

Members of a Buddhist Sect Here Express Pleasures of Gakkai

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New York Times (1857-Current file); Apr 26, 1966; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times

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"Pack up your troubles in your Gakkai pack and smile, smile, smile," the crowd of 250 men, women and children in the dingy Manhattan ballroom sang lustily. At the front of the room four men in shirtsleeves beat time, waving gilded fans in sweeping, cheerleader arcs.

The audience was bigger than usual, but other than that Saturday's meeting of the New York and New Jersey chapters of the Soka Gakkai of America was similar to other meetings going on this week all over the country.

The women were mainly Japanese, many of them brides of Americans who had met their wives during military service in Japan, when they joined the Buddhist layman's organization. The men, about evenly divided between white and Negro, were dressed well but not elaborately.

What had brought them together was their membership in Soka Gakkai—the Value Creation Society—and their belief in Nichiren Shoshu, a 700-year-old Buddhist sect that remained obscure and largely monastic until the Soka Gakkai, founded in 1928, burst into

prominence in Japan in the 1950's.

The lay branch now claims more than 15 million members in Japan, where it recently sprouted a political party that won 15 seats in the upper House of the Japanese Parliament last year and plans to contest 46 lower house constituencies at the next election.

In America, Soka Gakkai leaders say, they have about 30,000 members and no political ambitions. The organization, which publishes a four-page newspaper every other day at its Los Angeles headquarters, claims new members are joining at the rate of 2,000 a month. And the recent converts, unlike the early American members who learned of Soka Gakkai in Japan, are said to be "98 per cent genuine Americans."

"We're in a continuous state of pregnancy," said New York chapter leader Eric Williams, a 32-year-old sales engineer. Speaking at a recent Soka Gakkai meeting in a crowded private apartment near Columbia University, he added, "We're already bursting out. We're strapped for meeting space." He said there are about



Eric Williams leads the Buddhist group in the city.

700 families in the group's New York and New Jersey chapters.

Speakers at the session, and at a smaller meeting of the East Coast and Midwest Young Men's Division that followed it, stressed the theme of putting the Soka Gakkai philosophy to work by converting others to the faith.

Exhorting the members to radiate the "happiness" that their faith gives them, the society's director in America, Masayasu Sadanaga, asked, "If you have no joy, no confidence, how can you explain to others the Gohonzon?"

The Gohonzon, a scroll, is the object of worship before which members chant morning and evening prayer (gongyo) and do "daimoku" — the rhythmic chanting of "nam-myohorenge-kyo," the title of the founder's Lotus Sutra.

Experiences Related

The chanting of these prayers to the Gohonzon is said to bring financial, emotional, physical and spiritual benefits to the believers. A portion of almost every meeting, in fact, is set aside for the relating of "happy experiences" by the members.

Thus, on Saturday, a heavy-set sailor told how he had broken his neck, how physicians had told him he would be paralyzed for life and how, nevertheless, his faith had enabled him to get up and walk.

At a smaller meeting some weeks ago in the East Coast headquarters at 304 West 75th Street, Mrs. Yoko Levitch, a

concert violinist and member since last September, passionately explained the benefits of her faith to newer converts. "It's the greatest feeling to know that you will never be desperate, neither for money nor for anything else," she said. "You feel secure. Even if you're in the worst situation, you know something good will happen."

A composer, like more than half of the recent converts a former Roman Catholic, stressed that Soka Gakkai had given him "self-discipline." To a New York meeting, he explained, "Now I have dates with me. You can go through life for months without ever getting into touch with yourself."

Increasingly Soka Gakkai members are urging others to obtain the benefits of their faith. In Washington, the Carolinas and Los Angeles, the proselytizing is done by distributing copies of the English-language newspaper to the homes of strangers and then following up the deliveries with personal visits. In New York, the word is being spread more slowly and cautiously, largely among friends or co-workers.