

Through the SGI: A Personal Odyssey (2) **By Dr. Howard Hunter**

A professor of religious studies at Tufts University visits various SGI organizations around the world. In this issue, Professor Hunter journeys to SGI-Mexico.

IN a crowded office in an unpretentious building in the sprawling metropolis of Mexico City, five women sat across from me responding to my questions about their membership and participation in Soka Gakkai International. Why, given the rather routine nature of this encounter, did I have to resist revealing my tears? What was it about this meeting that immediately provoked an emotional response from me? It was the depth of appreciation these women expressed for their Buddhist faith and practice. It was also the simple eloquence of several of the older women as they recalled their life histories, typical histories of poverty, early marriage, lack of educational opportunities and unending labor. It was also the measured eloquence of one woman who fulfills dual roles as mother of four talented sons and as a career woman working as a medical doctor and administrator, challenging roles difficult to maintain anywhere, but especially so in Mexico.

When I heard the testimonies of these women, especially those from humble farm and working class origins, I could not help but think of two groups of people. The first was my own family with its similar story of rural poverty in Appalachia, a chronically impoverished area of the United States. While some instances of religious practice and conviction could be found among my family members, for the most part religion remained a distant and relatively unimportant consideration. These Mexican women, on the other hand, had found in Buddhism a practical and life-enhancing alternative to the prevailing options.

The second group of people who came to mind were the masses of women still experiencing lives of profound hardship, not only economic hardship, which is a condition confronting all of Mexico at present, but also the hardship of male domination, lack of educational encouragement and opportunity and religious authoritarianism.

Several women told of the struggles they had endured to overcome the hostility of their husbands and families as well as the disapproval of religious leaders when they began practicing the Buddhist faith with its stress on individual responsibility and freedom from depersonalizing, conventional social traditions. Each woman in her own unrehearsed and spontaneous way paid tribute to the central importance of Buddhism's emphasis on the personal obligation to cultivate one's spiritual life as well as the need to offer meaningful assistance to other people in the quest for personal authenticity. They were also thankful for the supportive community of fellow believers without whom they could not have succeeded in revolutionizing their lives.

When I reflected upon their stories, I remembered that I was listening to the stories of only a small fraction of the people living in Mexico City and the country of Mexico. I asked myself what could be the importance of hundreds of Buddhists in a sea of millions of non-Buddhists. The answer was revealed in the story of the small boy who was seen at a beach retrieving small starfish one by one from thousands stranded on the beach that were facing certain death. An adult asked the boy why he was wasting

his time when it was so clear that he could save only a few of the hundreds that were certain to perish. The boy responded: "What I am doing is important for the one I save." And so it is with the Buddhists of Mexico!

Challenging the Environment

SOKA Gakkai International of Mexico impresses me as an organization with an enthusiastic, energetic, ambitious and highly motivated membership. It has members representing a wide range of Mexican society, from people in professional careers to workers, students, homemakers and artists. The organization recognizes that the prevailing culture of Mexico presents both obstacles and opportunities for the development of Buddhist faith and practice, and that those obstacles and opportunities are two sides of the same coin.

The entrenched machismo attitudes of male superiority and self-definition in terms of virility as well as patriarchal patterns and a predominant formal religious tradition with its emphasis on tradition, mystery, suffering and dogmatic authority are regarded as both obstacles and opportunities by many SGI members. While these aspects of Mexican culture may differ from Buddhism's stress on the inherent worth of each individual, the necessity of discovering within one's self the truth of one's life and recognizing that truth alone as truly authoritative, they also cause people to rebel against the prevailing culture. Many people are no longer able to defend traditional machismo attitudes, and many accept only at a ritualistic level the religion which the Spaniards imposed on Mexico centuries ago. The Mexican people's disenchantment with the traditions of the church and with patriarchal society affords the members of SGI significant opportunities for teaching others about their philosophy and practice.

Mexico of today is still a challenging environment for the spread of Buddhist principles, however. Although there is a strong sentiment of anti-authoritarianism in religion, there are vast numbers of people who still profess and practice loyalty toward the church. In fact, in some areas of Mexico it can be extremely dangerous even to question or to deviate from the strictest conformity to traditional patterns of church-dominated society.

One SGI member made the point, however, that in spite of these conditions, more and more Mexicans are searching for something beyond their traditional religious and cultural patterns. Unperturbed by those people who are fanatic in their religious zeal, there are many people who have overcome their fear of that which is different.

A Tool for Living

ONE of the most impressive aspects of SGI-Mexico is its youth division. The youth division members' vitality, humor, intellectual curiosity and obvious joyfulness gave me reason to feel confident about the future of SGI in Mexico.

One student in particular demonstrated keen insight into the distinctive attributes of Buddhist thought. He spoke of his studies of various faiths and his conclusion that Buddhism is a truly universal religion, unlike those religions that preach salvation only for those who accept certain dogma. He said that Buddhism regards all life as valuable and, like water and the sun, it encompasses everything now and forever.

When I asked him to summarize his view of Buddhism as taught by the SGI, he responded that it is a tool for living, a love for life. He said that Buddhism teaches us to embrace life joyously whatever the circumstances and to keep on growing. He had

prepared notes for our interview and had questions for me regarding my reasons for studying the SGI in India, England and Mexico. He even suggested something that I had not recognized: a mystical connection between these countries!

This young man pointed out that the most current scholarship of human origins and cultures shows that pre-Hispanic Mexican cultures had their origins in Asia and that significant similarities exist between the philosophic concepts of Buddhist and pre-Hispanic culture. Both cultures question the meaning of life and death most intensively.

He expressed deep appreciation for the SGI and the guidance it affords him, and he spoke appreciatively of President Ikeda and especially of his book, *Life: An Enigma, A Precious Jewel*. He asked if I knew of it, and I replied that I had a copy in my suitcase!

Surprisingly, it was a question from eleven-year-old Aloysha Villalpando, following a talk I gave at the Cultural Center of SGI in Mexico City, that captured the essence of my project and its limitations. Standing with a group of adults, he looked up to me and said: "Excuse me, but I have a question. Just how far can you actually penetrate when you are studying someone else's religion?"

What an insightful question at any age! I told him that one could only go as far as descriptions of ideas and actions can go. The true location of the religious life cannot be penetrated by another person, because the true location of religion is in the human heart. It was clear to me that Aloysha knew this before he asked the question. It was a delight to encounter him and so many of his fellow SGI members who recognize that the true source of authority for their faith and practice lies within their hearts. The true Gohonzon, as Nichiren taught, is in the human heart.

Throughout my visit to SGI-Mexico, I was again impressed, as I had been in India, with the unmistakable reality that this organization is fundamentally indigenous, independent, freely chosen, deeply appreciative of the words and leadership of its President Ikeda but not dominated by him or his staff, and made up of studious, self-disciplined members committed to self-realization through lives dedicated to truth and to compassionate concern for all humanity. Presently their numbers are small, only thousands among ninety million, but their organization is strong and has within it the seeds of considerable growth.

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