

Through the SGI: A Personal Odyssey (1) **By Dr. Howard Hunter**

Allow me to share a rather unique travelogue, one in which I hope to relate over the next few issues an eye-witness account of the Soka Gakkai International in action throughout the world. The record of my visits — a personal odyssey, one may say — will not be exhaustive, since I will only be covering a fraction of the 128 countries with SGI memberships. Yet it will be illuminating, a discovery of the similarities and differences within a truly global religious movement.

As a professor of religious studies at Tufts University in Massachusetts, I have for some time sought to gain a full understanding of the remarkable organization which Soka Gakkai International has become. While I am happy to acknowledge a genuine empathy with the humane and humanistic Buddhist philosophy upon which the SGI is based, as a non-member, I have the opportunity to conduct my research objectively and independently.

As I wondered where to begin my search to discover the SGI's place in the world, Japan obviously came to mind, as did my own country. But, finding myself on sabbatical leave from my university and free to travel anywhere, I chose India as my starting point.

Why India? Because, while I have enjoyed contacts with the SGI in Japan and the U.S.A. — and will undoubtedly have more in time in both countries — the reintroduction of Buddhist activity in India, the land of its origin, was particularly intriguing to me. I knew there were some Buddhist groups remaining in India but what would it mean to be a practitioner of Buddhism taught by Nichiren and promulgated today by the Soka Gakkai of Japan? How does Indian culture, moreover, affect the way in which the SGI's message is transmitted?

This is the recurring theme of my voyages of discovery: Given that it is one thing to practice Nichiren's Buddhism in his homeland of Japan, what is it like to be a Buddhist in other cultures today, from such diverse lands as India is from Italy or the U.K. is to Mexico?

A Bodhisattva's Story

With passport and airline ticket in hand, I made my way to visit the SGI group and individual members in New Delhi, Bombay and Bangalore. I also had conversations with SGI members on an informal basis in Bhubaneshwar and Calcutta, both cities where I hope to return some day for more extensive visits. In addition to attending various group meetings, I taped interviews with individual SGI members in their homes. In mulling over the results of these discussions, it may be that I will present them in another form at another time.

My experience with the SGI in India is still fresh in my mind. Since it was the first of several countries I hope to visit, India leaves me with impressions rather than comparisons and conclusions. Among those impressions, I will relate several which rank among the most intense.

First is the unmistakable depth of concern members of the Bharat Soka Gakkai (BSG), as their organization is referred to in India, share for the physical and spiritual welfare — the two are not separate — of their fellow members. This concern was dramatically conveyed to me in the experience of an SGI member from Bangalore.

He and the son of another member from the Bangalore group were driving to New Delhi to attend an SGI meeting. On the way, they had a serious accident in which the latter, a promising youth of 24, lost his life. His companion also suffered injuries that doctors

determined were almost certain to be fatal. That was when another young man stood up without hesitation to nurse the injured member back to health, no matter what the cost to his own studies and career. The patient was able to recover through months of tireless care; without it, he would not have survived.

Today, he has regained his health, become successful in business, and is a deeply committed member of the SGI. Meanwhile, the young man who cared for him is currently in Russia, where he has been able to introduce his Buddhist faith to a dozen Russian colleagues. The example he set through his total dedication to the Bodhisattva ideal — in which one forgoes his own fulfillment to realize those of other people — is the source of much pride and appreciation among the SGI members of Bangalore.

For the Future

Another vivid impression I have is the BSG members' desire to extend the implications of their practice to the wider community. The goal appears to be not so much to proselytize but to demonstrate their faith and philosophy through action.

One example of this was the very successful effort — an exhibition titled “Rainbow in My Heart” which was held in a number of Indian cities, including Bangalore — to present the public with the artwork of children from the vast gamut of India's manifold cultures and religions. Considerable goodwill was generated by this and other programs — among them, a symposium held in southern India under the theme, “The Harmony of Religions” — dedicated to the larger good of the entire populace. The humanitarian outreach of the BSG, in my view, makes it a readily accessible forum for people from a bewildering array of backgrounds.

The third impression comes from my interviews with individual members of all ages. It is this: the deep personal regard they have for SGI President Daisaku Ikeda. In every discussion I had, they responded to my question about him with a heartfelt sense of appreciation for the spiritual guidance and organizational leadership they received from the person they do not hesitate to call their mentor.

It struck me that the cultural heritage of India — in particular the historic tradition of master-disciple relationships — plays a significant role in this instance. BSG members cite their trips to Japan, where they receive training and encouragement, and encounters with Mr. Ikeda, not only in Japan but during his visit to India, as having deep significance for the initiation and development of the SGI in their country. Repeatedly, members characterized the SGI president's contributions, not in terms of urging that they follow him, but rather that they discover the law of inner compassion — the heart of all Buddhist teachings — within themselves.

A final impression was the careful attention the BSG is paying to develop the most effective policies for the young SGI organization in India. The leadership is keenly aware of the nation's rich and complex cultural, religious and political circumstances. There is deep confidence that a Buddhist organization has much to offer for the amelioration of India's seemingly insoluble problems. By seeking cooperation over confrontation through the implementation of value-enhancing policies, they are in the midst of laying a solid foundation for the future — not only for the BSG but for all of India as well. □

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