

**BUDDHIST SCHOLARS LAUNCH BOOKS AT
NEW ENGLAND CULTURE CENTER
BY NANCY SIMMS
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Two new books on Buddhism in America were introduced by their authors at a dinner meeting held Nov. 19, 1999, at the SGI-USA New England Culture Center in Boston. Members of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, a group of scholars and practitioners attending the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religions, were guests at the book launching. Boston Culture Department representatives hosted the guests, who enjoyed an international cuisine prepared by local SGI-USA members.

Christopher S. Queen of Harvard University, editor of *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, published by Wisdom Publications, introduced this collection of 20 essays about socially engaged Buddhism. Among the essays in Professor Queen's book is "Racial Diversity in the Soka Gakkai," by David W. Chappell of the University of Hawaii.

In this essay, Professor Chappell reports on the findings of his study of the SGI-USA membership during the spring and summer of 1997. He states that the SGI-USA has attracted many people "through its attention and care to the needs of members, its concrete practices, and visionary purposes that reach across color barriers to support those who are seeking to improve themselves and change the world" (Queen, p. 197).

Richard Seager's book, *Buddhism in America* (Columbia University Press) succinctly addresses the split between the Soka Gakkai and Nichiren Shoshu from the standpoint of the Three Great Secret Laws.

Responding to both speakers was Father Roger Jacques of St. Joseph's Catholic Parish, next-door neighbor to the recently opened New England Culture Center. Introduced by Vice General Director Rob Eppsteiner as a man who has "dedicated himself to the welfare of the community," Father Jacques expressed his desire to learn more about engaged Buddhism. "Dialogue is so important," he said, "and there just isn't enough of it."

Also enjoying the program and discussions with the guests was SGI-USA Executive Advisor Fred M. Zaitzu.

As these and other scholars have noted, the SGI-USA's remarkable growth is a clear indicator of the infinite potential that exists, both within the lives of the members and within the organization itself. We enter the new millennium with great hope and anticipation of becoming an organization that continues to greatly benefit and enhance both local and global communities.

These books are available through local and on-line bookstores.

Richard Seager

In a recent interview in Boston during the American Academy of Religions, Professor Richard Seager commented that "the experience of SGI-USA in the 1990s reminds me somewhat of what happened among Catholics after Vatican II," he said. "Suddenly they faced new possibilities. One challenge was to sustain that sense of newness while finding abiding values in tradition." "As a new religious movement that experienced explosive growth, SGI-USA must also plan for the future. Other new movements in American history, such as the spiritualist in the 1840s and '50s, were not successful in doing that.

Eventually, they disappeared from the scene.”

Much of Richard Seager’s chapter on the SGI in his new book, *Buddhism in America*, is devoted to two hallmark events that have reshaped and revitalized the SGI-USA organization during the last decade:

“New initiatives inaugurated by Daisaku Ikeda continue to lead SGI-USA in progressive directions. Beginning in the 1990s, he acted as a catalyst for a thorough rethinking of the SGI-USA organization, urging across-the-board democratization in an effort to dismantle a hierarchical mentality inherited from an earlier era. Sacramental roles are now played by volunteers in non paying ministerial offices that are filled on a rotating basis.

“New initiatives have been put in place to enhance the ethnic and racial diversity of SGI-USA and to give women, who have always played a critical role, a higher profile at the top of the national leadership. Religious dialogue, both inter-religious and inter-Buddhist, is now on the SGI agenda, which would not have been the case under the sectarian leadership of the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood....

“The innovations in SGI since the schism have had different impacts in different countries, but in the United States have helped to transform SGI-USA into a form of lay Buddhism quite in keeping with the tenor and values of a moderate moral and religious current in the American mainstream” (Seager, p. 86).

“As the dust settles from the break between NST and SGI-USA, the latter appears to be in a very good position to play an important, ongoing role in the creation of American Buddhism. The Nichiren tradition provides a rich foundation for philosophical reflection and practice. The tenor and tone of the movement are very much in keeping with mainstream American values, while its varied membership gives it a multicultural and multiracial dimension that ought to be an asset in the next century” (Seager, p. 88).

—NANCY SIMMS

Buddhism in America

by Richard Hughes Seager

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www.columbia.edu/cu/cup

Christopher Queen

Socially engaged religious communities have been a source of inspiration to Christopher S. Queen, Ph.D., of Harvard University. His third book, *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, follows an earlier collection of essays, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (1996), which he co-edited with Sallie King, a professor of philosophy and religion at James Madison University. Professor Queen notes that religious communities of every faith have turned to address crises of human rights and economic injustice throughout the world. Engaged Buddhism, no stranger to this trend, is perhaps best known through the teachings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Vietnamese Zen Master, Thich Nhat Hanh. Of particular interest perhaps to SGI-USA members is a chapter written by Professor David W. Chappell of the University of Hawaii, titled, “Racial

Diversity in the Soka Gakkai.” This essay was written by Professor Chappell following his two-month visit to nine cities across the United States in which he interviewed many SGI-USA members.

In his conclusion, Professor Chappell states: “Racial diversity has never been a goal of Soka Gakkai, and Ikeda has attacked the very concept of race as a false social construct. Instead, Soka Gakkai affirms the value of everyone just as they are, and the capacity of each individual to improve, as well as the joy and responsibility everyone has for the happiness of others” (Queen, p. 206).

“It is fair to say in 1998, however, that with its large diversity of local leaders, its emphasis on dialogue by its national director, Fred Zaitso, and the socially engaged educational institutions established by its international leader, Daisaku Ikeda, Soka Gakkai in America has committed more resources, has impacted more lives, and has created more substantial institutions to implement programs for social and cultural improvement than any other American Buddhist organization” (Queen, pp. 206–07).

Queen said in a recent interview that internationalism is not something that comes naturally to most people. Rather, tribal thinking is much more natural to people throughout the world, including people living in advanced or developed countries — helping our own group, protecting our own group and keeping the others out — this is even reflected in the gated communities today. “So the idea for the next century that we all have to work hard toward is creating a sense of humanity, a sense of family within the global community,” he said.

“The founders of the Soka Gakkai movement have had a larger vision of the world,” he said. “Tsuneshaburo Makiguchi, for example, is sometimes called the John Dewey of Japanese education. His vision of what the educational system should be doing, that is, opening the minds of young people to a broader world, a world of not only material and intellectual capability but spiritual fullness and generosity, prefigured the kind of philosophy of Soka Gakkai Buddhism today.”

—NANCY SIMMS

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