

## Revolutionary Women on the Edge of Change: Buddhism in Cuba

By Jennifer Manlowe

In November of 2003, I traveled on a research visa to Havana, Cuba with the hopes of interviewing Cuban women interested in Buddhism. I met with officials from the *Federacion of Mujeres Cubanas* (FMC) and discovered, and I quote, “There are no Buddhist leaders here to interview in Cuba.” When I said that I had learned that a Nichiren Buddhist woman existed on the World Wide Web—something I discovered through the Soka Gakkai International (SGI) Buddhist website—the FMC official contested, “I’m sorry, I could not find any such woman for you to interview.”

If one were to believe the decades of U.S. right-wing propaganda about state repression of religion in Castro’s Cuba, one might think that the FMC officials were protecting Cuba from “outsiders” determined to bring the nation down through giving voice to religious rabble-rousers; as if all government officials instinctively, defend the universality of the atheist commitments to *La Revolución*. I knew this simplistic view was one extended to the former Soviet Union as well. I remember the tensions that reverberated when the reverend Billy Graham had discovered that “religion operated rather freely and openly in the U.S.S.R.” When Graham said this in 1989, this statement provoked such an uproar that he had to semi-recant his own observations to win back his more conservative religious supporters. “That people in *Red Russia* could—but didn’t much care to—practice any formal religion was considered an intolerable blasphemy for many believers in the states.”<sup>1</sup>

Socialist Cuba, like the former Soviet Union is, and has always been, under close watch by religious Christian fundamentalists. And yet, the enormous turnout of almost one million Catholics during Pope John Paul’s January 1998 visit also shows that religious freedom has in no way been “stamped out”—even after 40 years of a one-party system. After his introductory words to President Fidel Castro and the Cuban bishops, the Roman Catholic Pontiff assured the faithful at all levels that he felt “closely bound in solidarity” with them. Addressing himself to all Cubans, the Pope went on to say, “My best wishes are joined with the prayer that this land may

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<sup>1</sup> “Cuba: Church and State Radio” by David Underhill quoted in *The Harbinger*, [Mobile, Alabama], September 14, 1999.

offer everyone a climate of freedom, mutual trust, social justice and lasting peace. May Cuba, with all its magnificent potential, open itself up to the world, and may the world open itself up to Cuba.”<sup>2</sup>

Besides calling for more freedom for Cuba, the pope also had strong criticism for the United States and countries like it. He blasted “a certain capitalist neo-liberalism which subordinates the human person to blind market forces” denouncing the small group “of countries growing exceedingly rich at the cost of the increasing impoverishment of a great number of other (third world) countries.”<sup>3</sup> The Pope also made strong statements against the U.S. trade embargo, though without mentioning the U.S. by name. Immediately after the Holy Father’s departure, President Castro made a public announcement affirming religious freedom in Cuba.

Religious freedom is supposedly nothing new in Cuba. The country’s most beloved revolutionary and inspiration to Castro’s 1959 revolution is the great Cuban patriot, José Martí (1853-1895) whose statue now looks down over the square for which it is named. Even José Martí was known to say, “Every people needs to be religious...an irreligious people will die....” Surely, one cannot accuse modern-day Cuba of religious suppression.

A few days later, at the University of Havana’s Fifth Annual Conference on Women in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, I gave a paper on “Buddhism in North America.” After the panel discussion, several Cuban women came out of the woodwork to tell me of their love of Eastern philosophies, yoga and meditation techniques. I asked the woman most interested in Buddhist philosophy, “May I quote you for my research?” and she said, “No. It is not safe for me to be quoted, you could be CIA.”

Because I want to be ethical in my research, I can say nothing further about the specifics of what I learned by directly quoting this one woman in particular, but I can tell you of my impressions related to my research while in Cuba. All direct quotes, however, will be drawn from SGI [Japan-based Soka Gakkai International] Buddhist Newsletters. My general impressions from my time in Cuba will be articulated, as well, but no names will be given to

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<sup>2</sup> “The Pope in Cuba: A Call for Freedom” in April 1998 Issue of *St. Anthony Messenger Magazine*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

offer the protection I promised the people with whom I spoke about Buddhism and religious freedom in Cuba.

According to a July 2002 SGI newsletter,

On June 23, 2002, SGI members in Cuba held discussion meetings throughout the country, including Havana and the cities of Alamar and Gibara, to commemorate the last SGI President Ikeda's visit in 1996. Mr. Ikeda last visited Cuba in June 1996 and met with Cuban President Fidel Castro at the *Palacio de la Revolución* in Havana. More than 160 members gathered at the meeting in Havana to discuss applying their Buddhist practice in their daily lives. Cuban women's leader Joannet Delgado de la Guardia encouraged everyone to contribute to society's prosperity and development as responsible citizens.<sup>4</sup>

Through my online research I have discovered that this woman, Joannet Delgado de la Guardia, has become the first official Buddhist leader in Cuba—at least according to the SGI newsletter. Ms. Delgado was first introduced to the practice of Buddhism by her sister Armantina, who was introduced to such religious practices through her Japanese husband. Both have lived in Japan for 27 years. Armantina, who introduced many members of Ms. Delgado's family to Buddhism, including their parents, told Ms. Delgado that if she began to practice Nichiren Buddhism, her life would change for the better. But Ms. Delgado could not accept her sister's advice, as she did not trust in anything, in any religion. As a good communist (rational-atheist), she says, “My way of thinking was completely materialist.”<sup>5</sup>

At that time, although Ms. Delgado presented herself to others as very strong, she says, “I was actually afraid of other people, and my way of communicating was often abrupt, so that I offended my friends. I passed through a very difficult time, divorce from my first husband at the same time as graduating from university and beginning work. Even after I married for the second time, I didn't feel any love for life, and I actually attempted suicide.”<sup>6</sup>

When Ms. Delgado finally started to practice Nichiren Buddhism, she says, “My life began to change, and I felt real optimism and came to understand myself better. As I read more about Buddhism, I could finally understand everything my sister had been trying to say to me,

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<sup>4</sup> July 14-20th, 2002 SGI Newsletter.

<sup>5</sup> July 14-20th, 2002 SGI Newsletter.

<sup>6</sup> July 14-20th, 2002 SGI Newsletter.

and I felt deep gratitude to her. Of course, it took a lot of effort to change my way of thinking, and I had to study hard, but many aspects of my personality began to change.” Ms. Delgado attributes the suffering she was feeling at the time as a result of “not knowing how to confront and overcome obstacles.” She says, “Through my [Buddhist] practice, study and faith, everything in my life changed. I learned to understand and value other people and felt the desire to help them.”<sup>7</sup>

Nichiren Buddhism is a devotional sect of Buddhism based on the fiery reformer, Nichiren (1222-1282), who founded this sect in 13<sup>th</sup> century Japan. Philosophically, Nichiren Buddhism stems from a branch of first-century Mahayana Buddhism from India which derives much of its doctrine from the *Lotus Sutra*. This Mahayana school is translated as the “wider vehicle” and is focused on freeing all beings from suffering—even refusing one’s own (*Nirvana*) release from *samsara* (the cycle of existence) until all beings are free. When Ms. Delgado speaks of “learning to value other people” and having a newfound “desire to help them,” she joins a long line of Mahayana practitioners with similar purpose and conviction.

For the past half century, a modern lay-organization of the Nichiren sect called Soka Gakkai International (“Value Creation Society”) has been part of a worldwide movement that has been deeply influenced by tensions between highly traditional Nichiren priests and the innovative spirit of the laity. During the past few decades, priests and laypeople have worked together until 1991 when a formal schism took place. Since then, the movement has split into the Nichiren priesthood and Soka Gakkai International.

In America, although there are in it many immigrants, from both Japan and elsewhere in Asia, Japanese converts—like Ms. Delgado’s brother-in-law—played a pivotal role in laying its foundations outside of Japan. But, as a result of its successful propagation, a mission of proselytizing, preaching, and teaching value transformation in major cities, [in Japanese it’s called *shakubuku*], SGI has the largest proportion of African American, Hispanic American and lay female members—more than any other convert Buddhist groups.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> July 14-20th, 2002 SGI Newsletter.

<sup>8</sup> “Soka Gakkai and Its Nichiren Humanism” in *Buddhism in America* by Richard Hughes Seager, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 70-89.

When I say, “convert Buddhist groups” I mean those people, who like Ms. Delgado, found themselves drawn to Buddhist teachings after years of being raised in another tradition. Ms. Delgado, like many SGI-converts, is drawn to the real material change she seeks through her religious practices. She, like many Nichiren proselytizers, testifies as to how her practice brought her tangible “benefits.”<sup>9</sup> She says, “After chanting *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo* [literally, ‘Hail to the wonderful dharma Lotus Sutra!’] consistently, everyday, I was able to achieve my first professional goal.” In 1993, she boasts of being able to go to Ecuador to participate in a scientific [conference] on aquaculture to present her work on shrimp culture diseases. Ms. Delgado was newly inspired after the [conference], and says, “I spent two months doing research in Ecuador, and for the first time, I could join SGI meetings, which weren't yet being held in Cuba. On my return to Cuba, I set new goals, among them taking on responsibility as an SGI leader.”<sup>10</sup>

When the current SGI President Daisaku Ikeda and Mrs. Ikeda visited Cuba in 1996, Ms. Delgado’s parents were able to meet them in Havana. At that time, Ms. Delgado claims, “We were also able to meet about 30 other Cubans who were practicing this Buddhism. We were so surprised and pleased to find that we were not alone!”<sup>11</sup>

Again, like many lay-practitioners of SGI Buddhism in the States, Ms. Delgado claims this chanting practice, [in Japanese, *daimoku*], had not only material benefits, personally and professionally, but healing benefits for her loved ones. She claims, “I have been able to use my practice to resolve problems of illness in my family. My father became extremely ill with cardiac problems, and my younger son developed serious problems with his thyroid gland at age nine. Through strong prayer we were able to see this problem disappear within three months without the need for any surgery. My father has been fitted with a pacemaker, and he is now doing fine.”<sup>12</sup>

Like the most famous African-American Nichiren Buddhist, Tina Turner, who claims her chanting helped her leave an abusive relationship to Ike Turner, Ms. Delgado finds that her

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. “These benefits could range from concrete concerns such as financial gain, good health, and good grades to more spiritual matters bearing on insight into the meaning of life. The major thrust of all these testimonials was, however, that Nichiren practice helped people to take charge of their lives and responsibility for their destinies...to transform negative elements in life into positive benefits” p. 78.

<sup>10</sup> July 14-20th, 2002 SGI Newsletter.

<sup>11</sup> July 14-20th, 2002 SGI Newsletter.

<sup>12</sup> July 14-20th, 2002 SGI Newsletter.

spiritual, physical and fiscal well-being has been transformed through this chanting practice.<sup>13</sup> In her autobiography as well as in the popular film, *What's Love Got to do with It*, Ms. Turner claims that chanting helped her focus in the midst of domestic strife, see her life as it really is (rather than how she wished it would be), and to release her deepest potential, unencumbered by self-doubt.<sup>14</sup> Whether one is chanting the *daimoku* in a public temple, or before a home altar, it is the most basic element in SGI. In most cases, the *daimoku* is chanted for 15-20 minutes, after which the chant may change to what is called *gongyou* (which means assiduous practice,) and an assiduous practitioner might spend two hours a day chanting, with morning and evening variations in the liturgy.<sup>15</sup>

Ms. Delgado boasts of how chanting and her lay-leadership role for spreading her brand of Buddha Dharma have opened up her sense of opportunities for religious and cultural exploration. She says, “In 2000, I was able to visit Japan, where I was fortunate to participate in the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the Soka Gakkai. Now many of my close family are helping pioneer our Buddhist activities in Cuba where we have a total of 300 SGI members [in 2002].”<sup>16</sup>

In 21<sup>st</sup> century Cuba, the major faith is Catholicism, and its Africuban offshoot called *Santeria*—which was carried to Cuba from West Africa by slaves. Though Nichiren Buddhism is known to very few Cubans, Ms. Delgado claims that a Spanish-language documentary on the history of the Soka Gakkai entitled, "Embattled Buddhists," was shown at the 23rd International Festival of New Latin American Cinema in December 2001.<sup>17</sup> She says, “Around 400 people

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<sup>13</sup> SGI has a highly articulated institutional structure, but the daily ritual of chanting in a home-based setting forms the foundation for members' dharma practice. Members chant before an altar that contains a *gohonzon*, a replica of a mandala-like scroll first inscribed the Nichiren in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. See also, R.H. Seager's, *Buddhism in America*, pg. 71.

<sup>14</sup> Tina Turner, *I, Tina* (New York: William Morrow, 1986).

<sup>15</sup> *Buddhism in America* by Richard Hughes Seager, p. 80.

<sup>16</sup> July 14-20th, 2002 SGI Newsletter.

<sup>17</sup> This documentary on the Soka Gakkai organization's development in Japan, illustrates the Soka Gakkai's pioneering “work for the sake of people's happiness,” based on the spirit of Nichiren. Featuring many photos and film clips of early Soka Gakkai activities, it also portrays the resistance met by the organization in response to its efforts to oppose state authoritarianism and empower ordinary citizens. This video has recently been shown on public television stations in many countries. In two parts. Total running time: 48 minutes. Produced by Los Angeles-based Global Management Group Inc.

came. The film showed that the teaching of Nichiren Buddhism is a message of peace, which has been maintained by the successive presidents of the Soka Gakkai.”<sup>18</sup>

The current SGI president, Daisaku Ikeda, has made it his mission to convey Nichiren Buddhist values in an accessible way. He has written widely and in depth on Mahayana Buddhism, Nichiren, and the *Lotus Sutra*, and has undoubtedly recast many of the doctrines central to the orthodoxy of Nichiren Shoshu (hence the schism in 1991). Ikeda, not unlike the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, has called, in very plain language, for nothing less than a new Buddhist humanism that can revolutionize the 21st century through inner transformation of the individual and reordering of an increasingly interdependent global society.<sup>19</sup>

In keeping with the SGI president’s aims, one cannot miss this humanist-individualism that abounds when one studies Ms. Delgado claims. She writes, “I am confident that those of us practicing in Cuba will grow more as individuals every day, overcoming all difficulties through our own **human revolution**, in order to work for lasting peace in our society and the world.”<sup>20</sup> One wonders where went the Mahayana-Buddhist communitarian emphasis on “freeing my neighbor from suffering”? Is this SGI branch of Buddhism and its “inward human-revolution” similar to Cuban revolutionary values, the same communitarian values out of which Ms. Delgado comes?

Finally, what do I make of not finding one person to quote about Buddhism in Cuba? I don’t know what to make of it. Perhaps the recent arrests in the spring of 2003 of 75 Cuban intellectuals who may have been accused of selling counter-revolutionary information to the CIA may be the culprit.<sup>21</sup> While world opinion on Cuba is varied, one can speculate that a very small and very poor country that has been the target of military, economic and political aggression by a

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<sup>18</sup> July 14-20th, 2002 SGI Newsletter.

<sup>19</sup> *Buddhism in America* by Richard Hughes Seager, p. 88.

<sup>20</sup> SGI News July 16<sup>th</sup> 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Whatever may be good or bad about Castro's Cuba, we cannot blame the Cuban government for U.S. aggression and support for terrorist groups like Alpha 66 ([www.alpha66.org](http://www.alpha66.org)) and Omega 7, both of whom operate openly in Florida. Just look at the U.S. reaction to 9/11 in 2001. The Patriot Act Legislation rolls back civil liberties and greatly expands the U.S. government's ability to spy on anyone it wants to. When this act was passed, thousands of people were rounded up and detained just because they were the wrong race and/or religion. And yet people in the U.S. continue to criticize Cuba, which has been the target of U.S. attacks for over four decades. See Tony Samara’s “A Week for Political Fools: Columns Miss the Mark on Politics at Home and Abroad” in *Daily Nexus: U.C. Santa Barbara Student Newspaper*, (Vol. 83, Issue 108), April, 21 2003.

superpower does not have the luxury to be "free and open." Instead it is forced into a defensive position where the very security of the government has to become a top priority if its people if it is to survive. Perhaps the recent push by President George W. Bush to re-double his efforts to unseat the Cuban leader (as well as dispense of his brother, Raul) have made for increasing tensions for Cubans who befriend U.S. citizens. Again, I can only speculate.

I do know that many people would like the U.S. embargo to be lifted and the freedom of exchange between both of our countries allowed. The Mahayana Buddhist message "to free all beings from suffering" certainly integrates nicely with this revolutionary goal. One cannot help but wonder whether the tenor and tone of the SGI's multicultural and multiracial Buddhist movement will foster more individualism (and hence, alienation from Castro's revolutionary aspirations) or more interdependence and ethical responsibility in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Whether such transformation is revolutionary, there is no doubt...if revolutionary means "toward radical change." Whether such practices are good for revolutionary Cuban women will be revealed in time, perhaps by the Cuban women themselves.

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