

Encountering the Dharma: Daisaku Ikeda, Soka Gakkai, and the
Globalization of Buddhist Humanism.

By Richard Hughes Seager

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Review by Rebekah Humphreys, MA on June 28th 2007

In this penetrating study of the Soka Gakkai, Seager takes us on a journey, both personal and scholarly, in search of the true meaning of the Soka Gakkai; a lay organization established from Nichiren Buddhism. We are introduced to Nichiren Buddhism as a religious philosophy which claimed that the teachings of the Lotus Sutra could enable one to reach a state of happiness and follow a path that lead to enlightenment informed by wisdom, compassion and freedom. The chanting of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is an expression of the teachings of the Lotus Sutra and is chanted by Soka Gakkai members all over the world to cultivate the path to happiness and enlightenment.

Seager recognizes the Soka Gakkai as a movement that has been embroiled in controversy. On the one hand it has become a global, political and spiritual movement promoting peace, education and culture, whilst, on the other hand, it has been accused of being a self-interested cult that has created discontent within Japan. Daisaku Ikeda, the Soka Gakkai International's president, has emerged from these controversies as a man with two faces. To many people he is seen as an innovative mentor, working for the benefit of mankind, while other people see him as 'a cult leader skilfully manipulating his disciples' (p. 96.).

In the face of these controversies Seager reiterates his desire to be sceptical about the Soka Gakkai as a purely benign movement, but he comes to see the movement in a positive light. The Soka Gakkai is interpreted as a liberalistic, humanistic and spiritual movement that aims to adapt to different countries and cultures. It is not a new religion, but a Buddhism reinvented and revived so that it may be accessible to people living in the modern world, and may be integrated into their lives without conflict. On this interpretation we are confronted with a movement that overcomes cultural difference in the quest for peace and stability in a violent and increasingly insecure world.

While the Soka Gakkai aims to foster individual mental development and social awareness, the narrator's personal experiences stir, within himself, a need to cast off his old cynicism and a desire to encounter new hope and optimism. This is not to say that, therefore, the book is a highly subjective study with no real factual content. On the contrary, it is

through those experiences, that affect us deeply, that we come to understand the reality of life, and come to see the importance of finding meaning in life, as distinct from purpose to life. In an ever increasingly materialistic world, be fret by world hunger and environmental crisis, the Soka Gakkai gives a ‘refreshing and hopeful new angle on what it means to live in our great world house’ (p. 195.). The Soka Gakkai movement offers a much-needed new ethic that, not only allows human beings to develop their humanity, but also offers a solution to today’s self-interested worldviews. While the Soka Gakkai promotes world peace, it does not do so at a level that is far removed from individual concerns. For the Soka Gakkai, peace is to be obtained through cultivating one’s own mental peace and happiness, rather than through the sole concern of others.

However, the loyalty shown to Ikeda, by his supporters, borders on idolatry. As one of his followers explains, ‘ “We are Ikeda’s disciples...As disciples we tend to agree with everything” ’ (p. 173-4.). Another follower quotes, ‘ “I had a profound sense that betraying my mentor’s expectations was absolutely unthinkable; to do so would be the Buddhist equivalent of falling into hell” ’ (p. 125.). There is a sense in which the narrator comes to see such dedication as praise-worthy. In chapter eight Seager says, ‘Whatever else I might make of Ikeda... I willingly admit that Nichiren’s lions impress me’, and ‘I grew to admire his disciples’ consistency’ (p.175.). Here, Nichiren’s lions refer to Ikeda’s followers. However, any form of idolatry is dangerous. Uncritical support for such a powerful man seems foolhardy at the very least.

It is one of the strengths of this book that, while the focus is on Ikeda and modern Buddhism, Seager also takes us through the history of the Soka Gakkai and explains how its former presidents – Makiguchi and Toda – shaped the development of the movement. So, while the book is written for an academic audience, this background history makes the book also accessible to non-academics, and while the language is quite specialized, there is an adequate glossary that gives extra explanatory power. The reader is also able to access specific topics promptly through an extensive index.

The writing style is lively and engaging, and reflects the energy of the Soka Gakkai movement. The reader is carried along at a fast pace. The narrative voice is introspective and personal, reflecting the development of the self as a key component of Buddhist Humanism. Research takes place through observations, one-on-one interviews, personal contacts and self-conscious awareness making this book very much like a story of

Ikeda and the Soka Gakkai as well as a factual account. In this respect it makes for intriguing and thought-provoking reading.

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