SOCIAL ARCHITECTURE FOR THE GRAND MAIN TEMPLE
BY DAVID W. CHAPPELL

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In April 1998, Nikken Abe, the current high priest of Nichiren Shoshu, announced his plan to transfer the great object of devotion of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism—the Dai-Gohonzon—from the Grand Main Temple (Jpn Sho-Hondo). That temple complex was completed on the grounds of the Nichiren Shoshu head temple in 1972 with approximately $100 million in donations from eight million believers. This was prior to the split between the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood and SGI laity orchestrated by Mr. Abe in 1991. Soon after the Dai-Gohonzon was removed, the high priest ordered the demolition of the Grand Main Temple, and by the beginning of 1999, the structure was leveled.

Mr. Abe cited his reason for the demolition as to "completely refute the great slander of [SGI President] Ikeda and others." According to his predecessor Nitattsu Hossoi, the Grand Main Temple had been considered to be the High Sanctuary, one of the three basic elements of Nichiren Daishonin's teaching along with the Object of Devotion and the Invocation of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. However, it is clear that the significance of a "high sanctuary"—or more literally "ordination platform"—lies beyond any specific physical structure. In the following essay, Dr. David Chappell explores the meaning of a high sanctuary from a Buddhist historical and social perspective.

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The Sho-Hondo, the Grand Main Temple of Nichiren Shoshu, is no more. The land is there, and pictures remain. But these are but traces of its grandeur and nothing of its purpose. While I only know the bare details of the tragic story of the Sho-Hondo, now that it is gone I feel it is important to reflect on its meaning. Especially for Soka Gakkai members who were largely responsible for visualizing the temple, and then the enormous effort of funding and building it.

Practice is not Limited to Temples

The destruction of the Sho-Hondo in 1998-99 is not the first temple destruction in Buddhist history. The monastery on the site of Shakyamuni Buddha's enlightenment, Bodhgaya, is no more. Only the foundation stones remain. But the Buddha was not enlightened in a temple. In fact, his road to enlightenment involved leaving the buildings and palaces of his father. And his saving awakening occurred not in a building, but under a tree; not with a crowd, but alone. He was confirmed not by a priesthood but by the earth, as is portrayed in sculptures in which he touches the earth to bear witness.

Other great Buddhist temples are no more. For half a millennium the Buddhist university-monastery at Nalanda was the leading light of learning in India. Now only the stones remain to remind us of its intellectual grandeur. Wu-tai Shan in China once was the greatest Buddhist complex in the medieval world. The mountains are still there, and many of the temples still survive. But the practice is gone; the knowledge is gone, and the learned monks are gone. A few monks are located there as remnants of the Buddhist community largely to serve as photo opportunities for tourists.

Buddhism is not defined by buildings and architecture, and the message of Buddhism is not limited to stone and steel. Once, in ancient Greece, a traveler from Athens was sent to Sparta — famous for its military prowess — to see its fortifications, but was surprised to find no city walls. "Where are your fortifications," he asked. "Wait until morning," came the reply. At dawn, as the visitor looked out, he saw the soldiers of Sparta practicing in the glinting rays of the rising sun. The fortifications of Sparta were its people, its soldiers, and the strength of their training; not its buildings.

Where is Buddhism to be practiced? The most brutal tragedy in modern history was not Nazi Germany or Stalin's gulag, but happened recently in Cambodia when thirty-one percent of the Cambodian people were murdered by the Khymer Rouge government in just four years (1975–78). Fighting still continues in parts of Cambodia, yet beside those killing fields that exist outside most villages walks a Buddhist monk, Maha Ghosananda. Along with his followers, he walks into the dangerous corners of Cambodia to encourage people to trust again, to have hope again, to rebuild their villages and their lives again. When people criticize him by saying, "Venerable One, monks belong in the temple," he replies:

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> We Buddhists must find the courage to leave our temples and enter the temples of human experience — temples that are filled with suffering. If we listen to the Buddha, Christ, or Gandhi, we can do nothing else. The refugee camps, the prisons, the ghettos and the battlefields will then become our temples. We have so much work to do.1

He goes on to say that many Buddhists in Asia "have been trained to rely on the traditional monkhood" that kept away from society and its problems. However, Maha Ghosananda recalls the example of the Buddha who went onto a battlefield to prevent war. The Buddha was a great social activist. It is well known that when the Sakya clan and the Koliyas were about to go to war over the use of water from the Rohini River, the Buddha intervened to avoid conflict.2 His community (*sangha*) rejected caste distinctions and built a more inclusive community. But his disciples were taught not to focus on themselves, but to care for others. In the first year of his teaching when the Buddhist community was just beginning and consisted of only sixty monks, the Buddha sent them forth: "Go forth, monks, for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit, for the good, for the happiness of gods and men" (Mahavagga Vinaya 1.11.1).3

Wailing Wall or Launching Pad?

Ancient Israel believed that they were commanded to build a great temple to God, and in the tenth century BCE a temple was constructed under King Solomon. Then in the sixth century BCE, it was destroyed by the Babylonians, but then rebuilt in that century after their defeat. Then in 70 CE, the Romans destroyed the temple for a second time. Today in Jerusalem, Jewish people gather at a remnant of the temple, now called the Wailing Wall since Jews for 1900 years have gone there to lament the destruction of the temple.

But was Judaism destroyed? No. Were the teachings lost? No. Did the practice die out? No. What did they use for their altars to make offerings to God? Their family table. Their homes became temples. Instead of dying out, Jews spread around the world, enlivening cultures everywhere; giving humanity great gifts of learning, hard work, talent, and a sense of justice. Other people do not lament the destruction of the temple, but are grateful that Judaism expanded across the world with creativity. The destruction of the temple certainly caused great suffering, but that suffering became a crucible — a launching pad — that transformed suffering into a gift for the world.

Is the SGI dying out with the destruction of the temple? No. Instead, other buildings are rising. On May 3 of last year, the eighteen-story Central Tower of Soka University in Japan was completed —"to symbolize peace and culture spreading in world society in the 21st century" (May 21, 1999, *World Tribune*, p. 1). Inside will be a World Language Center to be a communication bridge integrating people across different cultures, and a Correspondence Education Office so that learning can be shared beyond geography. The Central Tower of Soka University is a different kind of high sanctuary of true Buddhism (Jpn *Honmon no kaidan*): it is a working temple, much like the Temple of Learning at the University of Pittsburgh, or the Temple of Understanding in New York. The goal is not to create a fortress to keep people out, but a platform for bringing people together.

There used to be a clothing line with the logo "For Members Only." That is what I remember about the Sho-Hondo, not its grand architectural style, since as a non-member I was not allowed to go there. Is that Nichiren Buddhism? Is that the way to bring peace to the world? Did the Buddha want to have a temple that is restricted to only a few select

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members?

The basic principle underlying Buddhist social activism is Dependent Origination, meaning that "We are all interdependent and share an inescapable responsibility for the well-being of the entire world" (Ven. Kosan). This is the principle of Buddhist peacework.

In the past, people described the basic foundation of Buddhist training as morality, mindfulness, and wisdom. But these three virtues have been expanded by compassion and courage. Compassion and courage mean that we must find ways to include everyone.

The High Sanctuary as a Platform of Justice

I do not know how Nichiren understood the "high sanctuary of true Buddhism" (Jpn *honmon no kaidan*), but I do know that *kaidan* was traditionally understood not as a temple but as an ordination platform where monastics took their vows to keep the Buddhist precepts. *Dan* means an elevated platform, a stage, where the ceremony of vowing to keep the precepts, the *kai,* was performed in the process of ordaining new monks and nuns. In East Asia, there were several levels of ordination; first as novitiates who promised to keep a basic list of ten rules while they studied to be a monk, then the full ordination of accepting the 250 rules of a monk or 308 rules of a nun, and then finally the ceremony of vowing to keep the precepts of a bodhisattva. This is the traditional meaning of *kaidan*; a platform for publicly vowing to maintain the Buddhist rules.

In traditional China, Korea and Japan, the government strictly controlled the building of a *kaidan* because they didn't want many monks or nuns since they no longer would be available for taxation and military service. In medieval Japan, having government permission to erect your own ordination platform meant that you had the authority to begin your own lineage of Buddhism. You had the authority to train and ordain Buddhists, based on your interpretation of Buddhism. To survive a group needed government recognition and approval. In the Tendai School, only after the death of the founder, Saicho, did the government grant permission for Tendai to start its own lineage by building an ordination platform.

Later, in the Kama-kura period, Nichiren and other leaders like Honen, Shinran and Dogen developed ordinations and lineages in spite of the government. Only several centuries later, did the Tokugawa government in 1635, again bring all the reform Kamakura Buddhist groups under government supervision, and required everyone in Japan to be registered at a Buddhist temple. This sealed the fate of these new reform movements by again making them part of the power elite.

Even in the early part of the twentieth century, most Buddhist temples in most Buddhist countries were not free to establish their own *kaidan.* Even today, in Thailand, people are imprisoned when they try to establish their own Buddhist ordination practices without government approval. But the separation of church and state based on constitutional governments is increasing in Asia, and the opportunity for more *kaidan* is spreading. But, with this new freedom, the question arises, not how to build the physical platform, the *dan*, the temple, but what are the guidelines that we should agree to follow.

Too much attention has been paid to the building — the *dan* — and not enough to the social relations, the guidelines for practice, the *kai.* The reason the Sho-Hondo was destroyed is not because of bad *physical* architecture, but bad *social* architecture.

The challenge facing the SGI, and all Buddhist groups in the increasing freedom of today, is to discover better *kai*, better guidelines or social architecture. Neither Nichiren Shoshu nor the SGI follow the monastic rules — the *kai* developed by Shakyamuni

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Buddha. In fact, most Buddhist organizations are not monastic. Instead of NGOs — non governmental organizations — I have developed the term NMBO, nonmonastic Buddhist organizations.

In Japan, these reform Buddhist groups (NMBO) often have vowed to follow not the monastic rules but the "complete and sudden" rule that was supposed to arise from the enlightened life. But the problem has been that those who claim enlightened authority often simply followed government and cultural patterns. In East Asia these patterns were often hierarchical and male-dominated elites. The priesthood of Nichiren Shoshu obviously fits this pattern and wishes to maintain strict control of its denomination and the subservience of its members.

The SGI, however, offers a different model. Each year SGI President Ikeda offers peace proposals that offer methods of social organization that will support a better world. The major *kai*, or ethical guidelines, that the SGI has supported has been the Declaration of Human Rights. As you know, these thirty rules can be divided into three levels: one to protect the individual from exploitation (#2-21), those that encourage the development of people in society (#22-27), and those that visualize a global order for peace (#28-30). These three levels closely reflect the three major Mahayana goals: avoid all evil, cultivate all good, and save all beings. In addition, today we realize that to save all beings it is important to support four particular practices: dialogue, transparency, accountability, and democracy for all people. In addition, the SGI has encouraged discussion of a new Earth Charter to protect the environment. Supporting these new *kai* provides a new ethical foundation as the social architecture to build a more inclusive and significant global temple than Taiseki-ji.

The Diversity of SGI-USA

In 1997, I was asked to study SGI-USA to discover whether it was ethnically diverse or not. I was not asked to visit the main temple Taiseki-ji, the Sho-Hondo, but to investigate SGI practice in the United States. Since I couldn't interview every member, I looked at the SGI leadership at the district level in nine major urban areas in the United States in 1997. Thanks to the helpful support of regional leaders, I was given the ethnic identity of 2,449 district leaders. The ethnic composition of the district leaders in nine cities in 1997 is shown in Chart II.

If these 2,449 district leaders from nine cities are arranged by race, the percentages are as shown in Chart I.

Part of the study revealed that the biggest discrepancy between the membership and district leaders in Southern Florida was the high numbers of Hispanic leaders who represented a much higher percentage than the percentage of members. This ratio contrasts with the national leadership which had been dominated first by Japanese leaders and then supplemented by White leaders without reflecting the growing Black and Hispanic general membership. Although the profile of national leaders in the 1990s reflect the earliest period of Soka Gakkai, recent appointments have started to reflect the more diverse constituency of the 1990s.

Conclusion

Sunday morning is said to be the most ethnically divided time in America, and most Buddhist groups are divided along ethnic lines. Jan Nattier has classified American Buddhism into three groups: ethnic Buddhism, elite Buddhism, and evangelical

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Buddhism. Elite Buddhists are largely White, middle-class, educated European Americans who practice Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, or Vipassana Buddhism. Ethnic Buddhism consists of those temples that are identified in term of the Asian origin of their membership, such as Chinese, Vietnamese, or Korean Buddhist temples. In the USA the largest Buddhist group for many decades was the Buddhist Churches of America (Jodoshinshu, Nishi Honganji) that has been in America for more than a century but whose membership is still over ninety percent Japanese ancestry. However, in less than forty years SGI has become fully integrated so that less than twenty percent of its membership is of Japanese ancestry. Even at the national level SGI is also becoming more diverse through the appointments of such leaders as Shielah Edwards and Ronnie Smith, both African Americans. With the memory of the propagation campaigns of 1960s and 1970s in mind, Jan Nattier made a special category called "evangelical" Buddhism to account for the unusual pattern of SGI. However, perhaps a better term would be "socially inclusive." It is clear that the racial diversity of SGI-USA is one of the social values — one of the *kai* — that is a necessary foundation for a peaceful world, and represents the kind of social architecture that is needed to build a lasting Buddhist *kaidan.* ❑

Footnotes:
1. Maha Ghosananda, *Step by Step*, (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991) pp. 62-3.
2. John A. McConnell, "The Rohini Conflict and the Buddha's Intervention," in Sulak Sivaraksa et al, ed., *Radical Conservatism: Buddhism in the Contemporary World* (Bangkok: Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development, 1990), pp. 200-208.
3. Prayudh Payutto, "Sangha: the Ideal World Community," in Sulak Sivaraksa et al, ed., *Buddhist Perception for Desirable Societies in the Future* (Bangkok: Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development, 1993), p. 276.

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