

## THE SOKA GAKKAI IN CAMBODIA

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Since the 1960s, the Japanese-based Soka Gakkai has evolved into an international movement with more than twelve million members in 190 countries and territories worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Soka Gakkai International, or SGI, the international wing of Soka 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, and Southeast Asia, where SGI has attracted tens of thousands of ethnic Chinese followers. SGI has also done well in the United States and South America and has smaller chapters across Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, and Oceania.

The subject of this brief study is the rapid growth of SGI in Cambodia. The Soka Gakkai had existed as a small movement consisting primarily of foreigners in Cambodia before the rise of the Khmer Rouge in the mid-1970s, but then it completely disappeared. Today SGI has returned to Cambodia growing from a small handful of followers in the late 1990s to over a thousand faithful in early 2007. Cambodia remains a deeply Buddhist country with its native practices and temples fully intact, so it is interesting to ask why a Japanese-based New Religion has established a viable foothold there and to find out who is joining.

### **Overview of Buddhism in Cambodian History**

Buddhism has a long history in Cambodia, dating back to at least the late twelfth century. At that time a “Sanskritized ‘Mahayana’ Buddhism” coexisted with a variety of Brahmanical beliefs and practices, but by the early fourteenth century, a Pali-based form of Theravada Buddhism became dominant. Since then, Ian Harris notes, “it has been customary to regard Cambodia as a Theravadan country, even though ‘Mahayanist’ elements have survived down to the present day.”<sup>2</sup> Over the

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<sup>1</sup>These numbers are provided by Soka Gakkai International and cannot be verified independently. They are accessible from <http://www.sgi.org>.

<sup>2</sup>Ian Harris, “Buddhism in Extremis: The Case of Cambodia” Ian Harris, ed., *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-Century Asia* (New York and London: Continuum, 1999), p. 54.

next six centuries Cambodia developed its own form of Theravada Buddhism.

The Khmer Rouge, which ruled Cambodia from 1975 to 1979, took a terrible toll on Buddhist institutions and clergy. They closed and then dismantled virtually all monasteries, using the rubble for building materials. “Buddha images were beheaded, stupas smashed, and ancient palm-leaf manuscripts were used for rolling cigarettes. Remaining monastic premises became the location for local Khmer Rouge Economic Bureaux or, if they were remote – torture, and execution centres.”<sup>3</sup> Every effort was made to destroy every aspect of Buddhism: Buddhist clergy were executed in mass numbers and libraries containing any Buddhist works were destroyed.

When the Vietnamese captured Phnom Penh in 1979, there were only about one hundred ordained Cambodian monks in existence, most of them in Thai or Vietnamese exile.<sup>4</sup> Since then, there has been a modest recovery as temples and monasteries have reopened and growing numbers of young monks have been ordained. When visiting a monastery in Kampong Thom in central Cambodia, I met a fifteen-year old novice monk who pointed towards his crude dormitory, proudly telling me that there were twenty or more novices living there, most of them younger than him. Today Cambodia is a nation of young people, with many families bringing up four to six children and often sending one of their sons to a temple.<sup>5</sup> It appears that Buddhism is experiencing a healthy revival.

It is apparent, however, that not all young Cambodians are returning to traditional Khmer Buddhism. When I asked groups of educated young Cambodians in Kampong Thom who worked for Japanese and other NGOs or as health workers about their religious practices, most replied that they had no use for traditional religious practices. Although there was no apparent Soka Gakkai presence in this region, these young educated Cambodians very much resembled the younger and young-middle-aged educated SGI members I interviewed in Phnom Penh.

Virtually all interviewed SGI members said that their families had stopped practicing Buddhism during the disruptive Khmer Rouge years and

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<sup>3</sup>Harris, “Buddhism in Extremis,” p. 66.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>This figure is based on anecdotal evidence. I made several surprise visits to English classes at several high schools in rural Cambodia and was told by each student I met that he or she had three to six brothers or sisters.

that part of their attraction to SGI is that it is, itself, a Buddhist group at a time when they felt a yearning for a Buddhist presence in their lives. The fact that Japan has such a good image in Cambodia, because of the massive Japanese aid effort there, was also an attractive feature.

### **Perspectives on SGI's Universal Growth**

When tens of thousands of Japanese immigrated to North and South America a century ago, they built their own temples and invited Buddhist priests from Japan to tend to the needs of these entirely Japanese congregations. The older, largely Buddhist congregations have largely faded as later generations became assimilated into the native population. Japan's contemporary New Religious Movements (NRM's), however, have become genuinely global movements because their teachings have attracted non-ethnic Japanese faithful abroad and today, survive as autonomous units. Today a number of Japanese NRM's such as SGI, Mahikari, and Tenrikyo are growing in Southeast Asia, North and South America, and elsewhere because they have successfully adapted rituals, languages, customs, and leadership to non-Japanese contexts.<sup>6</sup>

SGI in particular has succeeded in developing a strong following in many countries because, as Peter Clarke notes, "though a very Japanese form of Buddhism, it appears capable of universal application: no one is obliged to abandon their native culture or nationality in order to fully participate in the spiritual and cultural life of the movement."<sup>7</sup> Soka Gakkai leaders, while maintaining the essential elements of their faith, have released their form of Buddhism from its inherently Japanese roots by skillfully adapting their religious practices to each culture that they seek to penetrate. They recruit local leaders who direct the foreign chapter free of any direct control from Tokyo, conduct all religious exercises, publish all documents in the native languages, and emphasize those traits that are important to the host culture. Clarke, for example, notes that SGI practices in the United States that appeal to many American members are "the

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<sup>6</sup>Harumi Befu, ed., *Globalizing Japan* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2001), pp. 74-76.

<sup>7</sup>Peter B. Clarke, "'Success' and 'Failure': Japanese New Religions Abroad" Peter B. Clarke, ed., *Japanese New Religions in Global Perspective* (Curzon Press: Richmond, Surrey, England: 2000), p. 281.

absence of moralizing, the stress on individual choice, and the need to take responsibility for one's own actions."<sup>8</sup>

National SGI chapters, however, are autonomous on an organizational level. They are run and manned by local nationals and all business is conducted in local languages. National chapters make their own decisions, generally raise their own funds, and choose their own leaders. Links with Tokyo are generally informational. Strong efforts are made to show the local community that SGI follows the culture and customs of its host nation. Its international success also stems from the fact that it does not promote itself or its doctrines as being inherently Japanese, emphasizing instead a form of Buddhism, though founded in Japan, as applicable to everyone everywhere. Spiritual leader Ikeda Daisaku, however, is revered and studied in every Gakkai chapter I have visited from Staunton, Virginia to Phnom Penh.<sup>9</sup> This dramatic respect and loyalty to the aging Ikeda plays an important role in uniting the Soka Gakkai worldwide.

My research on SGI members in Canada, the United States, Southeast Asia, Australia, and New Zealand indicates that the Soka Gakkai attracts followers because of what they perceive to be its strong message of peace, happiness, success, and self-empowerment. Many adherents interviewed or surveyed by this writer believe that the Buddhism espoused by the Soka Gakkai gives them some degree of empowerment over their personal environments, that through their hard work and devout practice they can overcome their suffering and find happiness in the here and now. They also find great satisfaction and a sense of community joining with other people who follow the same faith. The practice of having small groups of members meet together regularly to pray, discuss personal and mutual concerns, and socialize as close friends is an important social reason for the success of the Soka Gakkai, not only in Japan, but abroad as well.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 285.

<sup>9</sup>Ikeda Daisaku served as the third president of the Soka Gakkai from 1960 to 1979 and is currently the Honorary President of SGI. He is the spiritual leader of Soka Gakkai constantly visiting Soka Gakkai chapters in Japan and abroad. His many writings on Buddhism are studied by Soka Gakkai members throughout the world.

<sup>10</sup>This interpretation is bolstered by the work of Hammond and Machacek in the United States, as well as Wilson and Dobbelaere in Great Britain. Their studies related the growth of SGI in these countries to value shifts

Many of the younger SGI members in these countries are also very well-educated. I was especially impressed by the large number of well-educated, upwardly mobile, ethnic Chinese members I met in Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, and Singapore. There seems to exist a strong affinity between a religious dogma that emphasizes “mental work” (attitudes and individual focus) and the well-educated who have to work very hard to attain their educational credentials. This phenomenon may well explain why this form of Buddhism is attractive to this particular social stratum and also helps address why the Japanese origin of the Soka Gakkai does not seem to matter very much to these non-Japanese converts.

Cambodia, however, is very different from any of the other countries where I have studied SGI. Few countries in the modern era have experienced the trauma of genocide that the Khmer Rouge inflicted on its own people – taking the lives of almost two million of the nation’s eight million citizens. Virtually all of the country’s doctors, teachers, and intellectuals died or fled the country. Thirty years of civil war from the late 1960s to the mid-1990s brought further ruin and misery to the whole nation.

I interviewed many Cambodians from all age groups while traveling through the country in May, 2006.<sup>11</sup> One factor emerging from

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associated with growing economic well-being. In short, the idea, drawn from other cross-national studies of value change in advanced industrial societies, is that as economic security rises, so does the population’s desire for intangible rewards such as happiness, self-fulfillment, and aesthetic pleasure. See: Bryan Wilson and Karel Dobbelaere, *A Time to Chant: The Soka Gakkai Buddhists in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Phillip Hammond and David Machacek, *Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); David Machacek and Bryan Wilson, eds., *Global Citizens: The Soka Gakkai Buddhist Movement in the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Daniel Metraux, *The Lotus and the Maple Leaf: The Soka Gakkai Buddhist Movement in Canada* (New York: University Press of America, 1996); and *The International Expansion of a Modern Buddhist Movement: The Soka Gakkai in Southeast Asia and Australia* (New York: University Press of America, 2001).

<sup>11</sup>See Daniel A. Metraux, “Cambodia Today: The Slow Road Back From the Inferno and Killing Fields Revisited,” *The Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 28 (2006).

these discussions is a need for hope for a better future. Many Cambodians admitted to 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, and they felt betrayed by their own government and abandoned by the outside world. Life is gradually improving for many Cambodians and on the surface everything looks quite normal, but the mental and physical scars of three decades of turmoil are very deep and very real. I was told over and over by older Cambodians that when one loses their family, home, and village, there is a sense of desperate rootlessness and instability that pervades their world views.

There is also the fact that 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. Outside of the tourist areas around Angkor Wat and Phnom Penh, there are no industries and very few jobs that lead to meaningful careers. Many educated Cambodians have no real hope for a productive professional life. This fact adds to a pervasive sense of gloom among many well-trained Cambodians, who often see no alternative but to leave their native land. Consequently, they are caught in a quagmire of depression.

#### **The Return of Soka Gakkai to Cambodia**

There was no Soka Gakkai activity during this period of Khmer Rouge rule and Vietnamese occupation, 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. Two of these people were devout Soka Gakkai members, Seng Vuthi, a Cambodian businessman who had been living in southern California during the worst years of Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese rule, and Joan Anderson, a British relief worker who had been chanting for four years when she first visited in 1990. When asked in 2006 why he returned to his impoverished homeland after developing a successful life in California, he replied, "I am Cambodian and it is my duty and resolve to do what I can to help my people recover from the disasters of the recent past."

When Anderson returned to Cambodia for a four-year stay starting in 1993, she found a group of about seven people chanting. They had begun to meet once a week to chant and study Buddhism together. Vuthi and

Anderson made contact in 1994, by which time Vuthi had introduced several colleagues and members of his extended family to the practice. Several other Cambodians living in the United States and France also told their family members about the practice and encouraged them to try it. By mid-1998 there were approximately fifty actively practicing members, virtually all of them native Cambodians. At this time there was no organized Cambodian SGI-chapter and no discernable assistance from SGI headquarters in Tokyo other than Gohonzon,<sup>12</sup> which was brought from Bangkok, and occasional study materials. Some external support came from a Cambodian committee within SGI-USA based in Los Angeles, which had been translating guidance and study materials from SGI-USA and sending it to Cambodia.

During the early 1990s, however, there was some degree of Soka Gakkai activity in the country. The Soka Gakkai Youth Division in Japan collected and sent two hundred and eighty thousand used radios in response to a request by the United Nations. The hope was that the radios would be distributed to every village to be utilized for educational purposes during the 1993 elections to let people know about the new election system and the virtues of democracy. SGI Youth in Kyushu, Japan collected and sold used postcards to raise enough funds to build two elementary schools in Cambodia that were subsequently named after Soka Gakkai founder, Makiguchi Tsunesaburo. Soka Gakkai aid was part of a massive ongoing effort by many Japanese individuals, corporations, organizations, and government agencies to provide assistance to Cambodia.

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, but a substantial number in their late twenties, thirties, and early to mid-forties. There were many very young members as well, in many cases the children of older members. There are also said to be some scattered communities with Soka Gakkai members in the interior of Cambodia, but I only interviewed members from greater Phnom Penh.

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<sup>12</sup>The Gohonzon is a mandala said originally to have been inscribed by Nichiren (1220-1282) himself.

By and large, Soka Gakkai's basic structural model has been faithfully reproduced in Cambodia. There is the usual organization with divisions and departments that separate adherents by sex and age, such as a men's division, a women's division, and a youth division. There are rituals centered in prayers (*daimoku*, *gongyō*) before the sacred object (*gohonzon*); there is the custom of "discussion meetings" (*zadankai*) as a feature to attract new members and keep the constituents cohesive; there is also the ever-present invigoration of Ikeda's leadership.

SGI Cambodia like most of its counterparts in Japan and elsewhere is a distinctly lay movement that works without the participation of any priests or formalized temple.<sup>13</sup> There are no salaried workers except one office manager. Everyone works on a voluntary basis and lives active lives outside of Soka Gakkai, but they meet on a frequent basis either at the cultural center or in smaller community gatherings.

### **Interviews with SGI Cambodia Members**

This study began in 1999 when I was writing a broader book, *The International Expansion of a Modern Buddhist Movement: The Soka Gakkai in Southeast Asia and Australia*, a work that includes chapters on research on SGI in Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Hong Kong/Macau, and Australia. I heard about a budding SGI movement in Cambodia and did some extensive interviewing with Joan Anderson and other SGI officials in Tokyo who provided me with several life "experiences" produced by Cambodian members. I published a short section in my book based on these interviews and "experiences" and vowed to one day make a trip to Cambodia to see it for myself. That opportunity came in 2006.

During my 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 its leaders at the culture 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

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<sup>13</sup>The Singapore Soka Association is the only exception to this rule. There is a small temple and priest to meet the spiritual needs of older members who grew up with a tradition of Buddhist priests and temples.

human revolutions (our individual transformations of character) helps to make Cambodia a happier country.”

The Soka Gakkai insists that the very core of its Buddhism is the “human revolution” (*ningen kakumei*) that the believer will experience through his or her deep faith and practice. The practitioner will become stronger, more self-confident, and better able to achieve his or her goals. SGI-C member Che Boramy describes what happened to her when she experienced this revolution: “Although I chanted very little each morning and evening, I began to feel some form of relief [from earlier “sadness” and pain during the Khmer Rouge era] within myself. I overcame my inherent shyness and became a stronger person.” She credits her religious practice with bringing her new close friendships, a closer relationship with her family, and, most importantly, a sense of optimism. She was no longer without any direction in life.

It was a collective meeting with five young middle-aged school teachers at the SGI Culture Center that told me most about the spirit and drive of 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 One (young woman, primary school teacher) said:

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-myoho-renge-kyo* (devotion to the wondrous Law of the Lotus Sutra) 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 have 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 Two (middle-aged male school principal) added:

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 Daishonin'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 and respect each other.

Teacher Three (middle-aged woman, primary school teacher) stated:

I was influenced to join this form of Buddhism from an aunt who had learned about it in France. As a school of Mahayana Buddhism, it is superior to the Buddhism that we traditionally practice here in Cambodia. There are fewer rules about how we are supposed to lead our lives and a much greater emphasis on compassion. The true Law of Life is that people need to have compassion for each other – which is something really lacking in Cambodia today. I used to be impatient for change and always focused on my own misery, but now I realize that everybody in Cambodia is suffering and I find so much more satisfaction in life by helping my students. We are doing good because of our fervent chanting for peace!

Teacher Four (young woman, primary school teacher) commented:

We learn through this Buddhism that we have to take responsibility for our own 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.

Teacher Five (young female primary school teacher) said:

It used to be that everybody I knew was in a bad mood. Everybody was obsessed with his or her own misery and with their moving ahead in life on their own. I want to teach my thirty two students to be considerate of others...I don't preach this form of Buddhism in class, but recently two students came to chant with me.

These interviews reflect themes found in other interviews as well as published "experiences." Wherever one goes in Cambodia, there is a pervasive sense of despair. However, at least in the minds of SGI members interviewed by this writer, there has been a real reversal of this process. There is a true sense of hope that things have already gotten better and will get a lot better in the future. It is a slow and arduous process, but by working together with other Cambodians, they can achieve a better life.

This very strong sense of empowerment centers on the individual as an active actor in history and life. It is a "this-worldly" orientation that emphasizes self-improvement and a "do-it-yourself" attitude that is a common theme in Soka Gakkai doctrines taught everywhere. There is an emphasis on the centrality of the individual in that he or she has the power to change his or her own destiny through one's own actions and that one must assume responsibility for one's own life. This attitude is a key reason for SGI's appeal in other Southeast Asian countries and in Brazil where SGI has made many converts.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Need for Empowerment**

Cambodians need a lot more than foreign aid to revive their country. Foreign medical supplies, money, and school books are useful, but to survive, Cambodians need to begin believing in themselves again. They need to put the past behind them and to begin working together to rebuild their lives, families, and communities. They need a strong dose of self-

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<sup>14</sup>See Ronan Alves Pereira, "'Bodhisattvas of the Earth' to Save Brazil or, how Soka Gakkai is Conquering its place among Brazilians" in Ronan Pereira and Hideaki Matsuoka, eds., *Japanese Religions in and Beyond the Japanese Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California-Berkeley/Institute for East Asian Studies, 2007).

confidence so that by working on their own they can succeed as a society and country. They need to learn to trust each other and have faith that they can move away from the past towards a more promising future. So often Cambodians today seem to be walking around in a daze, preoccupied with the question of sheer survival.

The key to Soka Gakkai Buddhism, as it is with much of Japanese Buddhism, is an emphasis on the here and now. Bad karma has brought suffering to the world, but closely adhering to the precepts of Buddhism can help practitioners develop a better life almost immediately. This is especially true in the form of Nichiren Buddhism sponsored by the Soka Gakkai. The late Bryan Wilson once noted:

Nichiren Buddhism is a strongly individualistic religious orientation. One takes responsibility for oneself, and chanting has a powerful, albeit not exclusive, role in self-transformation. Realizing one's true identity, transcending one's karma, coming to terms with reality by using the Gohonzon as a mirror of one's own individuality – All of these central preoccupations reflect the extent to which Nichiren Buddhism focuses on self-improvement and self-help.<sup>15</sup>

Many interviewees and “experience” writers in Cambodia agree that changing their karma is the key to their practice and that karma changed in this life can bring great rewards, both tangible and intangible.

SGI Cambodia 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 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 and by changing one's own karma, they can gradually remove the overwhelmingly dark karma that has brought such misery to Cambodia. No matter how bad things were in the past, the SGI faithful in Cambodia see a bright future now for those who demonstrate strong faith, work hard for their own career development, demonstrate compassion, and offer a helping hand to others.

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<sup>15</sup>Bryan Wilson and Karel Dobbelaire, *A Time to Chant: The Soka Gakkai Buddhists in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 186-187.

The key is a positive attitude towards life and a sense that they can achieve any goal because every person is master of his own destiny. Adversity is caused by bad karma, but the power of this Buddhism can help one overcome this barrier, there is hope for happiness and success in life even for the most wretched Cambodian.

SGI Cambodia 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 that 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 Cambodians), 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. As one member noted, becoming an SGI member was like emerging out of a cold dark tunnel and into the bright sunshine. She had been a prisoner of her and her country's past, but now she had joined a "loving family" whose members genuinely enjoy taking care of each other. There is a genuine sense that things can and will get better. Indeed, it is this sense of optimism and hope for a better future that propels the lives of SGI members in Cambodia.

Another theme evident in some interviews and "experiences" is that Soka Gakkai Buddhism found a greater relevancy in the minds of some believers. I was often told that the old forms of Cambodian Buddhism, the "religion of the elders," were not terribly relevant to the needs and desires of young Cambodians. They claim to have found little solace through their traditional Buddhism and were attracted to this new Buddhism because of its emphasis on individual empowerment and its clear explanations of the causes of life's tribulations.

### **A Sense of Community**

Another factor leading to the success of SGI Cambodia, as is the case in other Southeast Asian countries, is that Soka 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 Soka Gakkai in Cambodia is every member's "extended family" is extremely important. One sees in every interview and "experience" that the heart of the movement is a system of nurturing where each member is in essence responsible for the health and welfare of other members. The following statement from another primary

school teacher, a young woman, 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.

She made reference to Nichiren's famous 1260 tract, *Rissho Ankokuuron* [On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land] that is in a talk by Japan-based SGI President Ikeda Daisaku and published in an SGI-C brochure. 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?" 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 Cambodia 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. Some Cambodians [not SGI members] I met in a small village in central Cambodia wondered out loud if I was going to leave some money for the villagers. My translator snapped back, "No way, what have you done to deserve a handout?" Many Cambodians have become so attuned to receiving aid that they have not engendered a strong work ethic into their lives, but SGI Cambodia and its members declare that they have a strong responsibility not only to themselves and their families, but also to their communities and to 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 community strength for the individual.

Cambodian SGI members feel emboldened to work hard for themselves and their country, as is evident from the following “experience” proudly handed to me by Neth Vorleak, the office manager of the Phnom Penh cultural center. Neth was born in a peaceful and prosperous Cambodia in 1959, but tragically lost both her parents and other family members. She survived the harsh life in a Khmer Rouge commune and eventually moved to Phnom Penh where she worked in a government office and met Joan Anderson who introduced her to Nichiren Buddhism. After some hesitation, she 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 our traditional Buddhism]. 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, and 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, “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 Cambodia’s successful start is that it has not tried to grow too big too fast. Many years ago, Soka Gakkai members in

Japan, the United States, and elsewhere used to proselytize on the street, urging passersby to attend “Buddhist meetings.” The result was the genuine conversion of a few people, but also the signing up of casual members who often drifted away. The Soka Gakkai in its early days in Japan and in the U.S. boasted huge membership numbers and very rapid growth. This assertion was true to some extent, but also on occasion grossly over-inflated.

Today, the Soka Gakkai in Japan, as well as SGI chapters abroad, focus entirely on building a smaller, viable organization of dedicated members. Proselytization most often takes place by members talking to friends, neighbors, and colleagues. Typically, one family member will join SGI-C for whatever set of reasons. Their rapid increase in happiness, health, self-confidence, or a major improvement in job prospects convince others in the family, typically parents, spouses, and other siblings to join. A young member will then persuade their best friend of the benefits of this Buddhism and then the friend will spread the faith to others in their family. Nevertheless, it takes some courage to convert from a native to a foreign faith, even if the base religion is the same. As one member noted, “It is not so easy to convert to Nichiren Buddhism, as it involves facing up to one’s own weaknesses and taking responsibility for one’s life.”

Membership in SGI Cambodia can often appear in geographic clumps where the work of one or more members has paid huge dividends in terms of converting new members. Pat King, an SGI member in California, writing in the SGI publication *Living Buddhism* in October 2003, describes how one isolated village became one of the principal bases for SGI Buddhism in Cambodia:

Where can you find a village with twenty-eight adult SGI members and 186 youth members? It is in the village of Samrong Kaae, Cambodia...located about thirty-three miles southeast of Phnom Penh. How did this joyful blossoming of Nichiren Buddhism occur in a country that had been decimated by thirty years of war where killing and poverty were a way of life?

In 1996, two sisters – SGI-USA members Ponnary So and Phallivan So – determined that *nam-myoho-renge-kyo* should be shared in their native village, Samrong Kaae. It was at their urging that Mr. Seng Vuthi visited the remote village to share Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. At first the villagers were very wary about

any religion that differed from their traditional Buddhism. After much dialogue though, the first SGI discussion meeting was held in Samrong Kaae.

An elementary school principal, Vann Deth Pang, is now the SGI-C leader in the village. He has four daughters and two sons who are all very strong members. Two of his daughters, both school teachers, and a young man traveled every weekend over rough roads for one and a half hours each direction to go to meetings in the capital city. They traveled on a very rickety old motorcycle that often broke down on the way. With this type of dedication, soon a total of nine teachers began chanting and many young men and women were introduced to *nam-myoho-renge-kyo*.

One teenage boy started to chant for his mother to be able to sell all the pickles she had made so they could have enough to eat. He chanted and for the first time his mother sold out every day. With that money they were able to have enough to eat! What a joy! His mother was so delighted that she managed to save enough money to buy him a bicycle. The young man shared his actual proof and more people started to chant.

One young girl chanted for her parents not to fight and also to have enough to eat. After chanting she reported that there was more harmony in her family and more rice to eat. Like the other teenagers in Cambodia, her next goal was to chant for a bicycle. Stories like these spread like wildfire among the youth of the village.<sup>16</sup>

Pat King goes on to relate how village SGI leader Pang corralled gang problems in the area by persuading the gang leader and then his followers to chant with him. The villagers are said to have been so impressed that even the chief monk at the local pagoda sent his sons and nephews to chant with SGI faithful. “No one in Samrong Kae is against SGI. The villagers think that SGI has a magical way of helping troubled

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<sup>16</sup>Pat King, “SGI Brings Hope and Joy to Cambodian Youth,” *Living Buddhism* (October, 2003), p.56.

kids. They see changes before their eyes. They see renewed hope and a positive direction for their youth.” I met some teachers from this village and its surrounding area, and in their responses to my questions, they very much echoed the sentiments expressed by King in his article.

Of course, not all new members stay or maintain their enthusiasm. There is a long history of defections and drop-outs, but the fact that SGI-Cambodia grew from only a small handful of members when I first investigated them in 1999 to well over a thousand today is evidence that many new members do stay. The group of members that I interviewed in Phnom Penh consisted of men and women in their thirties, forties, and fifties who had been members for six to twelve years or more.

### **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 Cambodian leaders stress the importance of these ties, noting that these “good feelings” date back at least to the early 1990s when the Soka Gakkai in Japan donated the 300,000 radios and other funds to Cambodia. The goal of SGI Cambodia is to win the respect of government and community leaders as a worthy organization because of its active service and its participation in community and patriotic events.

In 2002 when SGI opened its Phnom Penh culture center and received its government charter, Soka Gakkai representatives from Tokyo, led by Soka Gakkai Vice-President Takehiko Sato met then Cambodian King Sihanouk and Queen Norodom Monineath Sihanouk at the Royal Palace. The delegates presented the King with a letter from Ikeda Daisaku and a commemorative photograph of Ikeda's meeting with the King in Beijing in 1975. In his letter, Mr. Ikeda acknowledged that the King's strenuous efforts on behalf of the people throughout modern Cambodia's tumultuous years deserved high admiration and respect. Mr. Ikeda closed his letter with a vow to make further efforts to help foster Cambodian youth and to contribute to the country's resurgence and development.<sup>17</sup>

SGI Cambodia takes pride in its efforts to reach out to the local community, often ostensibly taking part in a broad range of community events such as cultural festivals. In 2002, SGI held an exhibition of art by local children that included an opening ceremony attended by members of

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<sup>17</sup>*Soka Gakkai Newsletter*, May 2002.

the government and royal family. Government officials also frequent other SGI events. For example, SGI-Cambodia held its fourth youth general meeting on March 13, 2005 at Samrong Kaae, a village some fifty-three kilometers southwest of Phnom Penh. There were 1,500 people in attendance, including government officials from the local Religious Groups Agency and the Youth Education and Sports Agency, as well as families and friends of SGI-Cambodia members. Youth leaders shared their resolve. Two exchange students from Soka University, Japan, also spoke.<sup>18</sup>

These relationships with the community and government parallel efforts by SGI in other Southeast Asian countries. Unlike Japan, where the Soka Gakkai founded its own political party, the Komeito, in the 1960s, SGI abroad is not involved in politics at all.<sup>19</sup> However, there are efforts to reach out to the communities, to take part in local and occasional national events such as cultural festivals on national holidays, and to build friendly relationships with leading cultural and government officials.

### **Conclusion**

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 brings 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 ensures their 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 Cambodia. 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

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<sup>18</sup>*Soka Gakkai Newsletter*, June 2005.

<sup>19</sup>The Komeito (today officially known as New Komeito) has consistently held about five to ten percent of the seats in both chambers of Japan's Diet since the late 1960s and today is a coalition partner of the conservative Liberal Democratic Party. The Komeito became separated from the Soka Gakkai in 1970 and has operated as an independent party ever since, but Soka Gakkai remains an active supporter of the party.

everyone 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 improvement of their respective communities and country.

SGI stresses that each member has a strong responsibility not only for his or her destiny, but also that of fellow Cambodians. They can take their personal and their nation's destinies into their own hands and they are no longer dependent on other people, authorities, or religions for their survival. This feeling is very liberating for members because it gives them a new worldview and a new way of leading their lives.

SGI Cambodia is not looking for mass conversions and is not embarking on major crusades to expand its membership. It is only a tiny pebble in a much greater sea – a thousand or more members in a nation of thirteen million. But like its counterparts elsewhere in Southeast Asia, it will continue to grow, slowly but surely. It has built a solid foundation that bodes well for the future.