

Is SGI a cult? Does it matter?

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The word “cult” has an alarmist ring to it. Most people think that cults must be obviously dark and sinister. We don't expect cults to be friendly and normal seeming. We think cult recruiters must use force or diabolical spells to win recruits. We don't expect to be won over, little by little, through apparent care, concern and appeals to our idealism — appeals to “dream big dreams” rather than think critically about the group. Being open-minded people, we have no reason to doubt what the group says about itself, and we're usually willing to suspend our skepticism out of politeness if for no other reason.

What SGI members say about their group, however, is not always consistent with the functional reality of the group. SGI claims to be a peace organization that opposes authoritarianism, welcomes all people and teaches people how to practice Buddhism so they can become happy.

They are unlikely to mention that SGI is a multi-billion-dollar religious corporation that refuses to disclose its financial dealings even to members and donors who ask for information. Members have no voting rights, no grievance procedure, and no say in the policies of their own organization.

SGI does teach a version of Nichiren Buddhism, but it is an interpretation that reinforces the belief that SGI members are somehow “chosen” to save the world, and that their belief system is the one, true, correct religion for all time.

SGI promotes and perpetuates itself through recruitment, fund raising and public relations activities. Members call this “working for kosen-rufu” or “world peace.” The group's agenda includes going into U.S. grade schools and universities to promote SGI President Daisaku Ikeda as a “peace activist” on par with Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. — despite the fact that Ikeda lives a life of luxury (spending

millions of dollars on classic art, for example) and has never once so much as engaged in a protest demonstration.

Indeed, Ikeda is the *de facto* head of a ruling-coalition Japanese political party called New Komeito. The *New York Times* and many others have reported that this is a militant political party that aims to establish theocratic rule in Japan. But many people in the U.S. who join SGI thinking that they are joining a friendly group of Buddhists have no idea that they are in fact supporting and legitimizing one of the most powerful and controversial political movements in Japan.

As for the SGI welcoming all people, new and potential recruits should know that SGI has publicly condemned and maligned SGI members who have voiced constructive criticism and sponsored public discussion of SGI's policies and activities.

In fact, the “SGI-USA Reform Group” was threatened with legal action if they continued to identify themselves (correctly) as SGI members in good standing. SGI has proven itself capable of and willing to crush dissent and dissenters among its ranks. And non-members or former members who criticize SGI are branded as enemies.

Nichiren Buddhism is a religion, and there are dozens of different temples and organizations in which people learn, teach and practice this religion. Soka Gakkai, on the other hand, is a cult that uses this religion as a cover and a justification for accumulating wealth, political power and more members. Members receive nothing in return except a distorted view of Nichiren Buddhism, peer pressure, emotional manipulation, phobia indoctrination, a misguided belief that SGI membership gives them a special mission in life, and a habit of demonizing all perceived “enemies of Buddhism.” Is this the kind of group you want to support?

Cult Warning Signs in SGI

1. Authority without accountability. Soka Gakkai claims to have absolute authority with regard to Nichiren Buddhism; Nichiren Buddhism can only be correctly practiced if one is a member of SGI. Daisaku Ikeda is promoted by SGI to be the foremost authority on Nichiren Buddhism for the modern age. But SGI provides no accountability — members have no control over their leaders and have no mechanism by which to affect the policies and procedures of their organization.

2. No tolerance for questions or critical inquiry. There are no opportunities to publicly question or critique the teachings of SGI in the organization's publications or at large meetings. Critiquing SGI at small discussion meetings may be tolerated to a degree, but this behavior is called "negativity" and is discouraged.

3. No meaningful financial disclosure and no independently audited financial statement. Media reports and property tax records confirm that Soka Gakkai is a multi-billion-dollar religious corporation. SGI-USA refuses to disclose its finances even to members and donors who request this information. SGI has publicly maligned members who have pressed for financial disclosure.

4. Unreasonable fear about evil conspiracies and persecutions. Ikeda and his followers have denounced as "evil" a rival group called Nichiren Shoshu, and urged SGI members to fight this so-called devilish influence. SGI has sponsored prayer vigils focused on the destruction of Nichiren Shoshu and the demise of its leader, Nikken. SGI has also assigned at least one paid staff member to follow and spy on Nichiren Shoshu priests. Why? SGI claims that Nichiren Shoshu is out to destroy SGI.

5. The belief that former members are always wrong in leaving SGI. Former members often relate similar stories of being pressured to embrace certain beliefs, to say only positive things about SGI and to participate in fund raising, recruitment and public relations campaigns. Former members have similar grievances regarding SGI: too much emphasis on the "evil" of Nichiren Shoshu, too much adulation of Daisaku Ikeda and too little emphasis on the teachings of Nichiren

Buddhism. SGI leaders tell members that former members are deluded, cannot be trusted and should be avoided.

6. Dependence upon SGI guidance and activities for problem solving, solutions, and definitions without meaningful reflective thought. When SGI members are confronted with a problem, they are urged to seek "guidance" from local SGI leaders or to read guidance from Ikeda. Members are urged to recruit more members and participate in more SGI activities in order to have a "breakthrough" and solve their problems. If the problem is resolved, leaders are quick to claim that participation in SGI activities provides mystical benefits. If the problem is not resolved the member is often advised to make a greater commitment to SGI and "connect" with Ikeda's heart.

7. Anything that SGI does can be justified, no matter how questionable or harmful. SGI members are good at making excuses for the shortcomings of their organization. "We're still in our infancy — we've only been in America for a little over 30 years — mistakes are to be expected," they say. "We are only human." "We are fulfilling an important mission, so even if people are hurt by our activities, it will all work out for the best in the end." "If people are hurt by our organization it is due to their karma, not ours." "People are afraid of SGI not because we are deceptive and manipulative, but because we represent a real challenge to the status quo. People can't handle the truth and justice we represent." "SGI has problems, but we are the best and only option right now." The list of excuses for bad behavior goes on and on.

8. SGI members are afraid. SGI members have been indoctrinated with a litany of fears: fear of visiting temples or investigating other forms of Buddhism, fear of not chanting enough or skipping gongyo, fear of contradicting the SGI, fear of listening to or entertaining criticism of the SGI, fear of chanting to the "wrong" Gohonzon, fear of leaving the SGI. Members are taught that these things will invite severe "mystical" punishment such as financial hardship, illness, family strife, loss of a romantic relationship, getting fired from a job or a horrible, agonizing death.

So what if SGI is a cult?

In her book *Seductive Poison*, Deborah Layton shows how anyone can fall under the spell of a cult. Layton was a high-level member of Jim Jones' Peoples Temple. She tried to warn a skeptical public about impending disaster at Jonestown, Guyana. At Jonestown on November 18, 1978, hundreds of cult members perished in a mass murder/suicide. In the epilogue to her book, Layton writes:

Looking back, there are a few things I have come to learn. People do not knowingly join "cults" that will ultimately destroy and kill them. People join self-help groups, churches, political movements, college campus dinner socials, and the like, in an effort to be a part of something larger than themselves. It is mostly the innocent and naive who find themselves entrapped. In their openhearted endeavor to find meaning in their lives, they walk blindly into the promise of ultimate answers and a higher purpose. It is usually only gradually that a group turns into or reveals itself as a cult, becomes malignant, but by then it is often too late.

I hope my book will give my daughter some answers about how I got caught and how the Jonestown tragedy happened. I hope it will provide clues about the workings of a cult and shed light on the darkness of deceit. There are essential warning signs early on. Our alarm signals ought to go off as soon as someone tells us their way is the only right way.

When our own thoughts are forbidden, when our questions are not allowed and our doubts are punished, when contacts and friendships outside of the organization are censored, we are being abused for an end that never justifies its means. When our heart aches knowing we have made friendships and secret attachments that will be forever forbidden if we leave, we are in danger. When we consider staying in a group because we cannot bear the loss, disappointment, and sorrow our leaving will cause for ourselves and those we have come to love, we are in a cult.

If there is any lesson to be learned it is that an ideal can never be brought about by fear, abuse, and the threat of retribution. When family and friends are used as weapons in order to force us to stay in an organization, something has gone terribly wrong. If I, as a young woman, had had someone explain to me what cults are and how indoctrination works, my story might not have been the same.

It's never "harmless" when people are deceived or manipulated under the guise of religion.

1. A legitimate sangha or teacher will answer your questions without becoming judgmental and punitive.
2. A legitimate sangha or teacher will disclose information such as finances and often offer an independently audited financial statement regarding budget and expenses.
3. A legitimate sangha or teacher shares decision-making and encourages accountability and oversight.
4. A legitimate sangha or teacher may have disgruntled former followers, but will not vilify, excommunicate and forbid others from associating with them.
5. A legitimate sangha or teacher will not have a paper trail of overwhelmingly negative news reports, magazine articles and statements about them.
6. A legitimate sangha or teacher will recognize reasonable boundaries and limitations when dealing with others.
7. A legitimate sangha or teacher will encourage critical thinking, individual autonomy and feelings of self-esteem.
8. A legitimate sangha or teacher will admit failings and mistakes and accept constructive criticism and advice.
9. A legitimate sangha or teacher will not be the only source of knowledge and learning excluding everyone else, but will foster real dialogue, debate and the free exchange of ideas.

Accept no substitutes.