2001

"Wholing": Is Soka Gakkai USA Socially Engaged?

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Soka Gakkai International was begun in 1930 as a "lay Buddhist educational movement" dedicated to the ideas of Nichiren, even the chanting, which is still an integral part of the organization today (Chappell 184). The founder was a Buddhist nationalist administrator named Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, and the work and teachings of he and his two primary successors, Josei Toda and current organizational leader Daisaku Ikeda, gave the most shape to what the group has become today. [Soka Gakkai's] goal, as understood by [them], is to help individuals achieve enlightenment and happiness in the present world, and by so doing to create a harmonious society" (Hammond and Machacek 13-4).

The organization continues to expand each year, but first reached the United States in the middle 1950s, due in no small part to the Japanese presence during and after World War II. As immigrants families (24). Today, Soka Gakkai USA is by far the largest and most racially and culturally diverse Buddhist organization in the country.

Engaged Buddhism

It is probably correct to state that socially engaged Buddhism as a practice has existed since the time of the Buddha himself, but as a term, "engaged Buddhism" was first used in the late 1960s by the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh (Queen 6). It was the title of a volume he wrote shortly after founding the Vietnamese Buddhist University of Van Hanh (Hunt-Perry and Fine 38). Thich Nhat Hanh only exceptionally articulated ideas that had been on the tips of the tongues of many Buddhists and had been seen in practice for centuries (particularly in his home country). Socially engaged Buddhism, as described by Thich Nhat Hanh and others who have followed in his example, envisages a Buddhism that extends out from the meditation cushion into the world of social needs and ills around the practitioner. But rather than viewing this participation in the world as a constraint or separate from Buddhist practice, socially engaged Buddhism theory sees this effort as ideal, right practice. Therefore, socially engaged Buddhism is about Buddhist practitioners helping themselves and others, rather than just helping the people around them. In other words, realizing and practicing Buddhist compassion. The scholar of engaged Buddhism, Christopher S. Queen, outlines three main components to socially engaged Buddhism that he sees as common to all the different types of activities and attitudes that he would describe as "socially engaged Buddhism": awareness, identification, and action (6-7). What is

meant by awareness is what is discussed in much Buddhist literature as "mindfulness": "the essence of a buddha, an 'Awakened One,' whose deep wisdom comes from seeing the true constituents and interdependence of oneself and the world" (6). The second component of socially engaged Buddhism that Queen describes is identification, which he understands as a sense of personal connection with all other beings and their situations. This connection only comes with serious contemplation of "oneness" with others, not simply conceptualizing this notion. "First becoming, as the Japanese say, seeing, hearing, and acknowledging their experience, one then has 'compassion,' or 'sympathy,' a co-feeling or fellow-feeling that, unlike pity, dissolves the boundary between oneself and the other," he writes (6). Lastly, Queen identifies an action that somehow applies the knowledge that comes with awareness and identification as a key component to socially engaged Buddhism (6-7). Socially engaged Buddhists are those Buddhists who are actively involved with the world and invested in trying to change situations and circumstances for the better, as "better" is understood in Buddhism.

The Question

And so now, with the appropriate history and definitions, we return to the thesis of the paper and the question we began with: Is Soka Gakkai USA "socially engaged" as we understand socially engaged Buddhism? In answer to the question of whether or not Soka Gakkai International, and its branch in the United States, would be considered socially engaged, we should make an attempt to classify the various ways to consider social engagement. Firstly, we should try to answer the question of whether or not the philosophy and practices of Soka Gakkai USA promote social engagement, however specifically or broadly. As we have seen above, the understanding of Buddhism that Soka Gakkai International has been one typified by an emphasis on ideas of the individual and their enlightenment, or betterment of their station in life through Buddhist practice. Although concentration is placed on individual work, this necessarily involves relationships with others and the world: individuals certainly cannot improve themselves without improving, lifting, helping others, the way in which they approach the social world. Chappell writes, in answering the question of Soka Gakkai social engagement itself, that "this [way of approaching Buddhism] means that member's change not only their inner spirit, but also their personal relations, their physical surroundings, and the conditions of others. True happiness is [both] social and material, and involves the happiness of others" (201-2). So, if we are trying to determine whether Soka Gakkai dogma espouses ideas of social action and engagement, the answer would be resoundingly in the affirmative. Clearly, the organization promotes ideas that, while being directed at individual followers' needs at the end have a much loftier goal: that of some sense of overall amity.

Next, we should aim to present a broad picture of the ways in which Soka Gakkai, but particularly Soka Gakkai International, invests in the international world and the communities around the group's various national branches. In other words, what types of activities are being put together by the group to allow them either to contribute to the social world as an organization or to enable and empower their members to do so? While we will focus on Soka Gakkai USA, its work is going to need to be put into an appropriate context. While excavating some discussion of the work, especially the early work, of Soka Gakkai in its national base of Japan. An exploration of these Japanese efforts, however tangential it may seem, will provide an opportunity for us to understand Soka Gakkai USA's efforts in the proper perspective. It would seem a fair assumption to say that the work of Soka Gakkai USA is socially engaged in the sense of independent actions and efforts orchestrated by the organization's various national groups. The following section will help to demonstrate the truth in this speculation, which is an appropriate piece of the ultimate thesis of this research paper.

Soka Gakkai Social Engagement in Japan

The primary contribution of Soka Gakkai on the international level, but also on a national level in a way, would be the creation of the Soka Gakkai-affiliated political party known in Japan as Komeito. Certainly, Soka Gakkai's national contribution to social engagement could be as noticeable and potentially affecting as an entirely new political party. Komeitō's birth came in Japan in 1964, not long after Ikeda first occupied the role of chair of the party (Komeitō). A radical reform party with interests in addressing issues of social justice, Komeitō (which was also known as the "Clean Government Party"), unlike America's Green Party, came about as the result of a growing concern amongst a group of individuals affiliated with a particular movement, in this case a religious movement. But this ideological base proved to be a factor in the party's ultimate undoing as well.

Queen herself has edited two books on socially engaged Buddhism, Engaged Buddhism: Liberation Movements in Asia (Albany: SUNY P, 1996) with Sallie B. King, and Engaged Buddhism in the West (Boston: Wisdom, 2000). The fact that Queen has contributed to two substantial books and numerous journal articles on socially engaged Buddhism will give you some idea of how wide-ranged socially engaged Buddhist practice is. This would seem to be an appropriate way to view the Theravada Buddhism's relationship with social engagement, as well, as it is often misunderstood as being all about complete withdrawal from everything and denying all parts of life.
despite their work to promote ideas of religious freedom and diversity, because of its roots in Soka Gakkai, it became easy to stigmatize Komeito and it "drew suspicion as a 'religious' party" (Hammond and Machacek 18). Soka Gakkai and Komeito formally broke ties a short time after Komeito’s founding (Metrax 17). In 1995, the party, in an effort to put more distance between itself and its legacy, changed its name to the New Frontier Party. Since its inception and to this day, the party holds a steady ten percent of the seats in the Japanese Diet and is the country’s third largest political party (Metrax 2). The failure of Soka Gakkai to maintain its association with Komeito in no way seems to suggest a flagged attempt by the organization to affect social change within the tools of Japan’s democratic system. Rather, it says to me that, not unlike the way undesirable political connections are sometimes cut by parties in other countries, an unfortunate or potentially problematic tie can have a devastating effect on any group or individual. In the end, Soka Gakkai’s efforts in the political realm with Komeito suggest an ambitious and idealistic effort in social engagement on their part. The ultimate dissolution of the tie would seem to be very difficult to trace to ineptitude on the part of Soka Gakkai in any way. On the contrary, it would seem that the group did all it could to illustrate how non-partisan, even-handed, and unbiased it struggled to make the party appear. However, it would not be an honest attempt or a failure to disassociate the group to walk away from unsustainable. In fact, the opposite became true. Years later, a calm Ikeda would, in commenting about politics, say. "Someone once said that humanity would never have been successful in political matters. But if man exists in making failures, human misery may never fade from the earth" (Toynbee and Ikeda 145). A recent survey of members of the party, conducted as an international entity, we can begin an investigation into Soka Gakkai USA’s own socially engaged actions with some insight into the party’s perspective in light of its association. Despite any sort of model of engaged Buddhism: for every type of problem or social ill, Soka Gakkai seems to offer a response. As of yet, no issues has appeared to be too daunting for it, and no idea too ambitious. Social Engagement in Soka Gakkai USA So now that we have some understanding of the implications behind the very early socially engaged actions of Soka Gakkai, as well as the group’s current projects conducted as an international entity, we can begin an investigation into Soka Gakkai USA’s own socially engaged actions with some insight into the party’s perspective in light of its association. Despite any sort of model of engaged Buddhism: for every type of problem or social ill, Soka Gakkai seems to offer a response. As of yet, no issues has appeared to be too daunting for it, and no idea too ambitious. Social Engagement in Soka Gakkai USA: So now that we have some understanding of the implications behind the very early socially engaged actions of Soka Gakkai, as well as the group’s current projects conducted as an international entity, we can begin an investigation into Soka Gakkai USA’s own socially engaged actions with some insight into the party’s perspective in light of its association. Despite any sort of model of engaged Buddhism: for every type of problem or social ill, Soka Gakkai seems to offer a response. As of yet, no issues has appeared to be too daunting for it, and no idea too ambitious. Social Engagement in Soka Gakkai USA: So now that we have some understanding of the implications behind the very early socially engaged actions of Soka Gakkai, as well as the group’s current projects conducted as an international entity, we can begin an investigation into Soka Gakkai USA’s own socially engaged actions with some insight into the party’s perspective in light of its association. Despite any sort of model of engaged Buddhism: for every type of problem or social ill, Soka Gakkai seems to offer a response. As of yet, no issues has appeared to be too daunting for it, and no idea too ambitious. Social Engagement in Soka Gakkai USA.
order to recruit them, to being as specific as "Was [Ikeda] hospitalized [in September of 1996] to avoid a sexual harassment charge?" ("Incidents Archive" 1).

In many ways, the case could be made just as easily that Soka Gakkai International and USA have brought much of this criticism upon themselves. It may or may not be the case that Soka Gakkai has been unfairly marginalized by the upper echelon of Buddhist America. But these types of issues, which play into determining the reasons behind why the efforts of Soka Gakkai go unchecked, and are striking, really necessitate a paper of their own. In the end, in this paper I just want to answer a simple question; the rest is a task for either expansion or an entirely separate work.

And so our simple question has been answered in the affirmative. Soka Gakkai USA functions as a socially engaged Buddhist force in this country, for better or for worse. Although there are concerns raised above about the validity of the organization's commitment to Buddhism—even Nichiren's teachings of it—Soka Gakkai USA at least on the surface of its specifically socially engaged work and programs harbors a commitment to the types of ideas that socially engaged Buddhist philosophy itself is founded on. As Queen shrewdly observed in regards to the issue of similarities between Nichiren's social philosophy and engaged Buddhist dogma:

"We learn of the Nichiren Buddhist doctrine of esho funi, "the oneness of self and the world," and healing (or wholing) of mind, body, self, and society that engaged Buddhists have discovered in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction programs and the Gay Buddhist Fellowship in San Francisco. (6)

Queen here likens the attitude of Nichiren Buddhists with that of some of the most creative and radical engaged, "new" Buddhist practitioners and programmers. That attitude has carried over into the Nichiren sect's contemporary, politically and socially progressive establishment, Soka Gakkai International. Its national affiliate, Soka Gakkai USA, in seeking to perpetuate the ideals of the larger entity, has not only contributed significantly to the remarkable history of Buddhism's transmission to America by attracting the widest range of followers, but also by establishing itself as an organization with strikingly ambitious practices of social engagement. Despite its present lack of lip service, anyone involved in engaged Buddhist studies would do well to take note of the extraordinary work of Soka Gakkai USA.

Works Cited


