

PERSPECTIVE
TOWARD AN 'AMERICAN' ORGANIZATION:
WHAT GUIDANCE DOES HISTORY OFFER?
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What exactly does it mean to create an “American” SGI-USA organization, one that, while honoring its Japanese roots, can move into the future with a distinctly American character? Given the many differences between Japan and the United States — in physical geography, in cultural and social mores, and in historical development—“it is only natural,” SGI President Ikeda said when he was here in 1990, “that there might be differences in how kosen-rufu is advanced in the two countries.” What might those differences be? Or to put the question another way: What are some of the unique characteristics of the American people and their institutions that might serve as a basis for the further growth and advancement of our organization in the United States?

These are important questions, for while Buddhist principles like *o-bai-to-ri* (cherry, plum, peach, damson blossoms) and *zuiho bini* (the precept to follow the customs of the locality) remind us of the importance of practicing Buddhism in a way that is unique to us, both as individuals and as members of our respective societies, it is also true that, as President Ikeda reminded us in 1990, “infinite variety derives from the one Law, and the true entity of life is the same in all societies.” In geo-political terms alone, we live in an increasingly borderless world, one in which new challenges to the traditional sovereignty of the nation-state abound. In such an environment, we may have to begin to ask ourselves what sense it makes to speak of an American organization loyal to or reflecting a particular set of national traditions. How far should we go in stressing our exceptionalism when clearly the world is moving toward greater and greater interdependence; when our Buddhist values themselves stress such interdependence; and when, as our nation’s history teaches us, only in the very broadest terms, if at all, is there a distinctive “American” culture? Even if we could prove to the world’s satisfaction that we were exceptional, do we really want to go there as an organization?

Alexis deTocqueville, the French writer whose classical study of the American way of life is read and re-read today for insights into this dilemma, suggests something of the impossibility of the task, a difficulty rooted in the American personality itself. “No prudent man dared to be too certain,” he observed, “of exactly who he was or what he was about; everyone had to be prepared to become someone else. To be ready for such perilous transmigrations was to become an American.” Not only was American identity unfixed and constantly changing, it was an unstable element, “bottled lightning” in the words of another American commentator, holding in containment forces that were both dangerous and illuminative.

The indeterminacy of the American personality, its resistance to efforts to categorize and foreshorten it, does not mean that the materials do not exist for constructing a composite American identity. American character has been forged in a series of collective experiences—in the settlement of the nation by successive waves of immigrants (most voluntarily but many involuntarily; Africans, debtors, and indentured servants, for example), each bringing their own distinctive culture and folkways to the mix; in the two great cataclysms of our history, the American Revolution and the Civil War; in the challenges of rapid urban industrialization; and in the evolution of a culture industry whose stereotypes are at least as important for defining who we are as are any of our most

authentic experiences. Running through all of these experiences have been “two inner drives, two central spirits,” according to the historian Bernard Bailyn. One of them is an inveterate distrust of power, whether collected into the hands of a single individual, an interest group or the state. Leaders of the American Revolution developed an elaborate system of checks and balances, what another historian has called “a harmonious system of mutual frustration,” to control, limit and restrict the use of power and to ensure responsible and humane leadership. This spirit remains a permanent legacy of the Revolution. SGI-USA will be an “American” organization to the extent that it too breathes and upholds this spirit as one of its highest aspirations.

The second inner drive according to Bailyn is the American opposition to privilege; the belief that next to power it is privilege, artificial and man-made, that has blocked the dream of equal opportunity for all. “Everywhere in America the principle prevailed that in a free community,” Bailyn writes, “the purpose of institutions is to liberate people, not to confine them, and to give them the substance and the spirit to stand firm before forces that would restrict them.” The struggle against privilege has often been a bitter one in the history of the United States, forced underground at various times only to burst forth again with new and irrepressible vigor. The immigrant history of the country is a good case in point.

Immigrant diversity, as fundamental as it has been in shaping the United States, has not always been the source of celebration and national pride that we sometimes think. It has also been a source of worry for those who through the ages have sought consensus (and avoided conflict) over the beliefs and values that might guide American development. The emergence in the late 19th, early 20th centuries of key phrases like “Americanization,” “assimilation” and hyphenate-Americans was a response to the hardening of racial and ethnic lines of difference, but it was also something else: a conscientious effort to suppress those differences and fashion a vision of America that essentially excluded everyone but its original European settlers.

The notion that ethnic minorities and non-whites might pose a “problem” for the larger, universalizing project of American ultra-nationalists is still with us today, albeit in more subtle forms. It exists in such mandated public displays of loyalty as saluting the flag and pledging allegiance; in efforts to expunge from American speech untranslatable foreign words and phrases, except where they refer to such harmless items as the food we eat or the clothes we wear (no one I think would argue about eliminating the taco (Sp), chow mein (Ch), sushi (Jpn), denim (Fr), or dungarees (Hindi) from the lexicon); in the elimination of bilingual educational programs and in the growing movement against non-standard forms of English.

The controversy over language illustrates some of the difficulties Americans have had in understanding and accepting the diversity of sub-cultures that have existed and continue to exist in the United States. We no longer simply ask, “What does it mean to be an American?” but now also want to know, more contentiously, “What is an acceptable language for Americans?” Certainly there was a time, not very long ago, when the desire to retain elements of foreign culture, including immigrants’ native language, was stigmatized as “un-American.” In the process of Americanizing itself, SGI-USA would be making a great mistake, however innocently or inadvertently, to align itself with this cramped and cramping vision of the American dream. Linguistic diversity is a fact of American life. What decides whether this or that foreign word or phrase enters the common pool has more to do ultimately with usage in a democracy than with policy and

prescription.

There is an alternative to the vision of America that sees English language and custom as the primary carrier of our ideals. One that keeps better faith with the quintessentially American struggle against power and privilege. In 1916, the publicist Randolph Bourne called for a trans-national America, declaring that America “shall be what the immigrant will have a hand in making it, and not what a ruling class, descendants of those British stocks which were the first permanent immigrants, decide what America shall be.”

When we can view the enriching possibilities of other cultures as in some important way our own, we will have begun to appreciate our role as international citizens with an aesthetic appreciation of all cultures (including the culture of our ancestors). For Bourne this decentralized and internationalist pluralism was the only truly “American,” democratic route to a “genuine integrity, a wholeness and soundness of enthusiasm and purpose.” The alternative was the Melting Pot, “a tasteless, colorless fluid of uniformity” fit only for “cultural half-breeds” and “hyphenates,” men and women “without a cultural country, cultural outlaws, without taste, without standards but those of the mob.”

More recently, in a talk given as part of Soka University of America’s Human Rights Lecture Series, Cornell West, professor of Afro-American studies and religion at Harvard University, criticized the tendency to view cultural and racial differences as “part of an undifferentiated blob. A homogeneous and monolithic conglomerate. Which makes black people interchangeable and substitutable. Which means you only have to ask one what the rest of us think.” Other ethnic minorities as well as members of the urban and rural poor often express the same frustration—the tendency to be seen as “objects and abstractions rather than persons and individuals” tied by bonds of love and loyalty to a particular community or cultural expression. For West the solution lies in developing an “empathetic imagination,” an ability to identify with those who are “outside of one’s own space and life and lifestyles.” Unless we expand that “scope of empathy,” we will continue to talk past each other and to misconnect, especially over perhaps the most important, if sensitive, conversation of all, the conversation about race.

When I think of the United States I think of one of my favorite quotes from Nichiren Dai-shonin in “A Ship to Cross the Sea of Suffering,” where it says “All rivers flow into the sea, but does the sea turn back their waters? The currents of hardship pour into the sea of the Lotus Sutra and rush against its votary. The river is not rejected by the ocean; nor does the votary reject suffering. Were it not for the flowing rivers, there would be no sea” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 33).

We have a great tradition in America, one we have often had to fight to uphold, of accepting to our shores and accepting as full citizens people from all over the world. We have not always accepted them unconditionally, expecting them to conform at different times in our history to skewed notions of what it means to be an American. But in our finest hours we have resisted this temptation and have accepted new immigrants cultural baggage and all; indeed we have built one of our most powerful and enduring national myths around the celebration of these foreign cultural customs and traits and our ability to embrace and give full play to them.

An SGI-USA that is able to love and embrace humanity in all its cultural and linguistic diversity, beginning with its own representative membership, will be an American organization in the best sense of the term. It will not get bogged down in the specifics of terminology or in the foreign origins of certain forms and procedures, but strive, as one of the deepest aims of the SGI, to take all that the various people of our organization can offer

and create a liberating whole out of it. Our cultural differences from other countries will remain important, but we will be able to see them as differences of degree rather than of kind, all springing nevertheless from the same fundamental hopes and dreams.

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