

## **DENMARK'S FOLK HIGH SCHOOL MOVEMENT LOOKS TO THE FUTURE SGI'S "PEACE THROUGH EDUCATION" EXHIBIT STIRS INTEREST AMONG EDUCATORS**

The Folk High School movement is deeply rooted in Denmark. When Masaaki Kamio (now leader of SGI-Denmark) arrived in Denmark, he happened to start spreading Buddhism in the area where this movement was born. He arrived on August 13, 1965, young, full of hope and penniless. This meant he couldn't leave, and fortunately he was able to find work and lodging in a farmhouse in Rødding in southern Jutland. He entered a primary school at the age of 21 and learned Danish together with young children. In October 1967, he entered the Askov Folk High School where his roommate was Jan Møller. Jan became the first Dane to practice Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

Impressed by the mystic, yet logical aspects of Buddhism, Jan made up his mind to start practicing. He naturally trusted the process of changing one's inner self, which corresponds, to the Buddhist concept of human revolution.

Gradually more Danish people learned about Buddhism, and it was eventually possible to form a chapter in Denmark in 1974 with five native Danish members and several Japanese. Now there are five chapters, and meetings are held weekly in seven different cities. Once a year members from throughout Denmark gather for the Danish Summer Course, held in 1999 at the Askov Folk High School with the theme, "Creating Hope Through Action and Dialogue."

A key attraction for Danish people is that Buddhism stresses inner-motivated action rather than an outwardly imposed system of morals.

The Danish Folk High School tradition has led people to place great stress on inner motivation. N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872), educator, priest, author, poet and member of the Danish parliament, advocated education using "the living word." He believed education should not be reserved for an elite but made available to all people. If Denmark was to become a genuine democracy, ordinary people needed more education.

Grundtvig's young disciple Christen Kold (1816–70) started a boarding school at which adult farmers could learn through the living, spoken word in 1851. Despite their lack of formal education, people could learn about life, culture and Danish society. He created an open university at which people from all levels of society could meet, hold discussions and study. This idea spread all over the country, and today there are ninety-six Folk High Schools in Denmark. To study at one of these schools is seen as a chance for training, and so the majority of the Danish population joins a Folk High School at least once in their life.

While there is a wide range of Folk High Schools offering different political and religious perspectives and different subjects for study, the spirit common to all these schools has always been the wish to create a living, democratic society based on dialogue. It can certainly be said that this goal has been achieved. Now there is a strong tradition of dialogue instead of dispute in matters related to politics and employment in Danish society and no deep polarization between different groups of people.

The level of education is very high, and an important part of the primary school curriculum is caring about democracy. Many adults still study in evening schools or at courses paid for by their employers—they continue to develop themselves throughout their lives. The famous Danish welfare system initiated in the 1930s is based on the humanism of Grundtvig. His vision was of a society where "few have too much and fewer have too little."

Inspired by Grundtvig and Kold among others, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–1944), the Japanese educator and founder of the Soka Gakkai, created his value-creating philosophy of education. Like Grundtvig, Makiguchi emphasized the importance of education for ordinary people and that education provides a vital basis for a prosperous and peaceful society.

During the recent conflict in Yugoslavia, the members of SGI-Denmark wished to provide a Buddhist perspective on how to solve the greatest scourge of humanity: war. To this end, they created an exhibition on Makiguchi and his philosophy, entitled “Peace Through Education.” Members gave their time for many weeks to help realize this exhibition. They prepared posters, pamphlets, displays, a slideshow, mounted photos and succeeded in opening the exhibit on May 30 in the Nordic Culture Center in Copenhagen. In just one week 500 people visited, including many teachers and educators.

But that was just the beginning.

The Danish Folk High School movement is at a crossroads in its history. After 150 years of creating a Danish folk spirit, the question many people are asking now is “What next?” Increasing globalization, including the immigration of people from other cultures, has made Danish thinking alone insufficient in today’s world. This is a problem for the Folk High Schools, which is manifested in decreasing numbers of students in recent years. Some schools have had to close.

At the same time, the rapid pace of globalization is causing feelings of insecurity and rootlessness, and there is a need to address these issues in Danish society. It may be that the future task of the Folk High School movement lies here—and SGI-Denmark is ready to support and cooperate in whatever way possible.

Henning Dochweiler, principal of the Askov Folk High School, the third oldest Folk High School in the country (opened in 1865), opened the Makiguchi exhibition. Mr. Dochweiler gave a lecture at the Nordic Culture Center on the following day, in which he analyzed the opposing trends of globalization and removal of borders on the one hand and increasing nationalism and discrimination on the other. He urged close cooperation between the Folk High School movement and SGI-Denmark. He commented that the SGI, as an organization with experience in international dialogue based on exchange among ordinary people, and as a movement for peace based on education, could be a great inspiration to the Folk High School movement at this crossroads.

He revealed that he hoped the Askov Folk High School would be able to establish a European institute for international dialogue among ordinary people.

In August and September 1999, the exhibition “Peace Through Education” was shown at the Askov Folk High School.

It is the goal of SGI-Denmark to introduce this exhibition to all Folk High Schools in Denmark and in this way start to contribute to the dialogue on the revitalization of the Danish Folk High School movement. □

*Courtesy SGI Graphic*