

**PERSPECTIVE
ADVOCATING THE UNIVERSALITY OF BUDDHISM
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I believe we have been given a specific mandate by our mentor, SGI President Ikeda, to create an organization unlike any in the world—including the Soka Gakkai in Japan. Just a few weeks ago, in his message to the women’s conference at the Florida Nature and Culture Center, he said, “Please have an enjoyable, bright and cheerful time, in a manner befitting America” (Feb. 25 *World Tribune*, p. 3). During his visit here in 1990, he said, “I would like the SGI-USA to be a model for the rest of the world” (March 1990 *Seikyo Times*, p. 7).

During that visit he also said: “From the outset America has been a country to which people from around the world have flocked, leaving their homelands for one reason or another. They came to this country searching for a new home. It is the task of the kosen-rufu movement to breathe life into America’s purpose of building a new home for these people” (March 1990 *Seikyo Times*, p. 72). The next year he returned to this country and said: “The United States above all serves as an all-important stage for the whole world. It is an exciting and dynamic stage of vast dimensions” (November 1991 *Seikyo Times*, p. 21).

In 1993 he talked about a “new American Renaissance” and asked that we “march forward, carrying high the Stars and Stripes and the tri-colored SGI flag” (March 1993 *Seikyo Times*, p. 50).

Building an organization that is particularly American in character is an ongoing process. One of the ways our progress has become evident is in the language we use. We define who we are by the way we speak. Twenty or thirty years ago, we were strongly influenced in our speech and behavior by the immigrant Japanese who pioneered the organization. Our debt to them is immeasurable and a large part of that debt lies in our responsibility to further develop the SGI-USA. They didn’t intend for the organization to be an isolated Japanese colony. And so we have continued to change as our diversity and numbers grew.

The use of organizational jargon has been one of the most obvious changes. We realized that to prove the universality of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, we must be able to convey it in plain English. I believe that this is a key component of our mentor’s desire that “the United States become the central stage for the SGI’s worldwide activities” (November 1991 *Seikyo Times*, p. 51).

Therefore, we should continue our “language revolution.” The longer we continue to use foreign words to talk about Buddhism, the more difficult it is to propagate it to a wider audience. Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and reciting passages of the Lotus Sutra to our object of devotion are difficult enough for new members to get used to. Why make it even more confusing by peppering our speech with foreign words? Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism may have originated in Japan, but I don’t believe it is a Japanese religion. The teachings of the Daishonin transcend national and ethnic boundaries.

There are still a few words that we have not gotten out of the habit of using such as *shakubuku*, *goshō* and *sensei*. And there are some words that are formal titles of groups that we should translate such as *byakuren* and *gajokai*.

The word *shakubuku* is a specific method of propagation that the Daishonin talks about

in his writings. Although the term is not translated in the most recent compilation of his works, we misuse it to refer to any type of propagation or even people as in “He is my *shakubuku*.” There is no book in English called the *goshō*. It was translated to *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, which contain his letters and theses.

A curious thing happened during SGI President Ikeda’s visit in the early ’90’s. The women’s chorus had finished singing a Japanese song and after thanking them and praising their singing, he said that in the future it would be more appropriate for them to sing American songs. In an unusually direct manner, I believe he was imploring us not to mimic Japanese culture. That is why I don’t believe we should refer to him as *sensei*.

In this country, the most likely place one would encounter the word *sensei* would be at a karate or kung fu school. The connotation in that setting is one of unquestioning obedience to the master of the school, a connotation that in no way applies to our mentor. Besides demonstrating the universality of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, I believe we must prove the universality of our mentor as well. When signing in at the 1975 gathering in Guam for the founding of the SGI, President Ikeda put “the world” as his country of origin. He is truly a global citizen, and we do him a disservice when we treat him otherwise.

Speech habits are hard to change but I believe we must continue to be responsible for the way we portray our organization and mentor to prospective members, the media and general public. President Ikeda is planning to attend the opening of Soka University in Aliso Viejo, Calif., next year. It is an event that will be covered by national and possibly world press. The image of him entering to shouts of “*sensei!*” from hundreds of American members does not strike me as responding to his vision for our organization.

Another quote during President Ikeda’s 1990 visit concerns change: “Change, unceasing change, is one of the distinguishing characteristics of America. Change occurs more rapidly here than it does elsewhere. This could be said to be an indication of the vitality that this country possesses. Similarly, Buddhism holds that everything is in a constant state of flux. Thus, the question is whether we are to accept change passively and be swept away by it, or whether we are to take the lead and create positive changes on our own initiative. While conservatism and self-protection might be likened to winter, night and death, the spirit of pioneering and attempting to realize ideals evokes images of spring, morning and birth” (March 1990 *Seikyo Times*, p. 52).

These suggestions may seem radical to some, but I believe they are inevitable. The more we are perceived as an American organization, the wider the entrance we provide to new membership.

Our mentor made an even more radical suggestion in 1996 when he said: “I propose that we come up with an alternate name for the SGI to make it more accessible and familiar to a large number of people both inside and outside the organization. For example, we might use the organization’s initials to create a catch phrase like ‘Social Good Institution’” (July 12, 1996 *World Tribune*, p. 12). As his disciple, I am compelled to ponder what he is saying to us by such statements and take action accordingly.