

The Sōka Gakkai in Cambodia

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Drawing from the author's firsthand experiences in Cambodia in May 2006, this scholarly note offers an up-to-date look at the influence of a thriving international chapter of the Sōka Gakkai, a Japanese new religion based on the tenets of Nichiren Buddhism.

The Sōka Gakkai & Cambodia's Recent History

Since the 1960s, the Japan-based Sōka Gakkai, a lay Buddhist organization proselytizing its version of Nichiren Buddhism, has evolved into a worldwide movement with more than twelve million members in 190 countries and territories.¹ Sōka Gakkai International (SGI), the international wing of the Sōka Gakkai, has made significant gains in reaching out to the native populations in each of the jurisdictions it has penetrated. Its greatest successes have been in South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, parts of Southeast Asia, and even North and South America.

The subject of this brief piece is the rapidly growing SGI chapter in Cambodia. The Sōka Gakkai existed as a small movement consisting primarily of foreigners in Cambodia before the rise of the Khmer Rouge in the mid-1970s, after which it completely disappeared. Today, SGI has returned to Cambodia. It has grown from a small handful of followers in the late 1990s to over one thousand in early 2007. Cambodia remains a deeply Buddhist country with its native practices and temples fully intact, so I was compelled to find out who is joining in Cambodia and, moreover, to ask why a Japanese-based new religion has established a viable foothold there.

I interviewed many Cambodians from all age groups while traveling throughout the country in May 2006. One factor emerging from these discussions is the need for hope for a better future. Many Cambodians admitted a sense of hopelessness in their lives. Everybody I met had lost close family members. Family life had been destroyed; their homes and villages, obliterated. They felt betrayed by their own government and abandoned by the outside world. Virtually everybody in Cambodia today is quite poor.

True, there is little real starvation; most young Cambodians look healthy, and children are working hard in primary and secondary schools across the country—but there are very few prospects for high school and college graduates. Many educated Cambodians have no real hope for a productive professional life. They are caught in a quagmire of depression.

The Return of Sōka Gakkai to Cambodia

No Sōka Gakkai activities took place in Cambodia during the period of Khmer Rouge rule (1975–79) and Vietnamese occupation (1979–1990); but, with the reopening of Cambodia after 1988, many Cambodians who had been living abroad during this difficult period returned, and a growing number of foreigners—many of them involved in relief work—traveled to Cambodia. Several of these returnees and an active relief worker were SGI members who successfully began converting small numbers of Cambodians to their practice. By mid-1998, there were approximately fifty actively practicing members, virtually all of them native Cambodians. At that time, there was no organized Cambodian SGI chapter and no discernable assistance from the SGI headquarters in Tokyo other than some occasional study materials and a Gohonzon² brought from Bangkok.

Rapid growth in membership started around 2000, so much so that, in 2002, SGI built a cultural center in Phnom Penh and received a charter from the Cambodian government recognizing it as a legitimate religious organization. I was told in May 2006 that there were 1,006 members in Cambodia, some based in the capital but many others spread out in rural villages forming an arc around Phnom Penh. I observed very few elderly members; most seemed to be in their late twenties to mid-forties. I also saw many very young members, in many cases the children of older members. Some scattered communities with Sōka Gakkai members apparently exist in the interior of Cambodia as well, but I interviewed only members from greater Phnom Penh.

By and large, Sōka Gakkai's basic structural model has been faithfully reproduced in Cambodia. According to the usual organization, divisions and departments separate adherents by sex and age: a Men's Division, a Women's Division, and a Youth Division. Also reproduced are rituals centered in prayers (*daimoku* 題目, *gongyō* 勤行) before the sacred object (*gohonzon* 御本尊); the custom of "discussion meetings" (*zadankai* 座談会) as a feature to attract new members and keep the constituents cohesive; and the ever-present invigoration of the present spiritual leader, Ikeda Daisaku 池田大作 (b. 1928).

SGI Cambodia (SGI-C), like most of its counterparts in Japan and elsewhere, is distinctly a lay movement that works without the participation of any priests or formalized temple system. The only salaried worker is an office manager. All members work on a voluntary basis and have active every-

day lives outside of Sōka Gakkai, but they meet on a frequent basis either at the cultural center or in smaller community gatherings.

Interviews with SGI Cambodia Members

During my May 2006 visit to Cambodia, I visited the SGI Cultural Center in Phnom Penh, where I attended various SGI functions and interviewed several SGI leaders. Overall, I interviewed about twenty SGI members and read perhaps as many printed “experiences.” The clearest statement of SGI objectives came from one of the leaders at the cultural center: “We have three key principles: To develop a sense of compassion, to relieve the suffering of others, and to help others find happiness. Each one of our own human revolutions (our individual transformations of character) helps to make Cambodia a happier country.”

A collective meeting with five schoolteachers at the SGI Cultural Center told me most about the spirit and drive of the SGI in Cambodia and provided clues as to why SGI has begun to develop roots in Cambodian society. The following is a composite of the interviews with these teachers using their own words. They all proudly provided their names, but I have chosen to retain their anonymity.

Teacher 1 (*a young female primary school teacher*): I was introduced to SGI by a friend who is a member. We Cambodians live in a highly stressful and conflicted society. Nobody trusts anybody, and there is a sense of rage everywhere. But we cannot continue living in a world like this. Since joining, I have chanted *nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō* [南無妙法蓮華經, the *daimoku* mantra] for many hundreds of hours. I have found a melting of old hatreds in my heart and a growing sense of compassion for others. I have found so many like-minded people in SGI—there is a new spirit here of people genuinely wanting to help and care for others. None of us has much money, but together we can forge a new nation—we have a real sense of hope for a better future. I want to teach these values to my students.

Teacher 2 (*a middle-aged male school principal*): When the Khmer Rouge genocide occurred in my boyhood, people became desperate and each person had to fight for his own survival. The whole sense of community collapsed. Everybody was suffering and we all lost our families. We had to struggle on our own to survive and we learned to trust no one. Life was little more than a daily struggle just to survive. We really saw each other with bad eyes. But Nichiren’s Buddhism teaches us to live in the present, to overcome the suffering of the past. I want to train a new generation of young Cambodians to love, trust, and respect each other.

Teacher 3 (*a young female primary school teacher*): We learn through this Buddhism that we have to take responsibility for our actions. If we all just sit around considering our own misery, nothing will ever change in my

country, but, as a teacher, I can teach my students how to help themselves and help others. We have to start somewhere. Many foreigners have come here to help us, but the truth is that we must learn to work together and help ourselves. I even got my own parents to join—and they have become far more communicative and compassionate in their nature.

Wherever one goes in Cambodia, there is a pervasive sense of despair. But, at least in the minds of the SGI members I interviewed, a real reversal of this despair has begun. SGI members share a true sense of hope that things have already gotten better. SGI members in Cambodia and elsewhere feel a strong sense of empowerment—that all members must assume responsibility for their lives and have the power to change their destinies through their own actions.

The Need for Empowerment

Cambodians need a lot more than foreign aid to revive their country. Foreign medical supplies, money, and schoolbooks are useful; but, to survive, Cambodians need to begin believing in themselves again. They need to put the past behind them; they must begin working together to rebuild their lives, families, and communities. They need a strong injection of self-confidence so that, working on their own, they come to believe they can succeed as a culture and country.

SGI-C members remark that Cambodia suffered terribly from the thrust of negative karma during the latter half of the twentieth century; they further believe that their chanting of the *daimoku* and community work have allowed them to move beyond the horrors that afflicted their country. Members noted that they felt that chanting gives them more control over their destinies. By changing their own karma, they can gradually remove the overwhelmingly dark karma that has brought such misery to Cambodia.

SGI-C members, like those interviewed above, feel a sense of real liberation. They have freed themselves from the stress, frustration, anger, and mental deprivation of the past. They may not be noticeably better off materially than some of their non-SGI member peers (although most members I met had steady jobs, were well educated, and lived better than most other Cambodians live), but they demonstrate a very strong sense of self-confidence. They have clear goals in life and are fully confident that they can attain them within the scope of a normal life.

A Sense of Community

Another factor leading to the success of SGI-C is that the Sōka Gakkai is very skilled in fostering a sense of community—important especially in Cambodia, where the sense of community was so badly shattered by three

decades of civil war. The concept that the Sōka Gakkai in Cambodia is every member's "extended family" is extremely important. I saw in each interview and "experience" that the heart of the movement is a system of nurturing, wherein each member is responsible for the health and welfare of other members. The following statement, from another young female schoolteacher, places the important sense of community into clear context:

Our culture traditionally honored family and community, but the Khmer Rouge ripped apart our families and destroyed our communities. I once felt alone in the world and felt a sense of anger that I should suffer in this way. But SGI-C is all about a community—I now have genuinely kind friends who care about me and who let me care about them. The truly beautiful thing about this Buddhism is that it teaches us about understanding others and caring about our country. I remember so well when this country had no peace, but now we devote a lot of our time together chanting for peace. It is this sense of solidarity and true companionship that I like most about SGI-C.

The young teacher made reference to a passage from Nichiren's famous 1260 tract, the *Risshō Ankokuron* 立正安国論 (Treatise on Spreading Peace Throughout the Country by Establishing the True *Dharma*), that was mentioned in a talk by Japan-based SGI President Ikeda and later published in an SGI-C brochure.³ The passage states: "If you care anything about your personal security, you should first of all pray for order and tranquility throughout the four quarters of the land, should you not?" To this passage, she added: "Our daily prayers for peace will radiate out from our hearts and cross the land and will help end the awful nightmare our country has experienced."

SGI-C strongly stresses the point that one must be a responsible member of society. Nobody can sit by the wayside and expect benefits to float down like manna from heaven. Many Cambodians have become so accustomed to receiving aid that they have not engendered a strong work ethic into their lives, but SGI-C and its members declare that they have a responsibility not only to themselves and their families but also to their communities and their country.

SGI's tradition across Southeast Asia of forming small community chapters is a vital part of its Cambodian operation. Members of these local groups often meet in each other's homes, thereby creating a tightly bonded group of members who socialize together on a frequent basis. The new member of SGI therefore finds a ready-made group of friends that can become a very important source of individual and community strength.

Cambodian SGI members feel emboldened to work hard for themselves and their country, as is evident from the following printed "experience" proudly handed to me by Neth Vorleak, office manager of the SGI

Cultural Center in Phnom Penh. Neth was born in a peaceful and prosperous Cambodia in 1959, but she tragically lost both her parents and several other family members. She survived the harsh life in a Khmer Rouge commune and eventually moved to Phnom Penh. There, she worked in a government office and met Joan Anderson, who introduced her to Nichiren Buddhism. After some hesitation, Neth started chanting and soon found herself in a good-paying job. She credits Nichiren Buddhism and her life as an SGI member for releasing her from the bondage of her earlier life:

Throughout my years of faith, I have realized that this practice advocates that women are not inferior or unclean beings [as found in the traditional Buddhism of Cambodia]. Nichiren declared the absolute equality of men and women in realizing the innate Buddhahood nature within our lives. This is an encouraging fact for women like me, especially for the women of Cambodia today.

This practice of Nichiren Buddhism has also made me realize that I want to work for the peace and happiness of all Cambodian people. . . . I totally agree with what my favorite Gosho [御書, “honored writing” of Nichiren], “On Establishing the Correct Teaching,” states: “When a nation becomes disordered, it is the spirits that first show signs of rampancy. Because the spirits become rampant, all the people of the nation become disordered.” Another passage from the same Gosho reads: “If you care anything about your personal security, you should first of all pray for order and tranquility throughout the four quarters of the land, should you not?” As such, I am very determined to strengthen my faith, and share Nichiren Buddhism with more people in Cambodia, so as to enable more people to practice this wonderful Mystic Law and enable true peace and security in Cambodia.

Proselytization

Another factor in SGI-C’s successful start is that it has not tried to grow too big too fast. Today, not only SGI chapters abroad but also the Sōka Gakkai in Japan focus entirely on building smaller, viable organizations of dedicated members. Proselytization most often takes place by members talking to friends, family members, neighbors, and colleagues. Membership in SGI-C often appears in geographic clumps where the work of one or more members has paid huge dividends in terms of converting new members.

SGI’s Friendly Ties with the Cambodian Government

Another key reason for SGI’s success in Cambodia appears to be its friendly ties with the Cambodian government. SGI-C leaders stress the importance of these ties, noting that these “good feelings” date back at least to the early 1990s, when the Sōka Gakkai in Japan donated funds and 300,000 radios to

Cambodia. The goals of SGI-C are to win the respect of government and community leaders—and to win recognition as a worthy organization because of its active service and its participation in community and patriotic events.

Conclusion: From Benefits for the Individual to Benefits for the Nation

SGI attempts to provide members with a clear spiritual package that is easy to understand but complex enough to require continued study. Its well-coordinated organizational structure and socialization process bring members together frequently, helping thereby to create a sense of belonging. SGI also attempts to instill a sense of confidence in many members through group affirmation and support. These positive feelings, it seems, further ensure members' loyalty to the group and to the organization that is liberating them from the horrors of seemingly endless civil war.

Members were virtually unanimous that the quality of their lives had improved greatly after joining SGI-C. Most said they had become calmer, more self-confident, and happier in their work and relationships. Significant numbers said they had become more optimistic and were better able to make clear and informed decisions. Virtually all Cambodians I interviewed said they had chanted to realize a goal or set of goals, and they had achieved many of their desired results. Several members said chanting gave them more control over their destinies and positively affected the lives of their neighbors. By changing their own karma as well as that of others, members felt they were contributing not only to the betterment of their own lives but also to the betterment of their respective communities and country.

Notes

¹Background on the Sōka Gakkai in Japan, including its history and emphasis on pacifism, can be found in my article on religion, politics, and Japanese constitutional reform in this issue (pp. 157–72, esp. pp. 160–62).

²The Gohonzon is a mandala said originally to have been inscribed by Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–82) himself.

³For more background on Nichiren's treatise, see note 14 in my article on religion, politics, and Japanese constitutional reform in this issue (p. 171).