

200,000 Americans Are Attracted to Buddhist Sect



The New York Times (by John Soto)

Congregants of the Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist sect from Japan, chanting at a meeting at the Sonia Hotel, 2109 Broadway

The Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist sect with 16 million followers that has become a strong political force in Japan, says that it now has more than 200,000 converts in the United States.

The independent American operation, based in Santa Monica, Calif., has attracted middle-aged businessmen and housewives as well as large numbers of young blacks and hippies. In Japan, where religion has generally been on the decline since World War II, the Soka Gakkai membership is made up mostly of blue-collar workers.

The sect, which bases its beliefs on the teachings of a 13th-century monk named Nichren, is characterized by a mystical simplicity. Its fundamental belief is that the chanting of four Japanese words — Nam-myohoregnekyo — can bring ultimate enlightenment and happiness. "All we ask is that you try chanting for what you want," said one member. "Try it because it works."

Because the faith maintains that there can be no separation of the body from the mind, or

the material from the spiritual, new members in this country are encouraged to chant first for objects they would like to have. Believers tell of chanting for such things as bass fiddles or new refrigerators and, inexplicably, getting them.

A Natural High Feeling

Once a convert progresses beyond his material desires, many new members say that by chanting they discover a new meaning in life that they could not find through other religions, psychotherapy or experimentation with drugs.

"By comparison, LSD and mescaline were a synthetic feeling," said Edward Goldman, a 22-year-old graduate of the Juilliard School of Music who became a Buddhist eight months ago.

"Chanting gives you a natural high, an essential high, a universal high. You get an intense enjoyment from regular life."

The sect's figures show that so far more than 200,000 Americans have tried chanting long enough to purchase (at \$30) or rent (at \$4 a month) an altar

for their homes containing a sacred scroll called a "Gohonzon." The New York branch, with headquarters at 250 West 57th Street, has distributed 6,000 scrolls—half of them in the last year.

This rapid growth is largely a result of an aggressive technique called "shakubuku," used for spreading the faith. Literally meaning "break and subdue," shakubuku begins on a city street corner with the gently put question—"would you like to come to a Buddhist meeting"—and continues with a close, personal, effort at conversion.

Those who accept the invitation to a meeting are taken to the apartment of a group leader where about 30 casually dressed men and women, rubbing prayer beads between their palms, chant to the Gohonzon in a nasalized drone.

Well-Run Organization

They listen to testimonies of "benefits" received from chanting and are introduced to the organization—its daily schedule of meetings, newspapers and

magazines issued from California to Japan, and its elaborate plans for conventions complete with wife and drum corps and parades.

In Japan, the sect's Clean Government political party captured 47 seats in last December's parliamentary election.

Members say a strong organization is necessary for getting things done—particularly, in attaining the sect's ultimate goal of "world peace."

"What we do is all voluntary," said Kenji Sudo, the 31-year-old chief of the sect's headquarters in New York. "We are each happy to play a small part. This is never understood outside the organization."

In contrast to organized group activities, actual worship has few strict requirements. There is no priesthood, and no real necessity to study the philosophies, or even the literal meaning, behind the basic practice of chanting.

"It's the sound," one member said. "The sound is more important than the words. It's not what they mean, but what they are."