

# Soka Gakkai in Thailand: Its Rationale, Strategy and Tactics

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## INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades Thailand has witnessed the emergence of new religious movements both within the Theravada Buddhist Sangha and outside the mainstream Thai Buddhist tradition. The indigenous Dhammakaya and the Santi Asoke movements are examples of the Theravada-derived sects, while the Soka Gakkai in Thailand, the Sekai Kyuseikyo, and the Reiyukai (Thailand) Foundation represent the latter type. Since Theravada Buddhism has characterized Thai culture for centuries, such new religious formations in contemporary Thai society have attracted the attention of Thai scholars of Buddhism as to why and how those new religious movements have rapidly expanded their ranks in Thai society. However, most studies of Thai religions have been focused on the doctrinal and philosophical dimensions of Theravada Buddhism more than on the social milieu of new religious movements, particularly the imported ones. To my knowledge, Elizabeth Derrett's study of the Sekai Kyuseikyo is the only work on imported new religious groups in Thailand. (Derrett, 1984, 1991). Therefore, the study of the Soka Gakkai in Thailand attempts to provide some possible answers to these questions.

The Soka Gakkai in Thailand has survived through difficult periods and prosperous times in the contemporary history of the country and is still active in the cause after four decades of its existence in the strong Buddhist traditional culture of Thailand. As the organization has survived within the first generation and is expected to gain more

recruits every year, generally, there are some significant related factors facilitating the movement's prospect of success: its ideological teachings; the mobilization and socialization efforts; and the interaction between the organization and the larger society. In this paper, however, only some particular points, i.e., the movement's rationale, channels of recruitment including some strategic considerations underlying its propagation, will be focused on.

#### BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SOKA GAKKAI IN THAILAND

Originally, the Soka Gakkai in Thailand was affiliated with the Soka Gakkai in Japan which aimed at worldwide propagation of the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist Sect. Founded by Tsunesaburo Makiguchi before the Second World War, the Soka Gakkai in Japan was a lay organization of the followers of the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist Sect which mushroomed in post-war Japan. Starting with its first overseas branch in 1960 in the United States, the Soka Gakkai in Japan has since expanded its networks for the propagation of the faith all over the world. After Daisaku Ikeda, then the president of the Soka Gakkai in Japan, founded Soka Gakkai International in 1975, the Soka Gakkai in Thailand and its counterparts have become affiliates of Soka Gakkai International. After major conflicts with the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist Sect in the 1990s, organization members of the Soka Gakkai International are now no longer affiliated with the Nichiren Shoshu Sect. Daisaku Ikeda, the president of the Soka Gakkai International, clearly states that the organization has as its aim the creation of Nichiren Buddhist-based societies in which lasting peace and happiness will be available to all members.

Among the imported new religious movements, the Soka Gakkai in Thailand (SGT) is one of the most highly organized groups. In Thailand, SGT's original date of founding was claimed to be the year 1961 after the visit of Ikeda along with other leaders of the Soka Gakkai in Japan on their way to Buddha Gaya in India. In 1984, SGT was officially registered with the Office of National Culture Commission of the Ministry of Education as a voluntary association under the Thai name "Samakom Sangkunka Naiprates Thai." The name "Samakom Sangkunka Naiprates Thai" conveys the same meaning as the Soka Gakkai in Thailand, namely the Value-Creating Association of Thailand.<sup>1</sup> At the end of 1984, it was reported that

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<sup>1</sup> The name Soka Gakkai in Thailand (SGT) is used throughout this paper to coincide with other studies of organizations affiliated with the Soka Gakkai International, though the Thai name is always used by the organization in correspondence with its Thai members. On the organization's emblem, the letters SGT are placed in the middle, and the Thai name (*Samakom Sangkunka Naiprates Thai*) is underneath.

SGT's membership nationally had reached approximately 11,000 households. By 1988, SGT was rather firmly organized and was able to perform its activities on a relatively full scale in accordance with its main purpose: "to promote the study and propagation of the Buddha's doctrines in order that the members can obtain true knowledge, gain a better understanding of Buddhism, and put it into practice for the benefits and prosperity of all members."<sup>2</sup>

In the first three decades of its operation, SGT never publicized itself on a large scale to gain recruits, but the sense of mission on the part of its members was so strong that by 1990 the national membership claimed that approximately 13,000 families joined the organization. During the 1990s, however, some major developments in the organization have been observed. First of all, its headquarters was moved from Wireless Road in Bangkok to a more spacious location in Nontaburi Province, a metropolitan neighboring area. Second, new branches of SGT and their attractive buildings were opened in several parts of the country such as the eastern branch at Pattaya City. Third, SGT as a voluntary association has done more public service. Also, the organization's director, whose nationality is Japanese, and SGT members have appeared on many occasions at both governmental and private institutions. These phenomena may be considered to be signs of progressive expansion of the movement in the past decade as the organization expects to gain approximately 1,000 family members each year. Most of SGT members are drawn from relatively better off backgrounds. The number of unemployed is quite low. The majority of members are self-employed in retail trades, work for private companies and in a government service. Some are housewives and students.

#### RATIONALE FOR SGT'S MISSION IN THAILAND

SGT, like other Soka Gakkai overseas branches, has as its ultimate goal the worldwide propagation of Nichiren Buddhism, or *kosen-rufu* in Japanese which literally means "widely declare and propagate Buddhism." *Kosen-rufu* was originally understood to mean the proselytization of the entire Japanese population and eventually of the whole world. Ikeda modified this goal as it was vague and seemed beyond reach. In order to make a more plausible goal, Ikeda announced that when one-third of the population of an area became members of the Soka Gakkai, another one-third was sympathetic but unconverted, and the remaining one-third was opposed to the faith,

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<sup>2</sup> The Office of National Culture Commission, the Ministry of Education, Bangkok, Thailand, the license of the Soka Gakkai in Thailand, No. T. 669/1984. (The translation from Thai is mine.)

*kosen-rufu* might be considered complete.(White: 1970) Following Ikeda's policy, it is also SGT's obligatory mission to proselytize (*shakubuku* in Japanese) and gain as many recruits as possible to achieve this goal. In fact, SGT does not state explicitly that its goal is to convert one-third of the Thai population to Nichiren Buddhism, but this idea is implicitly ingrained in its members' consciousness.

As stated earlier, SGT went through difficulties and hardships, particularly during the first two decades of its operation. Yet the organization showed no signs of despair. On the contrary, its attempts to spread Nichiren Daishonin's message and to build a new Nichiren Buddhist-based society, in which lasting peace and happiness will be available to all, were made constantly. Unlike the propagation of Nichiren Buddhism in Christian-oriented countries where Buddhism is foreign to their people, SGT does not find it difficult to introduce the Buddhist terminology to their converts as most Thai people are familiar with concepts similar to SGT's teachings and tend to be eclectic in their religious practices.

On the other hand, SGT's attempts at converting Thai people to this new Buddhist faith may face some problems and difficulties due to a strong establishment of the Sangha Council of Thailand, political institutions, governmental offices that take care of religious affairs throughout the country, and Thai Theravada-oriented scholars and adherents. In fact, SGT has to deal with the constituency from which its recruits would be drawn, as well as the public and other established orders if its operation is to be successful. Since the concern of SGT in bringing some changes in values in Thai society is not only at an individual level, but also on a larger scale, the conviction that the movement's actions are appropriate and worth rallying around proves to be necessary. In other words, SGT had to add some rationale to its teachings and practices, besides the new world view and means to achieve a Utopian society because it is the rationale that motivates, encourages, and gives self-justification to SGT members to propagate their faith and bring about a peaceful world for all human beings. Without its rationale, SGT might not have moved beyond a personal level and developed into an organization of greater scope

At least four significant rationales are found in SGT. First and foremost, SGT anchored the cause by presenting itself as a legitimate voluntary association aiming at promoting the study and propagation of "Buddhism." In the official permit, when registered with a governmental office, SGT, like other imported Buddhist-based groups in Thailand, never explicitly specifies what sect of Buddhism

that the association wants to promote. In general, “Buddhism” as normally understood among Thai people is the Theravada tradition, one of the three pillars of the nation (namely nation, religion, and king.) There are several voluntary associations and foundations throughout the country that propose statements similar to those of SGT. However, most, if not all, adhere to the dominant Buddhist tradition. SGT, founded on a newly imported Buddhist tradition, is aware of differences in religious doctrines and practices as normally accepted in Thai society. Thus, by identifying the movement with “Buddhism,” a sacred value of Thai society, SGT, to some extent, proves to be acceptable in the public eye. For new converts and rank and file members, Nichiren Buddhism is regarded as a Buddhist sect founded by Nichiren Daishonin, a Japanese monk who expounded Sakyamuni Buddha’s teachings in the *Lotus Sutra*. A clear difference between these two Buddhist traditions is not a major concern. This is in accordance with what Ralph H. Turner and Lewis M. Killian suggested. In order to survive in a foreign land, a movement should establish its legitimacy and goals by confirming the sacred value of society in which it exists, but giving new interpretation and a novel application. (Turner and Killian, 1987: 280)

Second, SGT members are told that they are a special group of people who are fortunate to hear of the title of the *Lotus Sutra*, *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* in Japanese, and receive all the good benefits from chanting the “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.” (Nam is a short pronunciation of Namu.) The notion of being elected builds a sense of group identity, uniqueness, and group pride among SGT members. The sense of group identity and group pride make its members believe that it is their responsibility to carry out the task by reciting, transmitting, and protecting the *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* along with other Soka Gakkai members around the world. This conviction is best expressed by Ikeda as follows:

The Soka Gakkai, unlike other religious organizations, never forgets our obligation to protect people. Instead of enjoying power, our organization has as its aim the building of world peace and happiness for all mankind. . . . I believe that Nichiren Daishonin would have been happy to see your missions for *kosen-rufu*.  
(Sangkunka 58, 1990: 30)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> From Ikeda’s speech given at Soka University, Tokyo, on April 29, 1990. The speech was translated from Japanese into Thai and published in *Sangkunka* 58, 1990: 30.  
 Remarks: All English translations of quotations from *Sangkunka* and interviews throughout this paper are mine.

Third, the organization is considered to be a mission of mercy. This rationale for becoming active in the cause lies in the concept of Bodhisattva ideal which encompasses unlimited love and compassion for all human beings. SGT members, like Soka Gakkai members everywhere, believe that the present state of the world is of the period of *mappo*, the period of the extinction of the Buddha's Dharma. As a result, the world is in a state of chaos, misery, and unhappiness. In order to help as many people as possible to achieve Buddhahood or enlightenment in this existence, which is the ultimate happiness, its mission is done with love, mercy, and compassion for the sake of all mankind. Its missionary work is compared with that of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth mentioned in the *Lotus Sutra*. Following Nichiren's life, a District chief of SGT confirmed in an interview that SGT is a moral crusade whose aim is to rid people of suffering, and thus, motivates its members to enthusiastically go about introducing Nichiren Buddhism to outsiders and to keep active in the cause:

Those who propagate the true doctrine of the Buddha are like the Bodhisattvas of the Earth who have profound love and compassion, and wish everyone to be as happy as they are. As adherents of Nichiren, who was considered as the leader of all Bodhisattvas, SGT members are also following his path with love and mercy. Even though we might face some difficulties on the way, we won't give up.

A final, and perhaps the most significant rationale contributing to the success of SGT is the belief that Nichiren Buddhism is the only "true" religion in this era. Even Theravada Buddhism cannot compete with it in terms of good effects resulting from religious practices. Although this ideological teaching may not be imposed directly on new members right after their participation, the basic idea of "actual proof" of the faith is often mentioned during study sessions and conversation. The "actual proof" is to confirm the consequences of the practice of Nichiren Buddhism in individuals' everyday life which vary from tangible benefits to spiritual elevation. Testimonies in SGT's monthly magazine, *Sangkunka*,<sup>4</sup> constantly show that potential members were asked to try the new faith themselves. Once the

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<sup>4</sup> SGT's monthly magazine, *Sangkunka*, has been issued on a regular basis since March 1984. It is a valuable source for gaining a better understanding of SGT's official doctrines, personal and religious guidance, indoctrination for the young generation, and social activities which reflect its adjustments to the larger society. In addition, testimonies in *Sangkunka* make it possible to gather a bundle of data about its members' attitudes, past experiences, motives, channels of being recruited, benefits gained from chanting "*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*," etc.

practice of Nichiren Buddhism proves to be right and effective, they will realize that Nichiren Buddhism is the only “true and proven” religion. Thus, this rationale provides a firm ground for SGT members to propagate the faith.

#### PROCESS OF RECRUITMENT

SGT has existed since 1961. The movement has had to develop strategies, tactics, and organizational mechanisms to propagate its message, gain recruits, and promote the movement’s position in Thai society. As a movement emerges and exists in a larger society, it is assumed that the religious, cultural, and political situations in that particular society will have some effects on the movement. This is also true of SGT. Therefore, SGT must have good strategies and proper tactics in its process of recruitment. In order to achieve its goals, whatever they may be, a movement (either social or religious) has to be primarily concerned with how to make people in a society in which the movement is operating aware of its existence. Thus the most significant thing in a movement’s recruitment strategy is to send out its message and make contact with outsiders.

SGT has used several methods, both directly and indirectly, in sending out its message. Derived from David Snow’s framework, which is more systematic and comprehensive than others’ (Snow, 1980:787-601),<sup>5</sup> the following channels have normally been used by SGT: direct and indirect contacts with outsiders in the private and public domain.<sup>6</sup>

#### PRIVATE DOMAIN

Unlike other movements, SGT has never encouraged its members to visit strangers’ residences and talk about Nichiren Buddhism with them, or contact outsiders by phone or mail for the propagation purposes. The only direct means of outreach and engagement possibilities in private places used by SGT is face-to-face propagation and recruitment along the lines of members’ pre-existing interpersonal ties and social networks. This method is proved to be one of the most effective ways of propagating and bringing in new converts into the organization. Most converts who are linked with SGT members through this channel are kin, husbands and wives, friends, colleagues and co-workers. Among these, the recruitment among kin is very successful in SGT.

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<sup>5</sup> See also, Snow, 1976: 161.

<sup>6</sup> For details, see Angurarohita, 1993.

The importance of a pre-existing interpersonal relationship between recruiters and potential converts in the recruitment to a movement is recognized in various studies on social and religious movements. Gerlach and Hine pointed out that the type of structural relationships, i.e. sibling, spouse, parent, neighbor, and so forth, is less important to understanding recruitment to a movement than the frequency of interaction between recruiters and potential converts, or the effect of the relationship on the potential converts. (Gerlach and Hine, 1970: 84). This analysis may partly be true in the SGT's recruitment among friends and co-workers. However, it is worth noting that in Thai society bonds between parents and children, among siblings and other relatives are strong. These structural relationships also influenced movement members' participation in SGT. A long-standing male member testified in *Sangkunka* as follows:

I was introduced to the faith [Nichiren Buddhism] by my mother in 1983, but rarely understood the cardinal practices including how to chant correctly. After I moved to work in Chiang Rai Province, I met some SGT members and then started to go and join their meetings. . . . My wife and I have received lots of benefits from chanting, but not until 1996 the year in which we faced some financial difficulties. However, my wife and I have never given up chanting. We spent time chanting more and more to strengthen our faith. One day I came with other members to the headquarters to seek religious guidance and study the Dharma [Nichiren's teachings based on the *Lotus Sutra*]. I chanted in front of the *Gohonzon* [object of worship] and made a wish to go through all of the difficulties. Four-five months passed while I kept chanting, and finally, the power of the *Gohonzon* worked to the extent that the major part of our financial problems was resolved. . . . My wife and I decided that we will earnestly introduce the power of the Wonderful Law taught by Nichiren to others.

(*Sangkunka* 180, 2000: 59-60)

In the case of friends and acquaintances, it is noticed that a particular cultural element in Thai society is conducive to the acceptance of the faith. A number of SGT recruits pointed to situations in which they could not say "no" to recruiters' invitation to join the organization. They said that their main reason to try the chant was just because they have *kwamkrenghai* (this term in Thai



may be close to a considerate attitude). This kind of reason has a deep root in the Thai culture. In Thailand, interaction with people, particularly with intimates, is strongly inspired by consideration or deference, which is termed *kwamkregchai*. *Kwamkregchai* is not just a positive feeling toward people, but conveys a more complicated relationship in Thai social life. It appears to have double functions in social interactions: promoting harmony, and avoiding conflict and unpleasantness. Niels Mulder analyzed that Thai people are “well-advised to be *kreengcai* [*krengchai*] to each other, in seeking friendship, love [and] warmth, social acceptance, and safety in their group. . . . In their dealing with powerful people, *kreengcai* [*krengchai*] expresses submission and has clear survival value.” (Mulder, 1990:91) Along with a considerate attitude, gratitude, respect, and obedience toward people of seniority also had much influence on SGT recruits’ decision to join the organization when asked by respectable members. A young member said in an interview as follows:

I was introduced to the new belief and SGT’s activities by a senior member. She is a very close friend of my grandmother. She kindly explained to me about the chant and some organizational activities for young members that I can join. I tried it just because I was considerate of her feelings. I didn’t want her to feel bad. Come to think of it, I made the right decision to engage in SGT’s activities.

In terms of the nature of the relationship between recruiters and potential members, Gerlach and Hine proposed that a positive relationship is likely to influence a potential recruit to participate in a movement, whereas a negative relationship blocks recruitment. To some extent, SGT’s propagation and recruitment efforts are also in accordance with this suggestion. Many SGT participants have been recruited by movement members with whom they had established a degree of rapport and trust over a certain period. It is usually reported that in critical times SGT members whom potential recruits have known for years “just happened to be there and sincerely helped them out.”

#### PUBLIC DOMAIN

There are several channels to send out the organization’s message or make contact with outsiders in the public domain: face-to-face proselytizing in public places, participation in public welfare

programs, promotion in educational institutions and through dialogue with dignitaries.

#### 1. FACE-TO-FACE PROSELYTIZING IN PUBLIC PLACES

In other places, where religious and political freedom are constitutionally and practically guaranteed, we may see some recruiters attempt to lure people on sidewalks, in shopping malls, and similar locations, or converse with those who happened to walk by. This kind of effort is rarely practiced among Thai members. Very few SGT members have ever tried to proselytize in public areas by means of face-to-face propagation, such as when riding in a taxi or in a hospital. The direct means of propagation in public places might enhance public awareness of the existence of the movement, but it is difficult to gain actual converts, however. To my knowledge, no SGT convert has been recruited off the streets by direct means. This method does not work, and is not safe to practice particularly during time of political instability.

#### 2. PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC SERVICE.

Although, according to the director of SGT, SGT does not seek to proselytize on a large scale or advertise itself in public, it has performed some activities for the larger society. First, in the 1980s, SGT donated a million Baht to the mayor of Bangkok Metropolitan for building an overpass in front of the center on the Wireless Road in Bangkok, which was then its headquarters. Normally, Bangkok Metropolitan is responsible for building overpasses in the city to save pedestrians from traffic accidents. Several companies and organizations in Bangkok also contributed a certain amount of money to the city for covering the building expenses. Usually, after the overpass is finished, the name of a company or organization is carved on it, or in many cases, an opening ceremony will be held as a token of appreciation and recognition of their assistance. In the SGT's case, there was neither an opening ceremony, nor the name of SGT placed on the overpass in front of the center. The director said that this was because the association does not want to promote itself in public. Rather, it is happy to see its members and other pedestrians, particularly school students in that area, safely use the overpass to cross the street. Only one leading newspaper in English, *The Nation*, reported this event in a small column.

Second, SGT also follows its desire to help people in adversity. This kind of activity has been constantly performed. For example, at the end of the year 2000, there was excessive rainfall which caused

one of the worst floods in Hat Yai, a district in the southern part of Thailand. SGT, like other organizations and offices throughout the country, took action by collecting food, clothes, money, and so forth from its members and sending them to the governmental/district office to help reduce the disastrous effects on people impacted by the floods. Also, SGT gets more involved in schools' projects in local areas such as its contributions to a lunch project of Ban Nikom Nongharn School in Udon Thani Province located in the northeastern part of the country. In both cases, the letters of expression of gratitude from the mayor of Hat Yai as well as from the school principal were sent to SGT and published in *Sangkunka*. (*Sangkunka* 181, 2001: 67-68) On special occasions, such as the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the late Princess Mother's birthday, the director of SGT and members went to distribute stationery and other materials to students in Prajeen Buri Province. (*Sangkunka* 182, 2001: 3)

Third, special exhibitions such as that of "Paintings of Boys and Girls from All Over the World" was held at Central Department Store by Soka Gakkai International and SGT, in co-operation with the Department of Fine Arts and UNESCO between October 13-17, 2001. Also, the exhibition toured two more big cities in the northern and northeastern parts of the country, at the National Library and Siam Discovery Center in Bangkok. This exhibition was widely publicized and attracted a large number of people and dignitaries. (*Sangkunka* 191, 2001: 51)

It is observed that SGT rarely publicized itself on a large scale in the first period of its operation in Thailand, but has begun to get more involved in public services after the mid-1980s. Also, leaders and members of the organization have done more charity works in public places, especially from the 1990s to the present time. SGT's public participation might not be directed toward gaining actual converts, but it is a wise method to establish contacts and keep the organization's activities in line with the larger public.

### 3. PROMOTION IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

The propagation of Nichiren Buddhism in educational institutions started with the idea of value creation introduced by Makiguchi, the founder of the Soka Gakkai in Japan, who believed that education is a significant means for people to change themselves and transform society into a better environment. The role of religion in education appears to be highly recognized by Ikeda, as witness by his founding of the educational system, which is based on Soka Gakkai's philosophy of human revolution and Nichiren Buddhist principles,

Soka University, and other related institutions. In his three mottoes for Soka University, which was opened in April, 1971, Ikeda stated the following:

Be the highest seat of learning for humanistic education.

Be the cradle of a new culture.

Be the fortress for the peace of mankind.

*(Toward the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, 1978: 11)*

The promotion of Soka Gakkai and Nichiren Buddhism in educational institutions abroad has been done by SGT's mother organization, the Soka Gakkai International, and Ikeda himself. As a Soka Gakkai affiliate in Thailand, SGT's director, acting on behalf of the Soka Gakkai International and Soka University, has been in charge of correspondence with Thai universities. Major activities implemented in academic exchange programs between Soka University and universities in Thailand are the student exchange program, the participation of faculty members in conferences and symposiums abroad, the donation of books by leaders of the Soka Gakkai International and Soka University, the exhibitions and special lectures held on university campuses and other places.

First of all, in addition to the establishment of its own study centers abroad, Soka University has also arranged academic exchange programs with several educational institutions abroad and some universities in Thailand, starting with Chulalongkorn University in 1975. For example, the student exchange program between Soka University and Chulalongkorn University was established in 1979. While at Soka University, exchange students were constantly invited by Soka University students, who are Soka Gakkai members, to try the chant and join their group discussion meetings held in a dormitory. Some decided to participate in their activities because of having been considerate of their feelings, but they were not converted to their faith. The promotion of Nichiren Buddhism through the student exchange program was not very successful. Even if Soka Gakkai's message was able to reach exchange students, the number of exchange students from Chulalongkorn University was small, and, so far, none have been converted to the faith after having been contacted by Soka Gakkai student members.

Soka University also brings recognition to itself and SGT in the academic arena by inviting Thai scholars to participate in conferences, symposia, and so forth from time to time. However, topics of conferences or themes of symposia are mainly academic,

with an emphasis on the promotion of mutual understanding and co-operation among educational leaders. More often, culture, education, the promotion of global peace, and human prosperity were discussed in the symposia. Among other broad topics, the real message of Soka Gakkai, the propagation of the practice of Nichiren Buddhism as a means to achieve those ends, was not explicitly mentioned.

Another additional method of the Soka Gakkai International to present itself as an organization aiming at promoting education and culture to educational communities overseas is its donation of books to educational institutions. In Thailand, leaders of the Soka Gakkai and Soka University, while visiting SGT, came to present a number of books to Chulalongkorn University and Thammasat University in 1984, and in 1988. The success of the second book presentation ceremony at Chulalongkorn University was witnessed by its executive administrators and faculty members, Ikeda, and leaders of Soka University. Photographs and articles of the ceremony appeared in the university's newsletter, SGT's special publication, and *World Tribune* of the Soka Gakkai International. (*World Tribune*, February 19, 1988) This kind of activity was appreciated by all people involved. More importantly, it would probably lead to the establishment of reputation of Soka Gakkai and SGT in the academic environment in Thailand.

Besides having established good relationships with state universities, Ikeda, along with leaders of Soka University and the director of SGT, has made contacts with some private universities in Thailand such as Siam University. On November 5, 2000, Ikeda was presented an honorary doctoral degree by the president of Siam University and had a long conversation with the president of Siam University. (*Sangkunka* 183, 2001: 57-72) In addition, SGT offered a special lecture under the "Value-Creating Project" to its members by inviting a well-known educator (Dr. Nibhon Sasithorn who acts as the consultant of the president of Siam University) to come and give a lecture on "Sharing the Building of Society that Promotes Education." (*Sangkunka* 187, 2001: 2) On the one hand, the latter type of activity is considered to be another step of indirectly sending out the organization's message to the Thai academia. On the other hand, it is a wise strategy to introduce its members to outsiders and at the same time provide them with non-religious/doctrinal knowledge which may be added to their experience.

During November 14-17, 2000, the Thai Ideal Graduate Club held the first international conference entitled "Ideal Graduates" at the Chalermprabarami 50 Years Building in Bangkok. Ikeda, as the

president of the Soka Gakkai International, also sent his speech to be read at the conference. On this occasion, SGT also held an exhibition as a part of the conference. Basically, it was about the history of the Soka Gakkai, Ikeda's autobiography and works, activities concerning peace, culture, and education of the Soka Gakkai International and SGT. The theme of SGT's exhibition was "SGT – Sharing Buddhism with Friends Around the World." Its history and development were also included among others. Also, books, magazines, and other Nichiren Daishonin-related materials were provided for conference participants, students, and others. This exhibition required great co-operative efforts from SGT, the Soka Gakkai International, universities, and public relations. In addition to conference participants, the exhibition attracted approximately 1,500 people, including a number of press and television broadcasters. (*Sangkunka* 180, 2000: 2-4) For SGT, however, it had a very good opportunity to introduce itself as a Buddhist organization dedicated to the promotion of peace, education, and culture to the Thai public on a large scale. SGT's participation in this exhibition was a clever strategy to use educational institutions to formally send out information about the organization and stimulate the public interest in the existence of the organization as a peace movement and its activities.

#### 4. PROMOTION THROUGH DIALOGUE

Ikeda makes it clear that the new millennium, particularly the year 2002, marks the year of promotion of dialogue. Actually, this policy has constantly been carried out by Ikeda himself at the international level for decades. On several occasions, Ikeda has had extensive dialogue with political leaders, educators, scholars, and dignitaries around the world. His works on such dialogue have been published and used as guidelines for all Soka Gakkai members. In Thailand, The director of SGT and leading members usually act on behalf of Ikeda and the Soka Gakkai International in correspondence with Thai dignitaries. However, it is expected that, to some extent, SGT members will use Ikeda's action as an example to follow for they have been taught that mutual understanding between the organization's members and outsiders can be partly built up through dialogue.

In this section, Ikeda's dialogue with a Thai dignitary, Anand Panyarachun, who is a highly respectable person among Thai people, will be briefly cited. Former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun (between 1991-1992) and his wife were invited to meet with Ikeda on October 20, 2000 in Tokyo and had a dialogue on "The World and

Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” Basically, the content of the dialogue was about the Thai King’s projects, Ikeda’s promotion of peace, some political issues, diplomatic strategies, the application of ethical principles in administration, and so forth. In addition to a long conversation with Ikeda, the former Prime Minister was also presented an honorary doctoral degree by Soka University. (*Sangkunka* 180, 2000 & 182, 2001)

The most successful promotion effort of the Soka Gakkai International and SGT is probably Ikeda’s visit to meet with His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej at Chitralada Villa, Dusit Palace in Bangkok three times, of which the first one was on February 3, 1988. On this occasion, Ikeda made a donation to the king for the Projects under the Royal Institution of His Majesty the King. At the meeting, various topics of culture, arts, peace, and so forth, were discussed. On top of that, it was Ikeda’s proposal that a conference among monarchs should be held to discuss the happiness of all humans and world peace. Ikeda stated as follows:

The world of politics tends to be a realm of power struggle, while the world of economics puts priority on gain or loss. The realization of world peace is difficult if we only pursue such an attitude of confrontation. In this regard, I think it is very important for people of wisdom to get together and discuss the happiness of humanity and world peace. I would like to make a proposal that a conference of royalty be held, with the attendance of those monarchs who are respected by the people of their own country. (*World Tribune* 19, 1988: 7)

His Majesty the King replied that he agreed with Ikeda that the peace and prosperity of the world has been a vital issue, but he could not give an answer to Ikeda’s proposal at that moment because “in reality, the nation is managed by politicians and economists who make it difficult for such a meeting to take place.” (*World Tribune*, February 19, 1988: 7) From the main dialogue between the king and Ikeda quoted above, it might not be evident that a topic concerning Nichiren Buddhism was mentioned. However, at least the organization’s other messages were sent to the symbol head of Thailand. Also, a royal audience granted to Ikeda and his party at the Royal Palace in Bangkok was good publicity for the Soka Gakkai International and SGT as well. Ikeda’s dialogue with the Thai king made headlines in the organization’s newspaper and magazines, Thai newspapers and on television broadcasting. SGT’s special publication

issued in commemoration of the 27<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its operation in Thailand devoted a full page to a picture of the king conversing with Ikeda at Chitralada Villa.

To close this section, a few observations concerning SGT's reaching out, making contacts with outsiders and bringing in new recruits should be made. Practically, the degree of success of SGT in propagating its belief and gaining recruits and potential constituencies partly depended upon the larger society's conditions as they facilitated or obstructed the movement's action. In the very beginning, SGT found it difficult to spread the brand new faith among Thai people due to its lack of manpower and the mood of Thai society, particularly during 1960s and the 1970s. During its formative years in the 1960s, the movement was loosely organized as an informal group with a handful of members. Also, the political situation during those periods in Thailand was uncertain. Historically, Thailand during the 1960s was under the rule of authoritative regimes. A strong anti-communist policy was enacted. Labor and trade unions were forbidden, whereas educational and cultural associations could operate but only under restrictions. So, it seemed that political conditions of the period tended to impede the spread of the new belief in Thai society. However, SGT survived through these periods of political strictness. In the 1980s, especially in the latter half of the decade, the country appeared to be relatively stable, both politically and economically. SGT's continuing mission started to expand its influences in big cities throughout the country, and has constantly increased in the rate of membership growth up to the present time. SGT's success partly resulted from an improvement of political and economic conditions of the larger society in which it exists.

While political situations seemed to block the expansion of SGT's rank during its formative years, religious and cultural conditions appeared to be conducive to the reception of sectarian groups among Thai constituencies. Thailand is generally known as a Buddhist country and Buddhist influences have penetrated into Thai arts, literature, and the character of the Thai people for centuries. Known as a tolerant religion, Buddhism shows no sign of discrimination against other beliefs and practices. Practices of foreign religions in Thailand were welcomed centuries ago. In addition to a tolerant attitude of the general Thai people, other important factors that make it possible to have other religions or sectarian groups evolved and accepted in Thai society must be the role of Thai kings as "upholders of all religions," and the Thai constitution which guarantees religious



rights and freedom. In the history of the country, Thai kings devoted much effort to the upkeep of Buddhist doctrine as well as the establishment of Buddhist temples. However, the kings' support of Buddhist institutions was also extended to other religions. For example, from the reign of King Rama III of the present dynasty (1824-1851) on, Thai people experienced the propagation of Christian faith and also enjoyed public service work provided by an American Baptist missionary group. It was reported that the missionaries "were treated with marked respect." (McFarland, ed., 1928: 31) In contemporary Thailand, while Theravada Buddhism still remains dominant among the Thai population, various religions are free to exercise their spiritual activities. Besides long-standing established religions such as Christianity and Islam, lay movements affiliated with religions from abroad like SGT are increasing in number. Thus it is reasonable to conclude that the tolerant attitude of the country concerning the freedom of religious belief and practices and the strong tradition of the institution of monarchy paved the way for the establishment of sectarian groups in Thai society.

#### STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS UNDERLYING SGT'S PROSELYTIZATION

In order to bring some changes into the larger society in which it is operating, a movement has to exercise its power and influences over persons and organizations both inside and outside the movement. Having openly been exercising its influences long enough in Thai society, SGT had to devise strategies and tactics that advanced the organization toward its desired goals. We have seen that SGT carefully maneuvered tactics when making contacts with outsiders, particularly its potential constituencies and pre-existing establishments. Only tactics that help create its good image in public have been used, while those that might mar the publicity of the organization have been avoided. In the promotion of its ideology and goals, SGT seems to have significant strategic considerations underlying its tactical actions: to establish its legitimacy and good reputation by avoiding conflict with the three sacred values of "nation, religion, king" observed among the general Thai public. The strategic considerations underlying SGT's actions in its proselytization will be elaborated.

##### 1. COMPLIANCE WITH THREE SACRED VALUES IN THAI SOCIETY

Traditionally, there are three sacred values on which Thai culture has been founded: nation, religion, and king. These essential values can be traced to the reign of King Rama VI (1881-1925). The terms

“nation, religion, king” are open to a wide range of interpretations. From the Thais’ patriotic view, they can specifically be interpreted as the love of the country, the protection of Buddhism, and the loyalty to the institution of monarchy. Generally, the “nation” symbolizes the unity of the people, the security of the country, and the idea of democracy as expressed in the will of the people. The “religion” can be interpreted in different ways by different people. In practice, since the majority of the Thai population adhere to mainstream Buddhist belief, the “religion” is, then, referred to by most people as Thai Theravada Buddhism and the Sangha Order. However, as the Thai constitution guarantees religious rights and freedom, other religions are acceptable in society as well. As the symbolic political leader of the nation, the “king” displays his power of assent and appointment, but is not involved in the government’s matters. He receives the highest respect, and is not subject to any kind of accusation or action, although the institution of monarchy has remained under the constitution since the 1932 coup. Despite some changes in Thai politics and challenges from growing religious sectarian groups, these three foundations still find their significant places in contemporary Thai society.

In view of the significance of the three institutions, to some extent, SGT appears to adjust its line of action to fit into Thai culture while having remained separate in its ideology and goals. The strategic considerations of SGT, while being in accord with those Thai values, have been influenced by Ikeda’s moderate attitude toward the *shakubuku* work (proselytization), as he clearly suggested in his guidance several years ago:

I would like to suggest to those members that they should be patient and tolerant toward people to whom they want to introduce [Nichiren] Buddhism. One of the most important things is to establish friendships and interpersonal ties with people surrounding us. Of course, the propagation of our faith to others is significant, but we must not be opposed to social norms, customs, and traditions of that society, or against common sense. (Sangkunka 47, 1989:16)

## 2. ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ORGANIZATION’S LEGITIMACY

When looking at the history of SGT, we have seen its struggle to get the organization legally accepted in Thai society. During its early period, the lay organization operated unregistered for ten years. After the organization split into two groups, the one that became SGT

suffered until 1984, the year that marked a complete separation from its old organization with its claim of being the sole representative of Soka Gakkai in Thailand. At this point, SGT was faced with a two-sided problem of legitimacy. One was the legitimacy of the organization as viewed by its members, and another was as viewed by the larger society. While having worked for *kosen-rufu* side by side with the old organization, SGT was successful in showing its members that SGT has been accepted by its parent organization as the sole representative of the Soka Gakkai in Thailand. SGT's legitimate status among its members was especially confirmed by Ikeda's visit to its headquarters in February, 1988. Thus, the strong linkage between SGT and its parent organization and Ikeda seems to strengthen SGT's authority and make its members more confident in following its directives.

In dealing with the larger society, SGT's adjustments in its propagation and recruitment activities have been made in accordance with those three essential values. In order to prove that the organization was legitimate and meant no harm to the country, SGT had to get the organization registered with the Office of National Culture Commission of the Ministry of Education as a voluntary association in 1984, which marked the first step in its cause in the public arena. However, the legal establishment of the movement did not prove that SGT was socially accepted by the Thai people unless it effectively exercised influence over them. In fact, SGT has followed the footsteps of Soka Gakkai International by presenting itself as a peace movement through the practice of Buddhism, as we have seen in its co-operation with its parent organization in holding exhibitions concerning peace, education, culture and other activities. The idea of nonviolence and promotion of world peace have been mentioned again and again in Ikeda's guidance and translated into Thai and published in SGT's *Sangkunka* and on other occasions. SGT's performance as a peace movement in Thai society, coupled with SGT's participation in such public welfare programs of the Thai government as the donation of a large sum of money for building an overpass or the contribution of food and other commodities for the needy, helps convince pre-existing Thai establishments that the organization's cause is intrinsically good, valuable, and right. A female leader expressed her thought in an interview as follows:

Our organization aims at building peace on earth through the practice of Nichiren Buddhist teachings. We follow our great teacher, Ikeda Sensei, who has devotedly made his efforts to

talk to leaders of several countries about the significance of nuclear disarmament and the promotion of world peace. Our main concern, however, is we do not want our organization to be seen as being strange or alienated in society. As human beings, we just do the right thing in our own way in helping create a better world.

### 3. SGT'S ADJUSTMENTS IN ITS DOCTRINAL TEACHINGS

As the profound influence of Theravada Buddhist tradition has penetrated into every mode of Thai culture and become an integral part of the Thai life, SGT appears to make strategic adjustments in its doctrinal teachings to show that its members share Buddhist values with the larger society and that its teachings do not oppose the cardinal beliefs of mainstream Thai Buddhism. The first crucial concern of SGT is the significance of the figure of the historical Buddha, Sakyamuni, in Buddhist history. In Thailand, Sakyamuni Buddha is the most revered figure in the history of the faith for his reputation as the founder of Buddhism. The belief in his omnipotence and omniscience are prevalent among Thai Buddhists. As stated earlier, while considering Nichiren Daishonin, who expounded the Buddha's true teachings as expressed in the *Lotus Sutra*, as the founder of the Nichiren Buddhism in Japan, SGT new converts and rank and file members still held the idea that Sakyamuni Buddha is still superior to any Buddhist figures. This belief, however, was not in accord with the original teachings of Soka Gakkai as recognized by its followers elsewhere. It seems that SGT tends to adopt Ikeda's moderate view of Nichiren and Sakyamuni, which is succinctly stated in one of his works as follows:

Though Nichiren Daishonin effected a radical reform of existing Buddhism, he did not totally reject the Buddhism of Sakyamuni and T'ien-t'ai. His teaching is heir to the essential Buddhism that flows from Sakyamuni and through T'ien-t'ai. But he did more than merely inherit. He revealed the ultimate Buddhist teaching, to which his two predecessors had aspired yet never realized in practice. . . . Sakyamuni and Chih-i almost seem to have provided detailed plans used later by Nichiren Daishonin to create fresh, new values with his practical religion for all people. (Ikeda, 1976: 54)

While sharing a similar view of suffering and *karma* with general Thai Buddhists, SGT members are taught that chanting “Nam-myoho-rence-kyo” is the key to all the benefits and true happiness, including the attainment of Buddhahood in the present existence and that other means to enlightenment are considered to be insufficient. Although their religious practices are quite different, a religious guidance leader of SGT informed in an interview that he explained to SGT members as follows:

As the highest teaching of the Buddha, the “Nam-myoho-rence-kyo” encompasses every important aspect such as names of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Buddhist deities, and other teachings of the [Sakyamuni] Buddha. Thus, the teachings in the *Tripitaka* are not wrong, but less efficient than the “Nam-myoho-rence-kyo” in the present era. So, SGT lets our members try what they feel comfortable with. Finally, they will find out themselves what best suits their needs.

His explanation does not seem to strongly oppose the *Tripitaka* but shows a minor adjustment in its teachings to the mainstream Thai Buddhist tradition.

Crucial in the process of proselytization conducted by members of Soka Gakkai everywhere is to get movement members to remove the objects of worship of other religions and replace them with the *Gohonzon* once members decide to adhere to the Nichiren Buddhist faith. Having been used to practice Theravada Buddhism, most SGT members have images of the Buddha in different sizes and forms enshrined in their homes or hung around their necks. This religious observance is common among Thai Buddhists. Although this practice is mandatory in the Soka Gakkai, SGT members, particularly new converts, are not under pressure to remove their images of the Buddha or other objects previously worshiped right after they began to participate in SGT. Some of them still performed Theravada Buddhist practices such as making offerings to monks at local temples. One female member told her story in an informal conversation that:

I started to chant “Nam-myoho-rence-kyo” a few years ago. I still make offerings to monks almost every morning, and go to a [Theravada] temple nearby on Buddhist holy days as usual. I think both are merit-making practices that help cleanse my *karma*. Unlike, Christianity, Nichiren Buddhism is not totally

foreign, but it is a sect of Buddhism. Buddhism is like a tree with many branches. Each branch resembles a sect, all of which aim toward the same goal.

In many cases, it took years for them to give up the practice of Theravada Buddhist rituals completely. Some testified that they gave away images of the Buddha to their relatives and friends. Others contributed them to temples “where they belong.” SGT leaders often advise their converts that they make the decision themselves as to when those objects should be removed. One senior leader explained:

Our members were Theravada Buddhists. It requires much courage for them to perform religious practices that are not in accord with what they used to do in their old faith. They should be convinced that the chant “Nam-myoho-rence-kyo” yields them benefits, and that they should feel happy in so doing. Otherwise, the objectives of our organization won’t be fulfilled.

Such accommodative behaviors of SGT in propagating the faith not only build a good impression among its own members, but also convince pre-existing establishments, especially religious bodies, that the movement’s doctrinal teachings could fit in part into the framework of Buddhism as commonly believed.

#### 4. ESTABLISHMENT OF RELATIONSHIP WITH THE THAI MONARCHICAL INSTITUTION

As far as its strategies are concerned, it seems that there are at least two main considerations behind the movement’s outreach into the Thai Monarchical Institution. First, it is because the monarchical institution of Thailand is customarily revered with the highest respect by the masses. The establishment of good relationships, either by Ikeda or by SGT itself, with the Thai royal institution in such forms as financial contributions, holding the exhibition of the king’s photographic works, and so forth, proves to be appropriate ways of expressing loyalty to the monarchy.

More importantly, however, it may be the fact that the monarchy has close relationships with Buddhism and other religions. Maintaining traditional Buddhist rites of merit-making, the present king himself spent his monkhood at a temple in the same manner as ordinary Thai men traditionally do. Required under the Constitution to be a Buddhist and supporter of the faith, the king is a prime patron and protector of all religions in the kingdom. Thus, making contact and keeping good relationships with the royal institution probably

implied that, with the king's recognition of the organization and its activities, SGT's existence and its cause in Thai society would not be only legitimate, but also socially guaranteed. In an interview, one female member recalled her delight on hearing of Ikeda's courtesy visit to the king in 1988 as follows:

I am very proud of our organization for it has been recognized by His Majesty the King and his family. Imagine, it was such a wonderful moment when His Majesty the King and Ikeda Sensei had a long conversation about our faith and practices and the building of world peace. Our organization is now no longer unknown.

To conclude this section, SGT's strategic awareness can be best expressed by a senior religious guidance leader as follows:

The organization tries not to compare the two Buddhist traditions or argue against Hinayana [Theravada] Buddhism, for it might cause conflicts with the Buddhist Council or the Sangha. Also, as Thai, we love our country and are loyal to the monarchy. We should not do anything that threatens these institutions because any harm or conflicts with them would negatively affect SGT's reputation. In an extreme case, the organization might be put to an end.

#### CONCLUSION

During its 40 years of operation, SGT has gained a small numbers of followers compared to the total Thai population (over 60,000,000 people). However, this may not be a crucial problem at this moment, for SGT's main objective is to secure its members rather than gaining a large number of recruits who are loosely tied with the organization, as often expressed by the director of SGT in our informal conversations. SGT, as the sole representative of Soka Gakkai in Thailand, struggled to survive through difficult periods and prosperous times in the contemporary history of the country, and is still active in the cause.

In comparison with other new religious movements in Thailand, particularly those which are affiliated with the Thai Buddhist order, SGT is small in size. Among foreign-based new religious groups, only the Sekai Kyuseikyo is probably able to compete with SGT in terms of the growth rate of membership. In order to survive in a strong Buddhist environment, those rationales of SGT powerfully

motivate movement members to act collectively and justify their actions. However, rationales are considered to be the first step leading to SGT's success. In fact, SGT's expansion could be largely traced to the effective efforts of its members. Included are creating a good image of the organization in the public eye, establishing relationships with traditional pre-existing establishments of the larger society, and adjusting parts of its teachings. However, SGT's doctrinal adjustments may lead to other problems. As Soka Gakkai's doctrinal teachings are at the core of SGT and its counterpart, SGT's adjustments in this area, even minor ones, might affect its relationship with its parent organization in the future as changes in doctrines of a religious movement are seen as a sign of schism. Thus, it may be concluded that the degree of adjustments in doctrinal teachings should not go so far as to deviate from the parent organization's doctrine, while its teachings still prove to be valuable for their constituencies and do not obviously oppose mainstream Buddhist teachings.

Considered to be a respectable and legitimate movement, SGT has, to a certain degree, gained approval of its constituencies and proved to be able to co-exist with other segments of Thai society. Based on all of the conditions of SGT in the past four decades, there are reasons to believe that SGT will be tolerated in Thai society while remaining separate in its ideology. However, it is premature to project the size of the organization in the future and how effective SGT will be in changing values in Thai society. This is because of several factors, such as the sociopolitical situation in Thailand, the organization's flexibility in adapting to Thai culture, the administration and leadership of the organization, support from its parent organization, and so forth.

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