

EXPERIENCE—SAMUEL COHN, AUSTIN, TEXAS CREATING SOKA EDUCATION IN A MAJOR RESEARCH UNIVERSITY

I am a professor of sociology at Texas A & M University and have practiced Buddhism since 1990. Before I started chanting, I was an extreme example of the arrogant, elitist professor. The only thing that mattered was research, and research was meant to show how everyone else in the universe was wrong. My mission in life was to be smarter than anyone else and to demonstrate this by pointing out the intellectual errors of other students, professors and the general public.

I was very smart, and I did find a lot of errors. This brought me great occupational success, isolation from virtually everyone in the world and a life-state alternating between learning, anger and despair.

One of the consequences of chanting is that it changes your priorities, often not in ways that you expect or plan. I had gotten into Buddhism for intellectual reasons. I wanted answers to deep, metaphysical questions. I got the original benefit I sought practically immediately. The Gohonzon taught me more about how the universe operates in my first year of chanting than I had learned in 18 years of college and university study.

Surprisingly, however, my personality began to change as well. Suddenly, I was not at war with everybody trying to show they were idiots. Research and truth continued to matter—as they continue to matter to me to this day. But helping people also began to matter—even people who were not going to become college professors.

One day, my chair asked if I would become an undergraduate adviser. This is viewed as an unprestigious job in many universities. In the old days, I would have turned this down as an impediment to my research. Instead, I took the position and made a determination to commit myself to undergraduate reform. I wanted to create a sociology program that would make people happy and would help them achieve their life goals.

I had read the writings of first Soka Gakkai president Tsu-nesaburo Makiguchi before I made this determination. However, I had put them in the back of my mind and forgotten about them. It was only later, after the reform program was under way, that I reacquainted myself with Makiguchi's *Education for Creative Living* and realized how much that book had affected me. Almost everything that I had pushed for at Texas A & M came straight out of Makiguchi in some way. Study, like faith and practice, sometimes has inconspicuous effects; you do not realize what you have learned until it shows up later in your life.

Makiguchi taught that education is supposed to involve value creation. It needs to have a larger purpose. It is supposed to address a student's real life needs. Education should incorporate experiences from the student's actual lived experiences, preparing them to be global citizens. Soka education, in its more modern manifestation, encourages students to embrace cultural diversity. There is also an emphasis on meaningful mentor-disciple relations. I wanted to see some version of all of these at Texas A & M.

I began to push for a set of changes in undergraduate policy that represented a manifestation of these ideas. Texas A & M is a public institution and, as such, avoids even the appearance of including religious materials in its teaching program. To the extent that there is any religious expression at all, this expression is conservative and Christian. My chanting kept me focused on the humanistic features of Soka education—reforms that could be accepted by everyone regardless of religion.

I formed a committee and had it staffed with faculty who would be willing to work to make a difference in our program. The first reform however, was personal. I had to upgrade the quality of my own undergraduate advising. Most advisers in public universities see their mission narrowly as explaining the formal regulations of their respective major. My daimoku encouraged me to expand this role dramatically to include seeing that each student's education had a larger purpose.

Whenever a student enters our program, we now take an hour or more with the student, asking, "What do you want to accomplish with this education?" Sometimes students have an answer; sometimes they do not. I work to develop programs of courses for those students with a plan, to qualify them for their particular career or life-goal; I work with the indecisive students develop a long-term strategy and a sense of who they are.

Our committee then upgraded the quality of our internship programs. Internships deal with the need of students for occupational training, and also integrate schoolwork with actual life experience. We now have one of the largest sociology internship programs in the country.

Most schools treat internships as cheap off-site learning—in the spirit of "pay your tuition, then please go away." We instead put real content into our internships. Employers are expected to teach high-level skills to our students—or they do not receive another intern. Students must attend a seminar, in which they integrate past coursework with their observations, and write a paper that combines sociological theories with their experiences.

We created an undergraduate research fellowship. We take our top students and pay them to work one on one with our best professors. The professors have to compete for the rights to get a student by writing a proposal explaining what advanced skills they intend to teach their students. The normal outcome is that the student should be able to obtain publication in a legitimate scientific journal.

The mentoring in this program is clearly paying off. Texas A & M sociology undergraduates are developing a national reputation for research excellence. This year, several Texas A & M sociology undergraduates were invited to Puerto Rico and Los Angeles to present the results of their completed work.

We have also instituted programs in race and ethnicity, gender and global sociology. We have redesigned the introductory sociology course to emphasize the causal principles that affect American and non-American societies alike. We have put in six new courses, revitalizing faculty teaching by allowing them to teach what they love rather than what is on the books. Academic performance has gone sky high. Sociology department students used to have the lowest GPA in the college. In two years, our GPA jumped to above the college average, as bright students have flocked to sociology as a major.

Our innovations are being widely recognized and imitated. Key members of our advising team have been hired away by other departments in our university who wish to change their policies to resemble ours. Our program has been written up in the American Sociological Association's professional journal *Footnotes* and is getting its own chapter in a book on innovative undergraduate education. We have been invited several times to speak to audiences of sociologists at other institutions about the improvements we have made in our program. A scholar from the University of Utrecht came to visit me recently to discuss prospects of introducing some of these reforms into Dutch higher education.

One of the surprising aspects of these changes is how uncontroversial they were. Nearly every Soka reform we suggested was enthusiastically supported by the university. My Buddhist practice not only encouraged me to be steadfast in my goal, but I was also

generally in a high life-condition when I came to work. I also firmly believe that much of my victory is due to the fact that Soka education is just a good idea. Resistance is low when the programs you are promoting are fundamentally sound and benefit everybody.

Makiguchi's principles could be instituted in many institutions of higher education besides Texas A & M. We merely need to chant enough to want to make a difference, and then the intrinsic merits of Soka education will sell themselves.