

**PERSPECTIVE**  
**THE ISSUE OF LANGUAGE, THE SPIRIT OF REFORM**  
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All words have a history, all languages adopt words and terms from foreign cultures. Moreover, all religions borrow from the culture of that religion's origins. To my knowledge, there has never been a successful religious movement that erased its roots—linguistic or otherwise—in order to gain a wider audience.

Dave Baldschun's article "Advocating the Universality of Buddhism" (March 17 *World Tribune*, p. 10), however, seems to argue that the erasure of foreign influence—specifically Japanese influence—is not only possible, but desirable. I would like to draw attention to the issue of language and the spirit of reform that this article, I feel, misrepresents.

"Advocating" takes a questionable position on the use of Japanese language in our organization. Take this article's example of the term *shakubuku*. Many have tried to find an English equivalent to this Buddhist term, all to no avail. For example, calling *shakubuku* something like "propagation" is incorrect because that's not what it means. Literally, *shakubuku* means to "break and subdue," which most would agree sounds quite awkward if not off-putting in English. To the best of my knowledge, the word *propagation* itself belongs to the same linguistic origin as "propaganda," which refers to the committee of cardinals within the Roman Catholic Church entitled "Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith" in charge of spreading Christianity through foreign missions. If I had my choice, I would rather use the Japanese term, as "foreign" as it might seem.

The question is not whether we should eliminate "foreign words," for that seems to give the impression that we become more "American" in doing so. Rather, how to reform, how to proceed in a manner befitting America and the diverse American membership based on President Ikeda's vision, is the key question.

Achieving consensus on this topic is not easy. Perhaps that is precisely what makes us uniquely American: The recognition that what is American is too broad to be defined. Being true to ourselves, caring for each person and relating Buddhism to each individual's circumstances is, I feel, the best way to proceed as an organization. We must always self-reflect on substance vs. formality. Yet we cannot invent an "authentic" American identity that divorces itself from all things foreign. Even if these so-called foreign things—overtly Japanese in origin—are removed, we have not necessarily come closer to SGI President Ikeda's vision of an organization that would serve as a "model for the rest of the world" (March 1990 *Seikyo Times*, p. 7).

All issues about culture and language aside, I was quite disturbed by the suggestion that members should cease using the name *Sensei* to refer to President Ikeda. On April 24, 1979, President Ikeda was forced to resign as Soka Gakkai president during a time when Nichiren Shoshu, much like today, was embroiled in an internal battle for position and profit. Though I am not afforded a lengthy explanation of this episode, one of the demands ordered by Nichiren Shoshu was that members were forbidden to refer to President Ikeda as "Sensei." Top-level Soka Gakkai leaders acquiesced to this demand because they feared disobeying the priests. It is telling that a few women's division members who saw President Ikeda at a meeting and exclaimed, "Sensei!" did so because they couldn't accept the bogus dictate of the priests.

No one is required to use the affectionate name *Sensei*, yet I believe the name carries a tremendous amount of sincerity and genuine feeling from the members. That we should in some way suppress that feeling because we might be perceived as so-called “followers of a cult” is objectionable to me. That reduces the spirit of appreciation, respect, warmth and love the name *Sensei* invokes. It is necessary to delineate between that which opens our movement to a wider audience, giving it a more universal appeal, and that which tries to suppress what is in people’s hearts and their natural expression of joy.

In closing, I believe it is important to rely on the spirit of reform and not on cosmetic changes. Language is important, but what is more important is to seek the true meaning of President Ikeda’s expectations, know our history, and constantly seek to understand our mentor’s broad vision for the future.

**Editor’s note:**

*There has been a strong reaction—pro and con—to Dave Baldschun’s perspective titled “Advocating the Universality of Buddhism” (March 17 World Tribune, p. 10). We regret that we omitted the disclaimer at the end of the article that reads “Perspectives printed here do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the SGI-USA, or the World Tribune.”*

*We wish to stress that perspectives do not reflect official organizational policy; therefore, the March 17 perspective should not be used as a dictate among the membership; we are not advocating that people stop using the word Sensei. The article was intended to foster dialogue on the subject of the use of language throughout the SGI-USA.*