# Soka Gakkai Brings 'Absolute Happiness'

By IVAN MORRIS

A POLIO-STRICKEN Japanese boy throws away his crutches —after joining Soka Gakkai. A taxi driver who once lived in rowdy squalor—drunk, shiftless, tubercular—goes straight, buys his own cab and recovers his health as a devout member of Soka Gakkai. A baseball pitcher throws a no-hit game—and credits the feat to Soka Gakkai. To what does an American Embassy chauffeur attribute the strength and alertness that subdued Ambassador Edwin O. Reischauer's knife-wielding assailant? Soka Gakkai—the most emotional, dynamic, disciplined politico-religious movement in the history of modern Japan.

The militant society of lay members of the Buddhist Nichiren Sho sect, Soka Gakkai (the Value-Creating Academy), is growing at a fantastic rate. It has a membership of at least 10 million (10 per cent of the Japanese population); more than 1,000 chapters throughout the world; a multilingual, multimillion-dollar publishing empire; a splendid complex of temple buildings at the base of snow-capped Mount Fuji that attracts 10,000 pilgrims a day. Zealous adherents of Soka Gakkai regularly pack the largest halls and stadiums in Japan for meetings, rallies and mammoth sports events; last November 80,000 members jammed Tokyo's Olympic Stadium for the group's annual culture festival, culminating in a display of marching, gymnastics and dancing by 14,000 performers. Though much of Soka Gakkai's strength lies among poor urban workers, the group recently collected $8 million in less than a fortnight for a new temple at its Fuji headquarters.

Founded in 1930 by Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, an obscure schoolteacher, Soka Gakkai made little headway during the ultranationalist period before and during World War II. After 1945 it had to compete with hundreds of new religious sects that mushroomed in the aftermath of defeat. But in the last decade Soka Gakkai's efficient organizational techniques and aggressive proselytizing have converted millions to its goal: "To give absolute happiness to each individual."

Such phenomenal success might have satisfied some religious groups, but not Soka Gakkai. With the ultimate aim of making the creed the state religion of Japan, Soka Gakkai's young, tough leadership has led the movement into the political arena.

About 1,000 members of Soka Gakkai are representatives in local legislative assemblies, most of them elected during the last five years on the slate of the dominant Liberal-Democratic party. In November Soka Gakkai organized its own full-fledged political arm, Komeito (Clean and Fair party), which has just passed its first nationwide test.

In elections earlier this month for the Upper House of the Diet, Komeito won 20 seats in the 250-member chamber, solidly establishing Soka Gakkai as Japan's third strongest political force (after the conservative Liberal-Democrats and the Socialists). Before the elections Soka Gakkai had 15 seats (won under the auspices of a political affiliate), and its gain of five seats was the largest proportionate increase of any political party. Soka Gakkai's immediate political future also looks good. Komeito is putting up 32 candidates in the Lower House elections, which could take place within a year, and all are expected to win.

The party's domestic political slogans call for a "neosocialist society" in Japan, a fairer distribution of national prosperity and the elimination of corruption. The program appeals to millions of voters who, though disenchanted with the conservatives, would hesitate to support a left-wing party.

In international politics, too, Soka Gakkai espouses a "third culture" and insists that Japan must take a neutral stand ("global nationalism" is the current term) between the great power blocs. The conservatives are condemned for truckling to the United States, the Socialists and Communists for being committed to the Soviet Union and China, respectively; only Soka Gakkai is exclusively on the side of Japan and is free to work for the spread of "Buddhist democracy" and world peace.

The political implications that this may have for American policy in the Far East are evident, potentially far more important than the anti-Western neutralism propagated by the saffron-robed monks of South Vietnam.

NOT surprisingly, this noisy, energetic movement has provoked vehement criticism. Soka Gakkai is often treated as something of a joke, unworthy of serious attention by political analysts; others tend to dismiss it as a flash in the pan, one of numerous revivalist groups that shoot up in Japan only to vanish after a few years. More frequently, Soka Gakkai is pictured as a sinister right-wing group with fascist, militarist overtones.

But Soka Gakkai, despite its militant methods, is clearly not militarist. Though it is intolerant of other religions, to describe it as neo-fascist

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創価学会

These Japanese characters spell Soka Gakkai — "The Value-Creating Academy."

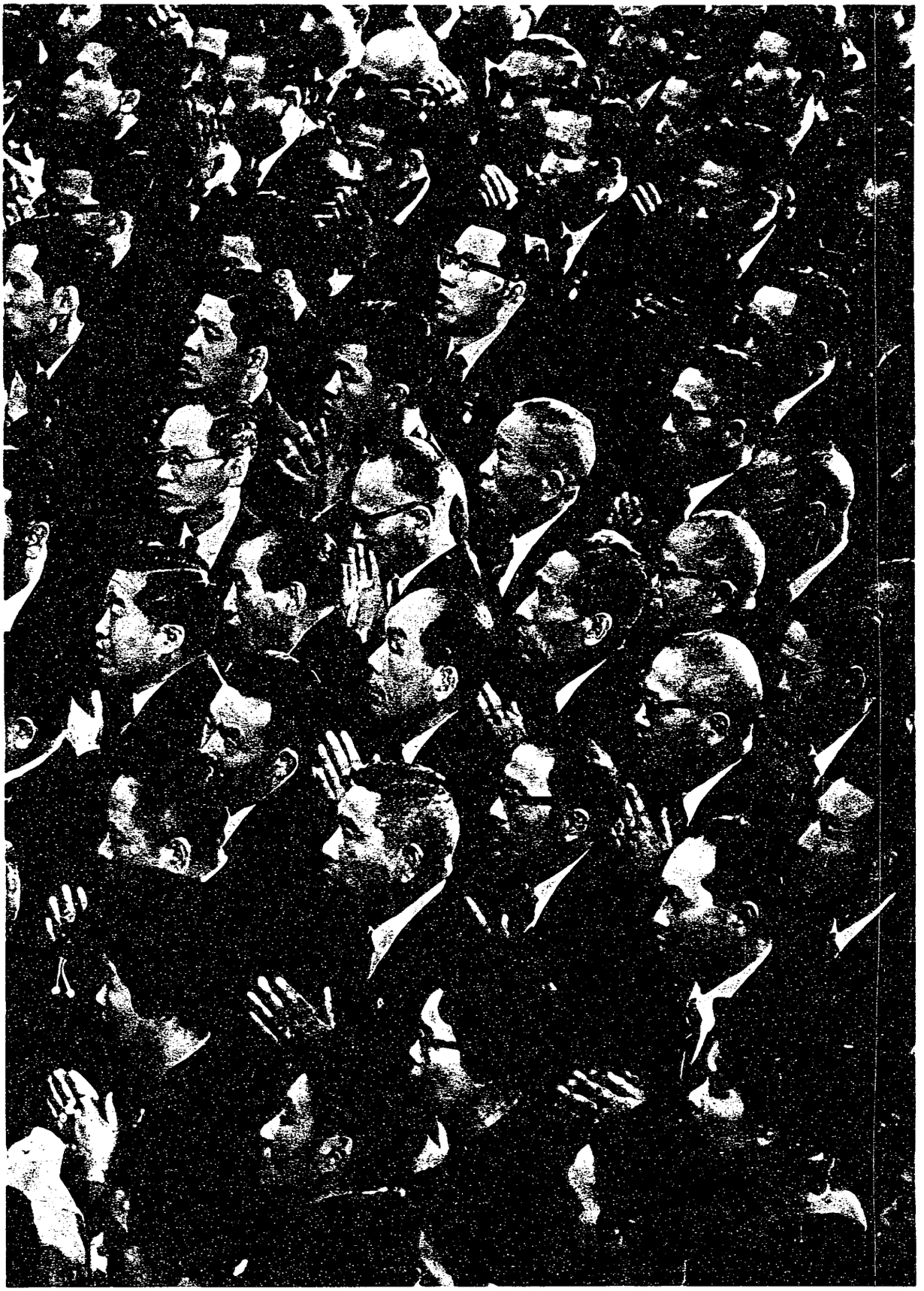
or right-wing is a misleading oversimplification.

It is an evangelistic, well-knit politico-religious group that promises, and indeed provides, solutions for many of the difficulties that beset the less favored elements of the population, notably unorganized members of the urban working class. For increasing millions of Japanese people it satisfies needs that other religious and political parties seem unable to meet.

THE creed of Soka Gakkai, as evolved by the schoolteacher-founder some 35 years ago, is a naive form of utilitarianism couched in somewhat peculiar terminology.

The main aim is to secure man's happiness. This can be done by the creation of proper "values," of which the most important is private and social "gain." The philosophical transcendental and mystical aspects of religion are disregarded; everything is focused on finding the most practical answers to mundane problems: keeping sober, making friends, getting a job.

Typical Soka Gakkai activities are not church services but group meetings in which members unburden their problems to each other's sympathetic ears. In addition to these therapeutic discussions there are body-building clubs, singing *(Continued on Page 36)*



A socio-religious movement with 10 million ardent adherents has become the third ranking political force in Japan. Its simple creed, to make man happy, has important implications both in the realm of national politics and concerning Japan's role in the Far East. Above, members pray at the opening of a new temple at Soka Gakkai headquarters at the foot of Mount Fuji. Left, a Soka Gakkai political rally before this month's elections, in which the society scored signal gains.

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circles, culture festivals and rallies of a type especially popular in Japan. Through activities such as these, Soka Gakkai helps to relieve people—especially the poorer members of the community—from their dissatisfactions and achieve the goal of a "bright home" in accordance with the group's slogan: "The home community as a vehicle of salvation."

The approach, in other words, is eminently practical and worldly, as suits a nation that does not think much in terms of doctrine. It follows that the leadership of Soka Gakkai should be secular, not priestly.

The stress on material concerns often strikes Western observers as anomalous in a religion whose original aim is to overcome desire, the source of all suffering, and to escape from the sad, evanescent world. Historically, however, most Buddhist sects have not hesitated to compromise between worldly and spiritual objectives, and here again Soka Gakkai belongs squarely to the Japanese tradition.

The tradition is 700 years old. Soka Gakkai's inspiration is Saint Nichiren, a 13th-century Buddhist monk who regarded himself as a Messiah come to save Japan from perdition. He demanded that his followers reject all evidence of other faiths and prove their sincerity by constantly making converts. And in a nation where religious history is marked by eclecticism, Nichiren was as violent in condemning nonfollowers as Luther himself. When a Soka Gakkai journal regularly refers to other Buddhist denominations as *jashu* ("evil sects"), it is speaking in the unmistakable accents of its founding spirit. Nor is Soka Gakkai much more cordial to other Nichiren-inspired sects, of which there are many.

Claiming that they alone represent the monk's authority, members of Soka Gakkai proudly aver that their Fuji headquarters contain not only the remains of Nichiren but one of his teeth, a magic object to which flesh is still growing. The holiest worship object of the sect is the Great Go-honzon, a tablet of camphor wood inscribed with a sacred formula and purported to be the work of Saint Nichiren himself. Most scholars deny its authenticity, but this does not diminish the enthusiasm of the Fuji pilgrims, for whom the first visit to the Go-honzon is a moment of culmination and of mystical joy.

ON a steaming summer day I set off for the religious center of the movement in a cedar grove at the base of Mount Fuji, a three-hour train journey from Tokyo. The mountain itself was hidden by the usual summer haze, yet one could feel its presence dominating the ancient Taiseki Temple, the modernistic Reception Hall, and the other surrounding buildings.

Armed with an introduction from an ardent Soka Gakkai organizer whom I had met in Tokyo, I finally discovered the correct office and was assigned a guide. He was a brisk, bespectacled young man who divided his time between work at the Fuji headquarters and local politics in Tokyo.

First I was taken to see the battalions of pilgrims, arriving for their two-day stay at the temple by great busloads from every part of Japan. I was told that if all the applications were accepted the number of 10,000 daily visitors would be doubled, but that no more could be handled until the road from the station to the headquarters was widened.

The arrangements for receiving the pilgrims are impressive. Efficiently marshaled in groups of 1,500, they are first taken to the dormitories where the men change into white clothes, then proceed to the temple itself to view the Great Go-honzon.

As a nonbeliever I was not allowed to enter the sanctuary, but I saw the look of rapt ex-

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citement as the pilgrims waited for the climactic moment when they would be led by their priests in the mass chanting of the sacred formula —*Namu Myoho Renge Kyo* ("Glory to the Sutra of the Lotus of the Supreme Law") —a ritual that families repeat twice daily (morning and evening) while worshiping before replicas of the Go-honzon in their own homes.

After I had watched some 3,000 pilgrims pass quietly through the outer halls towards the main sanctuary—the men forming a huge sea of white, the women comparatively drab in their everyday clothes—I was led along a magnificent row of cedars to visit the founder's tomb.

As we walked up the hill, the sound of the pilgrims' chanting became fainter and was soon drowned by the shrill chirp of the cicadas. Noticing some mysterious insignia on my guide's sleeve, I was reminded of a recent article in a mass-circulation magazine describing the paramilitary organization of Soka Gakkai, and I asked the guide what rank he held in the hierarchy.

"We are Buddhists," he declared indignantly, "and hate everything about war and armies." The picture given by most of the press was totally misleading. Far from being militarist, he said, Soka Gakkai was stanchly opposed to any tampering with the Japanese Constitution that might legalize rearmament, and had in fact been the only group openly to oppose the military during the war. He reminded me that their founder, before whose simple tomb we were now standing, had been thrown into prison by the militarists and had died there of malnutrition in 1944. I did not pursue the subject.

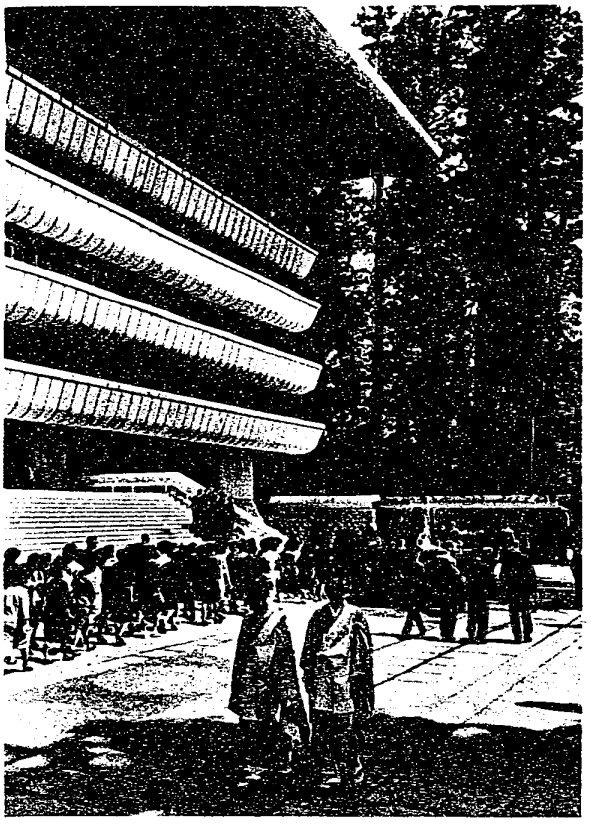
On returning to the main group of buildings, we visited the vast Reception Hall, recently completed at the cost of $3.5 million and which contained valuable stones and precious woods from all over the world. The main assembly hall—used for lectures, films, and prayer meetings—was the largest, though certainly not the most beautiful, room I had seen in Japan. All this, however, was to be dwarfed by the planned new building, a colossal marble structure which would be constructed in a few years. It occurred to me that the purpose of this lavish expenditure was similar to that which produced the opulent Moscow subway stations in the nineteen-thirties: to provide a vision of splendor for people whose everyday lives are drab.

During a tour of the dormitories, I observed one of the many "group therapy" sessions going on: clusters of about a dozen pilgrims sat on straw mats discussing their spiritual and material "difficulties" *(nayami)*, usually under the leadership of one white-robed priest and one lay official.

My tour ended rather abruptly when my guide left me in the corner of a large room, saying that he would telephone for a taxi to take me to the station. After about 10 minutes the room filled up with Soka Gakkai officials and I heard one of them giving detailed instructions concerning the reception of a huge group of pilgrims expected to arrive shortly from Osaka: "Section Leader Tanaka will check the first three busloads and conduct them to Dormitory B," and so on.

I began to feel like a spy, and no doubt I looked like one, for presently an official approached me and politely but firmly asked what I was doing in the room. I explained that I was waiting for a taxi, which at the moment seemed improbable even to me. The man asked a few more questions in a cold, direct manner which contrasted strikingly with the usual polite Japanese approach to foreigners. At this juncture another official fortunately appeared and announced that my taxi had come.

The driver turned out to be an ardent member of Soka Gakkai, and as we rattled along the hot, dusty road he told me how it had changed his life. It was a typical before-and-after story. "Before" was a history of drunkenness, tuberculosis, unemployment and gambling. Following a long struggle his sister had converted him to the Nichiren Sho sect and had persuaded him to join Soka Gakkai. Now my driver was a good family man; he owned his own taxi; he was a "tutor in tenets of the faith" and expected shortly to be promoted to the rank of "lecturer." It all sounded too good to be true; yet this was precisely the type of metamorphosis about which I was to hear from one Soka Gakkai member after another.



**PILGRIMAGE**—Ten thousand visitors a day travel from all parts of Japan to the national headquarters of Soka Gakkai. Above, the recently completed $3.5-million Reception Hall.

PERHAPS the most obvious mark of change is an attitude of cheerfulness, self-confidence —even superiority. The power of positive thinking is believed applicable to illness, too, and Soka Gakkai publications are full of inspirational stories about people who have recovered their health, after all medical means have proved ineffective, by their faith in the Go-honzon. The personable, 40-ish, president of Soka Gakkai, Daisaku Ikeda (officially considered a reincarnation of Saint Nichiren), is one of many believers who are said to have cured themselves of tuberculosis. Polio, ulcers and cancer are also among the hundreds of ailments that adherents claim to have conquered.

Many psychosomatic disorders, of course, can be cured by faith, but a good proportion of the miracle healing claimed by Soka Gakkai is fanciful.

Membership is also said to help believers out of economic troubles. The sense of belonging to a large, powerful group can certainly be a psychological and material help in moments of need and Soka Gakkai members often refer business to each other or find jobs for unemployed co-believers.

Many are the stories of people on the verge of financial disaster who became solvent, or even rich, through joining Soka Gakkai.

I was told, for example, the story of a young night-club hostess who had accumulated tremendous debts and then joined Soka Gakkai. On the very next day she received a cable from a former customer, a rich American businessman, asking her to come to New York and marry him. This happy tale, which is said to have produced a rich crop of recruits among hostesses and bar girls, had one credible ingredient: The customer in question was well in his 70's.

As a matter of policy, Soka Gakkai disclaims that it functions as an employment agency. "Soka Gakkai gives spirit and encouragement to those who are discouraged; it gives them hope to work harder," says deputy director general Joei Akiya. "To the diseased, we give the power to recover from, or cure, diseases. Through faith, a believer obtains dynamic power to live a happy life physically and spiritually."

More important than Soka Gakkai's supposed medical and economic benefits is the way in which the movement helps its members overcome the social and psychological dislocation of Japanese life, especially in the booming big cities.

Members no longer feel they are living only for their own limited hopes, but have the reassuring sense of belonging to a big reformist organization, whose adherents are duty-bound to help each other. The bonds of selfishness are broken; the fierce competitiveness of postwar Japanese society is side-stepped for something cosier and kinder.

Much of its appeal is therefore directed to young migrant workers and to lower level members of the urban working class, who, belonging to small shops and semi-skilled industries, have not profited from the benefits won by the large-enterprise unions. To such people Soka Gakkai offers a sense of social identification which in earlier days was provided by the armed forces. It also provides a substitute for the official state religion that existed under the old Emperor system. These are powerfully magnetic sources of strength, which Soka Gakkai reinforces with an organizational efficiency that is the envy of the Japanese Communist party itself.

The movement maintains 63 headquarters and more than 1,000 chapters throughout the world, including the United States and many Asian and European countries. The basic unit is the *kumi*, a group of 10 or fewer households living close to each other and meeting regularly for discussion and prayer. The *kumi* is the base of a pyramid of larger units, whose apex is a board of directors under the president. Moreover, Soka Gakkai has an ingenious horizontal system of organization in which the entire country is divided into blocks, members belonging to the block of their current residence.

The financing is equally efficient. Though there is no regular membership fee, there are about 100,000 supporting members, including many businessmen who contribute large sums annually. Another source of revenue is Soka Gakkai's $6-million-a-year publishing empire, which pours out popular newspapers, books and magazines.

A major reason for Soka Gakkai's fabulous membership is its aggressive missionary technique, which belongs to the Nichiren tradition of *shakubuku* (literally, "break and flatten") or forcible persuasion. Having been exposed to a certain amount of *shakubuku* myself, I can attest to the tireless and effective methods used by experienced recruiters whose promotion in the hierarchy is at least partly dependent on the quantity and quality of their converts.

I recently heard of a new mother in a maternity ward who pestered other women in the ward to join. Friends tell of a Soka Gakkai maid in an American home in Tokyo who made life unbearable for another maid she was trying to convert.

Bar girls and hostesses have many opportunities to discuss Soka Gakkai with their male companions and, though the group's officials angrily deny it, there is evidence that sex is often one of the inducements to conversion. (Soka Gakkai imposes no restrictions against what Americans might call loose living, and some of its most enthusiastic and successful missionaries are bar and nightclub hostesses.)

High-pressure tactics have also backfired on occasion, causing violence. There are cases of zealots who invaded Christian churches, destroyed religious objects and broke up meetings of other religious groups. Soka Gakkai members have also barricaded potential converts in their homes until the beleaguered victims finally surrendered simply to obtain relief.

Such persistence has produced a sharp resentment, and Soka Gakkai officials now declare that *shakubuku* authorizes no violent methods. They argue that any reports to the contrary are false or distorted. At the same time, they may acknowledge that Soka Gakkai members have become so carried away by its "divine blessings" that they may unwittingly overdo efforts to sway others to their creed.

Nevertheless, it is clear that people living in predominantly Soka Gakkai areas are often under almost irresistible pressure to join. Members bent on making conversions invade a neighborhood with repeated door-to-door calls, using as one of their most effective arguments the rapid growth of Soka Gakkai. Most Japanese, particularly the less sophis-

ticated, cannot resist group pressures or joining whatever seems to be a successful bandwagon. Once a foothold is gained in a neighborhood, conversions come rapidly, for rare is the Japanese willing to be odd man out.

MANY of the needs that win people to Soka Gakkai might, under other circumstances, lead them to the Socialist or Communist parties, which at least offer more coherent programs. Except for the promise of miracle cures, the left-wing groups potentially have much the same appeal.

But Soka Gakkai's emotional, revivalist, irrational aspects—though alienating most intellectuals—attract the less educated elements of the community. Furthermore, the left-wing parties tend to be associated with large-scale unions, which are precisely the groups from which so many Soka Gakkai members are excluded.

Far more important, however, in what remains a very insular country, is the essential Japaneseness of Soka Gakkai. While both the Socialists and the Communists have a distinctly foreign flavor, the Nichiren Sho sect and its society of lay members are Japanese through and through. The pre-1945 form of Japanese ultranationalism has virtually disappeared, but nationalist sentiment remains a powerful force, and Nichiren's idea of a universal church based in Japan exerts an emotional appeal.

This is the significance of the overseas activities of Soka Gakkai, which in South Korea, the Philippines, and other parts of Asia aims to build up what has been described as a "religious co-prosperity sphere."

There is little chance that success overseas will match Soka Gakkai's impact at home, but the fact that Soka Gakkai emphasizes the centrality of Japan in its Messianic schemes for a new world adds to the glamor of the organization.

And now that Soka Gakkai has moved openly into politics, it has become more glamorous—and significant—than ever.

It is clear that we cannot predict the future success of Soka Gakkai by simply extending the dramatic curve of its recent advance. There have been evangelical movements before in Japanese history (though never on this scale) and most of them have become dormant or have fizzled out entirely. The larger Soka Gakkai grows and the more it becomes involved in politics, the greater is the chance of disruptive factionalism. Furthermore, if the Japanese economy continues to develop and prosperity seeps down to lower levels, time will not be on its side, for more and more people will find solutions to their difficulties elsewhere.

Yet this immensely popular Buddhist political movement is not to be taken lightly. With its young, energetic leadership and a powerful youth section that claims almost 3 million members, it is likely to continue asserting itself both in social life and in politics.

Though Soka Gakkai can probably never acquire a parliamentary majority, it may (especially in time of crisis) exert an important influence on Japanese policy—and this influence will favor a more independent and probably neutralist course for the United States's principal ally in the Far East.