturally and efficiently accelerate the pace at which the true faith can be carried to the world (quoted in Metraux, 1992: 327)¹⁰

In the above speech, Toda's critique of the priesthood was more than implicit: the ways of the priesthood was outmoded and not equipped for modernity; it cannot meet the needs of its growing number of believers; and consequently, only a lay organization, namely Sōka Gakkai, can bridge this gap, and further carry the faith to the world.

Global Shakubuku

In 1960, a young Ikeda, tasked with fulfilling the vision of his predecessor and upholding Nichiren's teachings, inaugurated what would be the beginning of a global mission to spread Nichiren Buddhism. His journey to the West included stops in the USA, Canada, and Brazil. In undertaking this first mission to the West, Ikeda must have been aware of the Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki's success in proselytizing Zen Buddhism in the United States. The warm reception of Zen Buddhism in America could only have further encouraged his *kosenrufu* program of spreading Nichiren's teaching. Abroad, he urged members to assimilate to the local culture. Speaking to pioneer members in the United States, most of whom were Japanese women, he urged them to shed particular ways of dressing that would make them stand out, to learn to drive cars, to master English; in short, to assimilate to their new environment (Seager, 2006: 89). Through these members, *shakubuku* in America would begin. Similarly, in his trips to Asia, seeds were planted for the first generation of members to begin their *shakubuku*. In 1962, Ikeda made a speech that drew a parallel to Nichiren's *Rissho Ankoku-ron*.

⁹ The most recent was Tanaka Chigaku (1861-1931) who introduced a nationalistic reading into Nichiren's vision where he believed that the underlying purpose of the Lotus Sutra and Nichiren's teaching was to explicate the Japanese national essence. For further discussion on this, see Edwin Lee, 1975 1.

¹⁰ See also Daisaku Ikeda, 1976, *The Human Revolution*, Vol. 3, p. 42.

All people in the world desire the tranquility of their land; they wish to be happy and peaceful throughout their whole lives. Therefore, many philosophers, thinkers and leaders have made their efforts for the achievement of this state. This is the reason for the growth of religion. But disasters did not cease, wars broke out, and misfortune came in succession. This is because they did not know the highest Buddhism in the world. Now, the Sōka Gakkai alone knows the fundamentals, and so I positively state that it must be bravely advanced for the benefit of the individual, Japan and the whole world, making others understand the Daishōnin [Nichiren's] Buddhism." (Quoted in Metraux, 1986: 38)

In Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong, where research for this essay was conducted, membership rose exponentially between the 1960s and the 1970s. Members who recalled this early period remembered that Sōka Gakkai was then known as the religion of the sick, poor, and unhappy.

In Japan, Ikeda made several moves towards greater consolidation of the solid base of nearly 4 million households in 1969. He worked towards fulfilling Toda's vision of a *kaidan* that would bring to fruition the third aspect of the Three Great Secret Laws, as stipulated by their founder. Functioning as axis mundi, much as Mecca serves for Muslims, the *kaidan* at Taisekiji would be the pivotal site of pilgrimage, beckoning and gathering believers from all over the world to worship before the *Daigohonzon*, a mandala inscribed by Nichiren and regarded by Nichiren believers to be a sacred object of worship. But whether the *kaidan* at Taisekiji could be regarded as the *high sanctuary* presents the crux of the debate for a pre-condition for the construction of this sanctuary is that it must be state-sponsored, or in the context of medieval Japan, "by imperial edict and shogunal decree" (Stone 2003).

Ikeda's move in 1964 to launch a political party known as *Kōmeitō* (clean party) served to intertwine state and religion further. This particularly offended post-war sensibilities, which preferred to see religion and politics as separate. Under heavy criticisms by media and scholars, Ikeda began to de-contextualize the *kaidan* from state sponsorship. In a 1970 speech, Ikeda began to make the shifts that would come to define his presidency.¹¹ Seager noted, "Ikeda's 1970 speech marked a watershed between the *shakubuku*-driven activism of the early days and the more moderate, secularizing style that would become a hallmark of his presidency" (Seager, 2006: 97). Although it was intended to defuse criticism that its political aims were inimical to democracy and the freedom of religion, it also marked the first time that Ikeda would redefine the doctrinal import and significance of the *kaidan* in modernity. In this speech Ikeda suggested that *Kokuritsu* or "national" should be understood simply as "belonging to the public" in the sense of a national art museum or a national stadium, and that the establishment of the *kaidan* was "nothing to be feared, nothing special at all" but, rather, expressing "the collective will of the people" (Stone, 2003: 209). The *kaidan* was now recast as being the fruit of the people's sincere efforts and made possible by the people, and

¹¹ Stone (2003: 205), Metraux (1992: 327) suggest that this shift had begun much earlier in the 1960s.

shakubuku moderated. In fact it has been noted that the word “*kaidan*” had all but disappeared from the internal publication and discussions in recent times.¹²

What Sōka Gakkai now insists on—in consonance with its new emphasis on peace and cultural activities as means of propagation—is clearly a more accommodating stance that seeks to correct public impression of its organization as exclusivistic and “fanatical” with conversion by “a stream of abuse” and “physical violence.” Recent correspondence with Sōka Gakkai was careful to point out that their shift was guided by Nichiren’s own injunction to choose carefully the appropriate method of propagation—the gentler *shoju* or the more aggressive *shakubuku*—and to “whichever one accords with the time” (Yampolsky, 1990: 43). SGI defines *shakubuku* as follows:

Based on the teachings of Nichiren, the Sōka Gakkai does not adopt an exclusive adherence to either *shoju* or *shakubuku*. Nor does the Sōka Gakkai adopt a stance of pragmatically shifting from one to the other depending on the age or the circumstances. Rather, within the 80-year history of the Sōka Gakkai, there has been “dialogue based on the fusion of *shoju* and *shakubuku*.” This path of dialogue was created by the three presidents of the Sōka Gakkai, based on holding dear the correct teaching, respect for all people and empathy with those who are suffering.¹³

In this definition, Sōka Gakkai’s emphasis on “dialogue,” “respect” and “empathy” is telling. In their effort to correct public perception of the movement, we are persuaded to see this shift not merely as responding to popular sentiments but as one reflecting a dialogue created by its three presidents over eighty years. In a speech that Ikeda gave in 1991, this emphasis on compassion and “inner-directed processes” is also evident.

Over the ages, hard-power systems have succeeded, using the established tools of coercion or oppression, to move people toward certain goals. In an age of soft power, however, only those convictions and motivations that derive from inner-directed processes can serve as a true basis for consensus and understanding.” (Quoted in Hurst, 1992: 283)

In this statement, Ikeda, freshly emerged from the schism of 1991, strongly suggests that the priesthood is no longer tenable in a modern age. More than that, true revolutionary power lies in the ordinary Buddhist who is driven by her own conviction. This “inner-directed process” would soon become the basis of Ikeda’s teaching on the Human Revolution. This emphasis and tenor would gain further momentum in his writings and speeches. Gone were the aggressive tactics; instead, Ikeda “called for moderate *shakubuku* and for a more thorough democratization of the movement, urging its members to adopt an attitude of openness to others even as they held fast to their religious conviction” (Seager, 2006: 97).¹⁴

¹² Thanks to Daniel Metraux for pointing this out in conversation, Nov 8, 2009. See page 13 of this article for a further discussion on the *kaidan* and its remapping.

¹³ Correspondence with SGI Public Relations Office, Tokyo, 2009.

¹⁴ How “democratic” the organization ultimately is has been raised by a reader of this article, who notes that regional and local organizations have independence and freedom only in “minor” issues such as the sponsoring a cultural festival and that major decision making lies in Tokyo.

2. Decentering the Traditional Center: temple, priesthood

This downplaying of the import of the *kaidan* would become even more dramatic when things came to a head between the priesthood and the lay movement in 1998. In that year, the doctrinal issue of the *kaidan* was completely overshadowed by the dramatic about-turn in the fate of the head temple at Taiseiki itself.¹⁵ In a sermon on April 5, 1998, the High Priest Nikken revealed his plan to transfer the *Daigohonzon* from the *head temple* to another temple on the temple grounds. Reflecting the acrimonious relations with the lay movement, he attributed Japan's recent earthquake, volcanic eruption and tsunami to "the great slander of Ikeda's Sōka Gakkai" (Seager, 2006: 97). Referring to the head temple as "the largest thing to which they [SGI] members were related in the past," the priest then proceeded to bring about its demolition in 1998 despite protests from SGI members as well as from architectural and academic communities around the world (World Tribune Press, 2000). Much written about by scholars, the issues here are indeed complex. To recap briefly, the *kaidan* issue underscores one key fact: the power-struggle between the lay movement and the priesthood as exemplified by the power struggle between the two leaders. The 1991 schism and the destruction of the temple itself had two consequences: Nichiren Shōshū returned to its limited role as a temple sect, and Sōka Gakkai with its faithful followers who had stayed with it must now re-define itself without its historical base and axis mundi previously represented by the temple at Taiseiki. Two issues were at stake for Sōka Gakkai. It must convince its followers that it is the one and only true upholder of Nichiren's teachings and further, that it continues to be viable *and legitimate*, in spite of having lost access to the *Daigohonzon* or the right to make copies of it for its members.

Sōka Gakkai's response to this crisis was nothing short of the radical—it would sever its ties completely. In what may seem like a convoluted strategy, the traditional center was systematically shown to be bereft or empty of real sacred power. This was done by discrediting the temple or the priesthood—or both in this case—while it created multiple centers outside of it and empowering them. Put differently, the lay movement must now turn against the very source that had once nurtured it. This strategy ironically involved no less than self-mutilation as it called for an uprooting of its long historical and cultural ties to that sacred center represented by the priesthood and the temple. Ikeda further discredits the priesthood in the following statement:

The Nichiren Shōshū priesthood has consistently catered to the nationalistic current of the times. When the various other Nichiren schools petitioned the imperial government to confer upon Nichiren Daishōnin the title [in September 1922], Nichiren Shōshū joined them in advancing this cause. And when pressure from the military authorities intensified, it accepted the Shinto talisman from Ise Shrine...from start to finish, the priesthood was solely concerned with protecting itself and currying favor with the authorities. (Ikeda et al, 2003: 106)

By drawing upon these historical events, the lay movement attacks the priesthood not only for pandering to the nationalistic current of its time, but also for its collusion with the militaristic government and short of calling the priesthood "dinosaur," suggests that it is

¹⁵ The main temple building which has a seating capacity of 6,000 was built in 1972 and demolished in 1999.

unable to keep up with the democratic spirit of the post-modern era. At the same time, Ikeda implies that the priesthood's cave-in to nationalistic pressure shows its lack of moral fiber. In contrast to that is the cosmopolitan who is at once humanistic and thoughtful. In the same essay, Ikeda holds up the example of the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941): "For the sake of humanity we must stand up and give warning to all, that this nationalism is a cruel epidemic of evil that is sweeping over the human world of the present age, eating into its moral vitality" (Ikeda et al, 2003: 106). In a single stroke, the priesthood is dismissed as nationalistic, weak and even immoral.

In opposition to this "immoral space" Sōka Gakkai would create a moral space that transcends all material and national constraints. This space has no name or physicality. In this newly-created space, Sōka Gakkai holds itself aloof from the political doctrines and practices of the different local sites scattered across the globe even as it courts their legitimacy and permission to disseminate Nichiren's teachings. Instead of aligning SGI with the different political currents, Ikeda urges for an "inner-directed" revolution which he would famously name the human revolution. This states that societal transformation begins with the self-transformation of one that begins when the practitioner faithfully practices Nichiren's teachings. Such a platform transcending the material and the phenomenal lies, of course, in the heart and minds of the believer. In the intimate space of the heart, the tension between Nichiren's rigorous exclusivism and the loyalties of the diverse groups in the different global communities can be obviated. Advocating humanistic ideals, it conveys an image of itself as a religion without homeland and—in an era of nationalism—without nationalistic agenda. By a careful stripping away of the overtly religious from his rhetoric, especially after 1998, the lay movement makes a deliberate turn back to an earlier platform when value-creation, peace, culture, and education were paramount.

Without being able to rely on the priesthood or the temple as its sacred source of power, the lay movement remapped the sacred with its locus in the teachings of Nichiren. Therefore, Nichiren's words—not the priesthood or the temple or the sacred objects therein—would henceforth become the ultimate source of authority. Much like the Protestant's claim to enter into a direct relationship with God without mediation, Sōka Gakkai claims that any individual with deep faith in Nichiren's teachings can gain enlightenment without the assistance of a priest (Metraux, 1992: 326). Freshly deracinated from its traditional temple association, Sōka Gakkai thus re-invents itself as viable not just in Japan, but also globally, and at the same time presents itself as being more true to the original interpretation of Nichiren. Ikeda writes:

Nichiren Daishōnin's life flows in the Sōka Gakkai, the organization dedicated to accomplishing kosen-rufu, the Buddha's will and decree. The lifeblood of the Daishōnin and the heritage of faith are found only in the harmonious community of practitioners that is the Sōka Gakkai. To protect the Sōka Gakkai is to protect the heritage of the Daishōnin's faith. It is to cause the lifeblood of faith to flow in one's own life. Only in the Sōka Gakkai is the practice of the correct teaching of Buddhism found. (Ikeda et al, 2003: 140)

In promoting themselves as the upholder and protector of the Nichiren heritage, Sōka Gakkai—and its parent organization Nichiren Shōshū—re-enter the age-old tradition of sectarian debates where each attempts to undermine the credibility of the other over

doctrinal disputes. As Stone points out, this is nothing new. “The claim to possess the sole Dharma leading to liberation in the final dharma age is integral to Nichiren doctrine” (Stone, 1994: 255). This has resulted in alternations between confrontation and accommodation not only against political authorities but also in intra-sectarian jockeying as each defines itself against its historical past and social present. But while there appears to be nothing new, the stakes appear to be much higher in this case. Sōka Gakkai needs to discredit and isolate the temple for the fact that its credibility as a lay movement had once depended on Nichiren Shōshū and its legitimacy as a religious group was bound up with the sect and its temple.

In a 2003 publication of Ikeda’s teaching of the Gōshō,¹⁶ distinct shifts marking the new directions of Sōka Gakkai could be discerned. While denouncing Tanaka and Nichiren Shōshū as pandering to nationalism, Sōka Gakkai also redefines its stance: a Buddhist humanism without borders. In Ikeda’s discussion of Tanaka Chigaku (1861-1939) whom he calls a “Nichirenist,” he says, “The Nichirenists completely distorted the Daishōnin’s teaching to fashion a nationalist ideology. Grounded in the ideology of nationalism and State Shinto, their interpretation sought to make the Daishōnin’s words compatible with their aims...Generally speaking, the word “land” can be taken to mean either “a land centered around the powerful” or “a land centered around the people.” The Nichirenists clearly took the former viewpoint, which is completely erroneous (Ikeda et al, 2003: 140).

In redefining Sōka Gakkai’s position, several moves can be discerned. First, Ikeda corrects Tanaka’s reading while denouncing nationalism as a vice. In doing so, he achieves another goal which was to show up nationalism or any expression of it as mere parochialism. By upholding itself as a lay movement that speaks to all parts of the globe, it undermines the center and all the significance that an axis mundi at the foot of Mount Fuji used to embody. Perhaps a more cynical eye would dismiss this as self-serving and point out that since the lay movement has been expunged by its parent organization, it could not very well embrace that center. But as this essay has already demonstrated, the “removal” or downplaying of the traditional center has in fact liberated the lay movement to proliferate across the globe in dramatic ways.

Ikeda’s interpretation of Tanaka and its attendant nationalism also makes a deliberate move away from the primacy of Japan as a political and religious homeland. Instead, the emphasis is on any land—across the globe, one might add—that is “centered around the people” (emphasis added). So, the former center, which was located at purportedly the “most superlative site,” is now shown to be empty since the true center must, according to Sōka Gakkai, be any land centered around the people.¹⁷

This process of decentering is critical to understanding how the lay movement under Ikeda has moved forward since the debacle with the priesthood. This strategy of decentering from the historical and cultural specificity of its religious tradition is an important move that would manifest itself most clearly in Sōka Gakkai International¹⁸ (SGI), a term designated for its international branches. Its rhetoric of peace, culture and education seems well embraced

¹⁶ Teachings of Nichiren are referred to as *Gōshō*.

¹⁷ As one reader has pointed out, this decentering of the center is very much a hermeneutical move and that power has shifted from the temple to the Sōka headquarters in Tokyo.

¹⁸ SGI is itself an umbrella organization that serves independent international chapters.

in pluralistic societies such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong. In a near reversal of strategies pursued in Japan, where politics and religion appear closely aligned, SGI, far from being confrontational or insistent on Nichiren exclusivism, courts political favor by a strategy of co-operation with government programs while astutely keeping its distance from political involvement. Secondly, where religion is found in public space, it is interpreted as philosophy, culture and peace. For example, in strictly Islamic Malaysia,¹⁹ SGM has found a way to integrate Nichiren teachings with the general ethos of peace, culture, education by participating yearly in national celebrations and special events such as the Commonwealth Games, thereby earning political approval and legitimacy. This carefully managed public relations program has brought about numerous honors and doctorates bestowed upon Ikeda by academics and politicians who seemed ready to endorse SGI as a positive force contributing to the country's national agenda. This propagation program is often accompanied by a flourish of awards as evidencing success and approval in these countries. For example, in 2007, Ikeda was given the Anugerah Budaya GAPENA award, a prestigious cultural award, bearing the title Grand Universal Sage, in Malaysia.²⁰

To Ikeda's humanism could be added another term: cosmopolitanism. That is perhaps inevitable, given his diatribe against nationalism and all the negative associations in Nichiren's recent history. The equation for Ikeda can perhaps be formulated this way: The practice of Gōshō is personal and independent of country and creed. "The key is to practice exactly as taught in the Gōshō ...Buddhism humanism is always premised on the practice of transforming one's own life" (Ikeda et al, 2003: 5). Ikeda argues, following this, that if every human lives an enlightened life—based on Nichiren's teachings—then there will be world peace and security.

The prevailing view of security is steadily being altered from one that focuses on the state to one that focuses on the human being. The idea of human security is based on the fundamental concept of protecting human life... such thinking has emerged from the various global issues that threaten humanity's very existence—issues that include regional conflict, discrimination and other violations of human rights, growing poverty, the population explosion, and the destruction of the environment. (Ikeda et al, 2003: 108)

In this modernistic re-interpretation of the *Rissho ankokoron*, Ikeda calls for a Buddhist humanism through the practice of Nichiren's teachings. As Ikeda sees it, the essence of Buddhism is little different from culture, understood here as refinement and self-cultivation. He notes:

The Buddhist concept of cheery, plum, peach and damson—that each person should live earnestly, true to his or her unique individuality—has much in common with culture. Culture is the flowering of each individual's true humanity, which is why it transcends national boundaries, time periods and all other distinctions. Likewise, correct Buddhist

¹⁹ Malaysia has over sixty ethnic or culturally differentiated groups among its population of twenty million, but the main division lies between Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera people. Malays constitute the main Bumiputera group and account for around 60 per cent of Malaysia's population.

²⁰ GAPENA represents the Federation of National Writers Associations of Malaysia.

practice means cultivating oneself and serving as an inspiration for others to lead truly cultured lives. (Annual Report Singapore Sōka Association, 2005)

Whether it was Hong Kong, Malaysia or Singapore (where research was conducted), the answer was nearly uniform. A response from a Hong Kong Gakkai member perhaps best captures the impact of Ikeda's teachings on his followers. "Nichiren Daishōnin Buddhism encompasses daily life. It is universal and transcends time, space and cosmos. I do not see myself as a person in Hong Kong or confined to my workplace, that is, my surgery or clinic."²¹

3. Globalizing the Sacred: Remapping the *kaikan* as temple

The parallel to the moral space in the hearts and minds of Gakkai members, as discussed above, can be seen in the physical construct of the *kaikan*, the community center. Typically, a *kaikan* functions much like a venue for events and in the West, it is simply called the community center. The interior layout consists of a main hall where members would assemble before a big *gohonzon* for group chanting, and offices and rooms for study and music practice. On any given day, there are activities going on at the *kaikan* as members belonging to the youth, men and women divisions gather for study and cultural activities such as dancing, music and singing. It is also a venue for monthly art exhibitions and cultural seminars. Yet its seemingly humble and ordinary façade should not be underestimated. This, after all, lies at the heart of SGI's remapping of the sacred.

In critical ways, the importance of the *kaikan* grew out of the limitations of Nichiren Shōshū to minister to all its global members. As Sōka Gakkai grew, exponentially during the 1970s, many of the *kaikan* would come to take the place of temples and senior members would perform the roles once undertaken by the priests. It is perhaps no wonder that Nichiren Shōshū priests felt threatened by the growth of the *kaikan* and their complaints suggest that they were prescient of the eventual eclipse of their own role and function by these non-descript community centers. The priests "blamed their inability to secure permanent positions in temples—without which they had no income from performing rituals for laity—on the Gakkai's building of *kaikans*" (Seager, 2006: 129). My visit to one such *kaikan* in Singapore in 2006, long after the schism, showed that lay members had successfully assumed the roles once held by the priests. In a ceremony held for the bestowing of *gohonzon* to new members, leaders in the Singapore Sōka Association performed the role with a simple handshake while the audience showed their endorsement with protracted chanting throughout the event.

What is also remarkable about the *kaikan* is its lack of any religious specificity, as is suggested by its literal English translation. It is simply a community center where people gather. While it captures the modern spirit of the times, it is also consonant with Ikeda's efforts to strip Nichiren's teachings to its essence and remap the word "religion." Indeed one would be hard pressed to recognize any "religion" in any of these buildings. No statue of the Buddha or even of Nichiren could be found. Occasionally, there is a picture of Ikeda, but even that was displayed with some caution.²² Located among factories and office high rises in urban spaces,

²¹ Interview with SGI member in Hong Kong, June 23, 2007.

²² In my visit to the Tampines Sōka center in July 5, 2007, the public relations person informed me that a picture of Ikeda was taken down over fears that the group might be construed as worshipping Ikeda.

the community centers, painted white and devoid of special signifiers marking its religious identity, blended with the flatted roofs of surrounding factory buildings. Inside, young men and women practice a group dance for a public performance that was coming up while another group chanted in a smaller room. Observing these *kaikan* on a busy Sunday, it is not difficult to see why it was perceived as a source of threat by the priesthood in Taiseiki. In some ways, Nichiren Shōshū's charge of Ikeda as leading a "full religious revolution" is not entirely unfounded (Metraux, 1992. 329). If "religion" used to be understood in terms of axis mundi, priesthood and temple, it is now redefined by the power of the people gathered before the *Gohonzon* at any one time at any place. The *kaikan* becomes the new and movable temple, so to speak; it is wherever Sōka members are.²³ In this revised context, the *kaikan* is the temple redefined and effectively replaces, even removes the need for the traditional temple at Taiseiki.

In the same way that the *kaikan* removes the need for the Taiseiki temple, the thorny issue of the *gohonzon*, which was yet another source of confrontation between Nichiren Shōshū and the lay group, was similarly obviated. In 1993, a priest from a different temple in Tochigi Prefecture, Japan, offered SGI the *gohonzon* inscribed in 1720 by Nichikan, the 26th high priest of Taiseikiji, that his temple had preserved. Adopting this proposal in 1993, the SGI began to issue *gohonzon* reproduced from Nichikan to its members world-wide. In doing so, SGI's break from Nichiren Shōshū is all but complete. Correspondence with the Tokyo office adds a telling remark: Nichikan is known as a high priest who "revived the priesthood at a time when Nichiren's original spirit had in many ways been long forgotten."²⁴ By this single move of adopting the *gohonzon* inscribed by Nichikan, Sōka Gakkai achieves two things: that it, too, is intent on reviving Nichiren's original spirit and, even more importantly in the context of its break-away, that it has lost none of the sacred power located in its historical ties to the priesthood—even if it has to come from an eighteen century source.²⁵ The irony is somewhat poignant. In the face of such an incongruity where it has turned diasporic within its own homeland, the lay movement responded by finding itself a new source of sacred power—a tart reminder to the old that it is not the only source of sacred power—and proceeding, in characteristic fashion, to disseminate it across its global, diasporic centers.

The *kaidan* redefined

The emphasis on people, particularly its believers, is no more evident than in Sōka Gakkai's post-schism interpretation of the *kaidan*. But as I noted above, the process of reinterpreting the *kaidan* had begun much earlier in the 1970 speech mentioned above. In that speech, Ikeda deliberately reduced the import of the *kaidan* so that it is nothing fearful but rather ordinary, much like a museum or stadium. While one could conceivably dismiss this as an attempt to reflect modern-day sensibilities, it would be missing the significance of Ikeda's shift in his outlook and relationship with the priesthood. By downplaying the import of the *kaidan* and undermining the immanence and sacrality of the Taiseikiji, Ikeda began the process of redrawing and remapping what is sacred and what is profane. By transferring the power of

²³ Meetings are also held at members' houses, but official ceremonies such as the bestowing of *gohonzon* are always held at the *kaikan*.

²⁴ Correspondence with SGI Public Relations Office, Tokyo, Jan, 2010.

²⁵ Correspondence with SGI Public Relations Office, Tokyo, Jan, 2010

the state to the people, he effectively decenters the power of one to the many. This is an important strategy especially in light of the destruction of the temple after the schism. To recap, the two divergent readings of the *kaidan* are as follows: 1. “Wherever people practice the Daishōnin’s Buddhism with faith in the *Gohonzon* is generally regarded as the high sanctuary of true Buddhism” and 2. A high sanctuary with concrete specificity: “When the sovereign of the nation establishes this Law, the high sanctuary of the temple of the true teaching shall be built at Mount Fuji” (World Tribune, 2000). Sōka Gakkai’s stance in the aftermath of the demolition of the temple is clearly delineated in SGI publications on the issue:

It must be noted, however, that the Daishōnin does not simply ask his future disciples to build a hall of worship. He makes it clear that the high sanctuary be built “when the sovereign of the nation establishes this Law.” In other words, the high sanctuary must be built only as a result of the wide spread of his teaching. “The sovereign of the nation” in our present democratic age essentially *means the people* (emphasis added). Put simply, the substance of the high sanctuary cannot be limited to a physical structure; it essentially lies in the propagation of the Daishōnin’s Buddhism. (World Tribune, 2000)

The implication is clear: the high sanctuary is “to be found in our faith as well as in our efforts to spread the Daishōnin’s Buddhism” (World Tribune, 2000). In declaring the traditional Taisekiji to be empty since in a democratic age the people hold the power, the site at Taiseki—thought once to be most superlative—is no longer so since the people are no longer there. According to Sōka Gakkai, the laity is spread over the globe and therefore by virtue of this innovative reading, the *kaidan* is now wherever the people are. In short, the *kaidan* now transcends the local. In attempting to turn a native, locative religion into a diasporic one, Ikeda reinvents Sōka Gakkai as a religion of “nowhere,” of “transcendence.” Accordingly then, the new interpretation of the Great Secret Laws are as follows: the *Gohonzon*, *Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō* and the wide spread of Buddhism through individual believers’ sincere faith. Perhaps, in this context, we can begin to see why the word “*kaidan*” has all but disappeared from the movement’s discussion of Nichiren. In this hermeneutical revisioning, the Gakkai pushes its claim that in an age when Nichiren’s original spirit has been forgotten, it alone remembers, and moreover, by engaging in a reinterpretation that responds to the social present, it alone is the most worthy upholder of Nichiren’s teachings.

By emptying the traditional center and transcending the local, Sōka Gakkai is able to spread and take on local flavors. This resolute emptying which removes both religious and historical ties from the center liberates the different branches to adapt to the particularities of the local conditions. This is an important point since scholars have often read SGI’s policy of adapting the teachings to various cultures around the world, known as *zuiho bini* (adapting to local conditions) as a cause of its success (Hurst, 1992: 128). As I have shown in this essay, to practice this effectively requires first an emptying of the Taijiki temple, the traditional center long held to be sacred by virtue of its locative power and historical lineage. The effect of globalization deems that any religion that aspires to global presence must first “uproot,” “sever” and distant itself from its historical center—in order to enter into diasporic realms. The success of Sōka Gakkai’s strategies could perhaps be best gauged by Sōka members’ responses to my questions on this issue. One member wrote: “Although SG has a Japanese beginning, as a Chinese living in Malaysia and who is a member of SGM, I do not see myself as

belonging to a Japanese organization. Further we are encouraged to follow local customs and rules. Therefore my own identity as a Chinese is not compromised.”²⁶ Summing up the status of Sōka Gakkai today, Bryan Wilson wrote:

Today, the Sōka Gakkai is a faith being consigned to the care of its lay following. The breach has been sudden, and the behavior of the priesthood must appear irrational and inexplicable, given the power which the Sōka Gakkai has conferred on the Nichiren sect. But those inexplicable actions and attitudes can be interpreted in the light of the history of religions, and may then be seen as a virtually inevitable process...The movement today transcends the national and cultural boundaries which once circumscribed Nichiren Buddhism. It has been acquiring a universalistic orientation.... (Quoted in Hurst, 1992: 298)

Wilson’s reading, however, overlooks the fact that while the traditional temple has been emptied of its force as axis mundi for the global lay movement, in its place is another center—the Tokyo headquarters. The Tokyo office, functioning as a corporate headquarters, not unlike a Honda or Mitsubishi, continues to make key decisions even as it permits the international branches to run on their own, and as Ikeda’s seat of power, it continues to inspire awe. From this center of charisma, inspirational letters and videos from Ikeda emanate monthly in a systematic ripple of influence that is carefully maintained and sustained by dedicated and enthusiastic diasporic centers that have proliferated across the globe and run independently even as they continue to look up to Tokyo for inspiration and guidance in major decision making.²⁷ Indeed, by a strategic process of hermeneutical revisioning, Sōka Gakkai has managed to take what was a thirteenth century monk’s vision and map it on to the twenty-first century and in different parts of the globe. By a single line of rhetoric delivered through culture, peace, education and human revolution, Ikeda has managed to distill Nichiren’s doctrines down to an essence and at the same time allow it to transcend so that it is at once everywhere and nowhere.

Conclusion

The success of Sōka Gakkai as a lay Buddhist movement with presence throughout the world has come at a cost. As this essay has shown, its rupture with traditional temple Nichiren Buddhism is an inevitability given its ambitions to be a world religion. But in the process, the lay movement has re-invented and recast for itself an image of a Buddhist movement that is in keeping with modernity. Through a three-fold strategy that involved a hermeneutical revisioning of Nichiren’s key teachings, a process of decentering the traditional center, and a remapping of the sacred, Sōka Gakkai now holds itself as the true purveyor of their mentor’s intent as opposed to Nichiren Shōshū. Indeed, this rupture is, on hindsight, not a bad thing. For it liberated the lay movement from its locative roots and enabled it to make the kind of

²⁶ Interview with a SGM member from the Men’s Division, July 29, 2007.

²⁷ Whether this center of charisma will be able to sustain its influence over its international branches after Ikeda shall remain to be seen.

transcendent leaps that all religions aspiring to world status and multiple diasporic centers must achieve.

Yet not for a moment did Sōka Gakkai consider itself secular although its rhetoric may be suggestive of that to some. Asserting its claim as Nichiren's most authoritative interpreter for the modern age, it has created for itself a sacred space that is at once physical and transcendent. By means of a hermeneutical strategy that seeks to show up the traditional center as empty and devoid of real sacred power, with imputed links to nationalism, and the failure of moral rectitude, SGI is able to distant itself and sever its ties with its origins.

By re-casting the *kaidan* as the fruit of the people's labor, Sōka Gakkai was able to emerge with a modernistic interpretation in line with contemporary sensibilities. The *kaidan* in this innovative hermeneutical reading is decentered from the "superlative site" formerly associated with Taiseikiji and is now centered in wherever the people are. For the lay movement with its global ambitions, this means that the *kaidan* is wherever the daimoku is being chanted by its allegedly 12 million members scattered across the globe. In this way, Nichiren's *kaidan* enters a transcultural space outside of nation, time and space and assumes imaginary proportions and symbolic value—while at the very same time it becomes material by the very act of its devotees chanting the daimoku before the *gohonzon*. As the critical role of Ikeda in this process of remapping has well demonstrated, in a religion that is intent on global presence, the chief religious figures are no longer priests or divine warriors but "rather god-men, saviors or religious entrepreneurs" (Smith, 1993: Preface).

By the same token, *the center* no longer holds. The traditional center and axis mundi has been decentered by the proliferation of centers upheld by people chanting in the belief that Nichiren's way is *the way* to gain enlightenment *sans* assistance. In place of the old center is a new one—modern, media-savvy, and no less potent—from which it radiates out to its many ubiquitous centers where religion as remapped by Ikeda is practiced. In a way, Nichiren's teaching—transformed and updated for the modern world—is best captured by the miniature *gohonzon* that I was introduced to by a globe-trotting SGI member. Measuring less than a finger's length, the *gohonzon* fits into her suitcase and enables her to practice wherever she is. This new mobility that young SGI members embrace is perhaps a measure of the success in which Nichiren has been re-invented for the modern age. But this success has of course come at a cost. This cost is seen in the loss of an axis mundi, of being uprooted from its traditional grounding and lineage, but in casting its lot with the diasporic communities across the globe where its teachings have been embraced, Sōka Gakkai has surely turned cost to profit.

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