

**SCHOLARS RECOGNIZE THE SGI  
BUILDING BRIDGES OF TRUST  
BY AL ALBERGATE  
SGI-USA DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY RELATIONS**

Headline in the July 2, 1999, *World Tribune*: “‘Soka Gakkai in America’ Authors To Sign Books.” Headline in the March 3, 2000, *World Tribune*: “Buddhist Scholars Launch Books at New England Culture Center.”

These stories heralded a new era for those seeking current information on the Soka Gakkai International. Within just the past four years, 10 books on Buddhism containing significant material on the SGI have been published by authors from the academic world who are not members of the SGI (see box, p. 3).

Ten years ago, you could not have produced such a list. Any journalist, student or researcher looking for literature about the SGI written by those with academic credentials could not find much, and what they did read contained significantly out-of-date information.

So what changed? There seems to be two main answers. We became more open as an organization and, at the same time, American society was becoming more interested in Buddhism.

Nowhere, perhaps, was this revival in society’s interest more widely proclaimed than on the cover of *Time* magazine on Oct. 13, 1997, where a photograph of actor Brad Pitt, star of the movie *Seven Years in Tibet*, stares out over the headline: “America’s Fascination With Buddhism.”

*Time*’s fascination with the SGI brand of Buddhism was relatively low, judging by only one passing mention in the eight-page survey of Buddhism in this country. By contrast, people in the academic field of religion seem to have found plenty to write about.

But why the SGI and why now?

Rob Eppsteiner, SGI-USA vice general director and director of academic relations, said that when he started speaking with professors of religion a decade ago: “There was little interest because we were not an open organization when we were together with the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood, so we could not create bridges of trust. Over the past 10 years we have been able, as an organization, to become more open, engaged.

“We have allowed scholars to do research. SGI President Ikeda has encouraged us to become that kind of organization. Once we start to develop avenues of trust, scholars can do objective research on us.”

Bridges of trust are built; they don’t just spring up by themselves. And the voice does the work of the Buddha. Mr. Eppsteiner and other SGI-USA representatives let it be known to scholars that they were more than happy to cooperate with their research projects.

At the same time, the religious organization began to reach out to the community in new ways, sponsoring educational exhibits on environmental problems, children’s rights, the life of renowned scientist and peace activist Linus Pauling and the Soka educational system, which have criss-crossed the 50 states. Books were donated to Africa and Victory Over Violence and the Earth Charter became themes for nationwide awareness-raising activities. Photographs of nature scenes by President Ikeda comprise an exhibit now embarking on its second tour of the United States. All of these exhibitions and activities are free to the public.

Scholars became interested in our members in part due to their social engagement, according to Mr. Eppsteiner, but also “because we are not only one of the largest lay movements in the United States, but the most diverse.”

Our cultural and ethnic diversity sparked the interest of Dr. David W. Chappell, who studied our membership in 1997 and wrote: “In a country of immigrants like America, religion often reflects and reinforces the distinctive ethnic heritage of its members, and Sunday morning is said to be the most segregated time in America. In contrast, Soka Gakkai came to the United States in 1960 and attracted a greater diversity of races and classes of people in the first three decades than any other Buddhist organization.”<sup>1</sup>

These comments by Dr. Chappell, a professor in the Department of Religion at the University of Hawaii, appear in one chapter of *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, edited by Harvard’s Christopher Queen, who included the SGI in two other recent books he co-edited, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* and *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*.

In a book he himself edited, titled *Buddhist Peacework: Creating Cultures of Peace*, Chappell decided to include an essay by President Ikeda, “The SGI’s Peace Movement”; in addition to contributions by the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, Sulak Sivaraksa, Robert Aitken and about a dozen other respected Buddhists. The preface to this book was contributed by Virginia Straus, executive director of the SGI-affiliated Boston Research Center for the 21st Century.

Just who our members are and what led them to Buddhism was the subject of a sociological survey resulting in the only book on the list of 10 completely devoted to the SGI, *Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion*, by Phillip Hammond and David Machacek of the University of California, Santa Barbara. Among other conclusions, the authors said the SGI-USA “promises to be a lasting presence in the United States.”

So significant to academics has been the work of the Boston Research Center, which was founded by President Ikeda, that it apparently inspired Richard Hughes Seager to include a brief profile of Ms. Straus in his book, *Buddhism in America*. Mr. Seager, an associate professor of religious studies at Hamilton College, especially was interested in the 1991 split between the SGI and the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood and focused on it in one chapter titled “Soka Gakkai and Its Nichiren Humanism.” He concludes, “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.”<sup>2</sup>

This transformation of the SGI-USA, which began a decade ago, continues today and, in Mr. Eppsteiner’s opinion, likely will continue to interest scholars into the new century.

1. David W. Chappell, “Racial Diversity in the Soka Gakkai,” in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*. Edited by Christopher S. Queen; (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 184.
2. Richard H. Seager, *Buddhism in America*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 88.

## Current Reading on the Soka Gakkai

**Hammond, Phillip and David Machacek**, *Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

**Prebish, Charles S.**, *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

**Prebish, Charles S., and Kenneth K. Tanaka**, eds., *The Faces of Buddhism in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

**Queen, Christopher S.**, ed., *Engaged Buddhism in the West*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000.

**Queen, Christopher S. and Sallie B. King**, eds. *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996.

**Rapaport, Al**, compiler, *Buddhism in America: Proceedings of the First Buddhism in America Conference*. Boston: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1998.

**Seager, Richard H.**, *Buddhism in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

**Tweed, Thomas A. and Stephen Prothero**, eds., *Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

**Williams, Duncan Ryuken and Christopher S. Queen**, eds., *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*. Honolulu: Curzon Press, 1999.

## Journal and News Articles

**Coussens, Pat**, "Buddhists find joy in being good citizens." *Des Moines (WA) News*, 24 August 1996.

**Elam, Patricia**, "Buddhism Lighted the Way to the Joy Within." *Washington Post*, 10 October 1998.

**Jiang Zhongxin**, "The Lotus Sutra and the Twenty-first Century." *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 8 (1998), 106–118.

**Lyles, Charlise**, "Prayer; Alone or in Groups, People Stop to Reflect." *Dayton (OH) Daily News*, 6 May 1999.

**Mitchell, Donald W.**, "New Forms of Lay Spirituality, Buddhist and Christian." *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 15 (1995): 249–56.

**Moscoso, Eunice**, "Religious Leaders Protest Arney School Prayer Amendment." *Cox News Service*, 22 July 1996.

**Nattier, Jan**, "Buddhism Comes to Main Street." *Wilson Quarterly*, Spring 1997.

**Singer, Catherine**, "Gay and Lesbian Buddhists Finding Answers in Their Spiritual Quest." *Orange County Blade*, August 1997.

**Straus, Virginia**, "Peace, Culture, and Education Activities: A Buddhist Response to the Global Ethic." *Buddhist-Christian Studies No. 15* (1995), 199–211.

**Taylor, R. Shawn**, "Buddhism finds a new audience." *Chicago Tribune*, 13 August 1995.

**Watanabe, Teresa**, "Japan's Crusader or Corrupter? Buddhist lay leader Daisaku Ikeda ..." *Los Angeles Times*, 15 March 1996.

**Yarborough, Sophie**, "Buddhist retreat offers quiet spot in suburbia." *The Miami Herald*, 26 February 1998.