

## **Through the SGI: A Personal Odyssey (3)** **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-United Kingdom.**

As some readers may know, I have had the privilege of paying visits during the last several months to individual members of Soka Gakkai International as well as various culture centers of SGI in India, Italy, England and Mexico. This is the third brief article to appear in *Living Buddhism* giving some impressions based on my experiences in these very different countries. My purpose was to learn how the various cultural conditions affect the teachings and practices of SGI.

The most frequent question I have received regarding my research has been this: "What differences have you discovered among the several SGI groups you have visited?" To this I have responded that while some notable differences do exist with regard to somewhat secondary matters pertaining to local circumstances, the central teachings and practices are essentially the same. What has been also quite obvious—and sometimes amusingly so—is the way in which stereotypes of the several cultures prove accurate.

These stereotypes must be rooted in reality since, as one would anticipate, the Indian members were profoundly hospitable, attentive to the courtesies due visitors and clearly at home with matters philosophical and spiritual. They spoke very little of intimate personal matters. Mexican and Italian members, equally hospitable but even more celebratory, were far more likely to discuss their emotional lives and their relationships, their affairs of the heart. In short, the stereotype of the passionate Latin spirit was often confirmed. Serious intellectual concerns did not overcome a desire for convivial occasions accompanying nearly every meeting. What of the English? This is the subject of the present report.

VISITING individual members and several of the organizations, groups and cultural centers in Greater London leaves one with a lasting impression of a vital and lively movement blessed with excellent facilities and an enthusiastic membership. The facilities include a prominently situated center in suburban London on Richmond Green that not only has meeting rooms but also a shop in which books and other materials relating to the work of SGI can be purchased. A large but tasteful sign is imprinted on one side of the building bearing the words "SGI-UK: Buddhist Society for the Creation of Value."

Another facility is a truly outstanding castle-like stately home called Taplow Court, which is situated a few miles outside London and not far from Oxford. This center is a place that can host conferences and retreats as well as public events like exhibitions and concerts. It is available to individual members and groups, and scholars find its well-appointed library a rich resource of books dealing with SGI in particular as well as more general books dealing with Asian religions and philosophies. SGI young people volunteer to take care of the many duties connected with maintaining in perfect condition a large country residence and grounds. The headquarters of SGI-UK are also located at Taplow Court.

It was there that the librarian of the Oriental Collections, a graduate student in

Buddhist studies at London University, gave a touching response to a question I had asked regarding his view of authority in Buddhism and his perception of the role of President Ikeda in this regard. After acknowledging deep appreciation for President Ikeda's teaching and leadership, he said simply, "In the final analysis, the authority for me is the Law." The assurance with which he said this was impressive. I could not help thinking that this was a response with which President Ikeda would be pleased. So, of course, Shakyamuni Buddha insisted that his followers be lamps unto themselves rather than worship him.

I was able during a short visit to conduct interviews and hold conversations with quite a wide variety of SGI members—professional and business people, artists and media people, students and workers from varying levels of economic status. What emerged from my discussions with them was a sense that their involvement with SGI reflected a deep desire on their part to find and to express a coherent and rational approach to the problems that the contemporary metropolis of London presented to them. Several individuals, especially the professional and artistic members, spoke of personal crises in their lives that led them to search unsuccessfully for understanding and guidance from traditional religions and social groups. They gave heartfelt tribute to the benefits they obtained through the study and practice of SGI.

One interview conveys some characteristic aspects of the cultural situation in Britain that affects the effort to practice Buddhism there.

A leader told me of her remarkable spiritual journey from a strict Roman Catholic upbringing with a very devout mother and a brother who was a priest. She moved away from home and married outside her Christian faith. After this marriage proved unsuccessful, she explored the avenues of spiritual practice available to her but found none satisfactory. After encountering the SGI, she was intrigued by its teachings but found its focus on a worship object and the use of prayer beads discouragingly reminiscent of the practices of the faith she had rejected.

Still, her fascination with Buddhism persisted as she studied the works of Nichiren Daishonin and the writings of President Ikeda. One day she decided that she would try to chant but certainly not in public. She retired to her home and even there closeted herself in the privacy of her bathroom. She began to chant but even then, entirely alone, she blushed! She laughed merrily at herself as she told this story. I told her that I had heard before of "closet Buddhists" who were shy about revealing their Buddhist practice, but that she was the first "water closet Buddhist" I had encountered.

VISITING individuals in their homes was especially rewarding, for members could and did discuss the deepest concerns that motivated their adoption of Buddhism. Repeatedly members told me of their dissatisfaction with domestic relations, their spiritual life and of their sense of frustration due to their inability to find ways to cope with the negative aspects of their lives. Attendance and participation in the established church did not appear to be a live option for them and they perceived themselves to be living in a culture which had lost its traditional values and its roots.

Their interviews with me confirmed what Professors Bryan Wilson and Karel Dobbelaere analyzed in their thorough study of Soka Gakkai Buddhists in Britain. In their book, *A Time to Chant*, the professors offer extensive documentation of the fact that SGI offers the type of practical direction and purpose for life that many find lacking in Britain.

While I was in London, I was presented copies of SGI-UK publications. They are

well-edited and make a significant contribution to the members' practice. One periodical, the *UK Express*, is directed not only toward the SGI membership but to the larger public. It is presented as "The magazine of SGI-UK, the Buddhist Society for the Creation of Value through Peace, Education and Culture." Its subtitle states, "Trust through Friendship, Peace through Trust." The issue, current at the time of my visit, offered articles on SGI practice and a lengthy special feature on "Sex, Sexuality and Gender."

I had the opportunity to discuss this special section with Win Hunter (no relation) who was co-author of the lead article of this special section. She noted that the subject of sexuality in SGI-UK was provoking more response than usual from readers, some of whom felt that the subject and manner of presentations were inappropriate. Win Hunter's view was that so important a subject clearly deserved thorough consideration from the Buddhist perspective and that there was no reason to ignore or to deny its centrality in human affairs.

Whatever one's opinion might be regarding the appropriateness of rather sensational pictures accompanied by quotations from such "authorities" as Woody Allen, Mae West, Cole Porter and Oscar Wilde, there is no question about the willingness of SGI-UK to tackle an often controversial and provocative subject openly and thoroughly. I found the issue of *UK Express* one of the most helpful and stimulating discussions I have ever seen on the subject of Buddhist perspectives on sexuality.

ONE highlight of my experience in London was attending a meeting of young SGI members and of prospective members in a working class neighborhood in suburban London. Gathered in a row house were some twenty-five young people from all walks of life. Students, laborers, office workers, artists, professional people and some unemployed, some single, some married, some straight, some gay...here was a cross section of London youth united in a common enterprise of studying and discussing Buddhist thought, testifying to its relevance and chanting with enthusiasm. The honesty, openness and the happiness at being together in common dedication to the values of the bodhisattva ideal and commitment to the effort to realize this altruistic ideal in contemporary London remain with me as an especially meaningful memory.

While the formal beauty and excellent facilities of Taplow Court are great assets to the SGI-UK, it is in the hearts and minds of such young people that the future of the organization is located. The excellent publications and well-structured organization are aspects of great importance to the SGI-UK, but again the unpretentious sharing of the joy of Buddhist teaching among these young people speaks eloquently of the joyful benefits they are achieving through their practice. □