

COMPLETION REPORT

Comparative Studies on Beliefs and Practices of Nichiren Buddhism in Japan and Thailand

This study, financially supported by the Sumitomo Foundation in Japan, conducted both documentary research and field work using qualitative research methods during April 2011 and March 2012. It has four main objectives: firstly, to illustrate the historical background of Nichiren Buddhism in Japan; secondly, to investigate the different beliefs and practices among the three main schools of Nichiren Buddhism (Nichiren Shu, Nichiren Shoshu and Soka Gakkai); thirdly, to clarify how and why Soka Gakkai plays a significant role as a socially engaged Buddhist movement; and finally, to investigate how and why Soka Gakkai Thailand (SGT), as a lay organization of Nichiren Buddhism, adapted to and expanded in Thailand, which has been socially and culturally influenced by Theravada Buddhism for centuries. The study will possibly be helpful in clarifying the SGT movement as a lay organization promoting socially engaged Buddhism in Thailand.

Thailand is well known as a nation with a profound historical connection to Buddhism. It is recognized as a “land of the yellow robe,” reflecting the popularity of Theravada Buddhism among the Thai people. Thus, it has traditionally been quite difficult for other religious beliefs and practices to become established and spread throughout the country. However, Nichiren Buddhism was introduced to Thai people in 1959 by Kiyotaro Nishida who came to work as a chef for the Japanese Embassy in Thailand. The growth of Nichiren Buddhism in Thailand was slow because of the language barrier and the misconception that this was strictly a Japanese religion. Later, as understanding improved, more Thai people were drawn to the humanistic principles of Nichiren Buddhism, such as the practice of transforming one’s own life, the belief in the vast potential of each person, and the development of wisdom, which directs knowledge towards good and towards the creation of value, leading to peace and happiness in one’s life, family, society and nation. The main reason for the successful establishment of SGI in Thailand is that it has been able to adapt its beliefs and practices to the Thai culture and basic way of life, thus offering its Thai members a new method of religious practice that can fulfill their expectations of living.

Soka Gakkai, as a lay Nichiren Buddhist movement, teaches its members to learn about individual empowerment and inner transformation through attaining Buddhahood in one’s present form. At the same time, it contributes to global peace, enabling people to develop themselves and take responsibility for their lives, no matter what their circumstances and backgrounds. Regarding religious faith, practice and study of Buddhist tenets, Soka Gakkai followers’ expectations are of immediate benefits, or worldly practical benefits, which are generally understood to involve primarily material or physical gains such as good health, business success, and significant advancement in one’s career or life path. These also include other less tangible benefits such as personal well-being and life satisfaction and happiness. According to the field research, SGT followers generally seek happiness, assurance about better conditions at work and business, and success in freeing themselves from all human problems and suffering, including individual health issues and emotional troubles. In contrast to SGT’s religious approach, Thai Theravadin monks have gradually lost touch with the public, particularly in urban societies, and are largely viewed as religious officials who perform Buddhist ceremonies and rituals. Soka Gakkai has removed itself from this milieu and enters directly into the follower’s life. Its emphasis on practical benefits, here and now, reflects the common ethos in modern capitalist societies for realizable gains in the immediate future. Consequently, Soka Gakkai has become a global lay organization contributing to the socially engaged Buddhist movement throughout the world. It is a movement very much associated with present-day social, economic and global problems, while maintaining certain basic beliefs that stem from the traditional Nichiren Buddhist practices originating in Japan.

Publication of the Results of Research Project:

Verbal Presentation (Date, Venue, Name of Conference, Title of Presentation, Presenter, etc.)

August 23, 2012. Visit Prachuabmoh building, Social Research Institute, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

Conference: "Understanding the Differences: Our Trends – World Trends"

Thesis (Name of Journal and its Date, Title and Author of Thesis, etc.)

Submit to : National University of Singapore(NUS)

Journal: Southeast Asian Studies(English Journal)

Date: Possibility in 2013.

Title: Soka Gakkai Thailand: Alay Organization of Nichiren Buddhism

Author: Pinit Lapthananon

Book (Publisher and Date of the Book, Title and Author of the Book, etc.)

Expect to publish a Thai book in 2013

Title: "Soka Gakkai: A Japanese Lay Buddhist Organization in Thai Theravada Buddhist Society"

Presenter: Pinit Lapthananon, PhD.

Publisher: Chulalongkorn University Press