

Between Buddhism and Postmodern Spirituality: The Popularization of Soka Gakkai in Austria and Germany

Nicole Bauer

University of Graz, Austria

Nicole.bauer@uni-graz.at

ABSTRACT: Buddhist practices of self-improvement and mental healing are today of interest to many Western devotees. Soka Gakkai adapts Buddhist philosophy and practices such as reciting sections from the *Lotus Sutra* or chanting the sutra title *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō*. These practices are disseminated as the true path to happiness. This paper explores the popularization of Soka Gakkai in Austria and Germany and shows the success of Buddhist practices as techniques of self-improvement and healing in postmodern societies. In Germany, “Soka Gakkai in Germany” has officially been recognized as a religious organization by the government of the State of Hessen, where it is headquartered. Soka Gakkai in Germany is the first Buddhist organization in the country to be certified as a corporation under public law. It is active at seven locations as “cultural centers.” In Austria “SGI-Austria—Association for the Promotion of Peace, Culture and Education” is officially recognized as a Buddhist order within the Austrian Buddhist Religious Society (Österreichische Buddhistische Religionsgesellschaft). In both countries, the organization is officially committed to inter-religious dialogue and peace, is active in the fields of culture and education, and offers spiritual seekers an extensive range of lectures and workshops centered on Buddhist practices of self-improvement.

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai, Soka Gakkai in Germany, Soka Gakkai in Deutschland, Soka Gakkai in Austria, SGI Austria—Association for the Promotion of Peace, Culture and Education, Österreich Soka Gakkai International—Verein zur Förderung von Frieden, Kultur und Erziehung.

1. Introduction: “The Circle of Life”

Embrace the circle of life
That is the greatest love
Go beyond fear
Go beyond fear
Beyond fear takes you into a place
Where love grows
When you refuse to follow the impulses
Of fear, anger and revenge (Turner and Shak-Dagsay 2009).

One of the most prominent representatives of the Buddhist movement Soka Gakkai was the pop singer Tina Turner (1939–2023), who came into contact with the group in the early 1970s. Since then, she took every opportunity to point out the “power behind” (Craig 2023) to which she attributed her success. It was only through her encounter with Soka Gakkai and the integration of the chanting of *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō* (“Devotion to the Mystic Law of the Lotus Sutra”), she said, that her personal life improved and her professional career was optimized. The recently deceased artist demonstrated her interest in Buddhist practice by incorporating Buddhist signifiers into her cultural productions. In one of her autobiographies, *Happiness Becomes You: A Guide to Changing Your Life for Good*, she talks about her spiritual path and describes herself as a “musical bodhisattva of the earth” (Turner 2020, 105).

In this respect, it is not surprising that her spiritual identity is also expressed in her musical productions. In the lyrics quoted above from the 2009 album released together with yoga teacher Regula Curti and mantra singer Dechen Shak-Dagsay, there are Buddhist elements such as the motif of the “circle of life” (*bhavacakra*), the practice of mastering (negative) emotions, and the idea of physio-psychic self-improvement, which are central aspects of Soka Gakkai (Dehn 2022, 85–91). The album includes both Buddhist and Christian chants. The artists wanted the entire proceeds to go towards projects promoting peace between different cultures and spirituality in education, training, and research for children and young people (“Laila” 2009).

These lyrics illustrate an essential aspect that characterizes contemporary religious movements and is discussed in this paper: the emphasis on the self and self-optimization, which, according to the thesis put forward here, makes a significant contribution to the popularization of Soka Gakkai in Western societies. Not only do the boundaries between religion, popular culture, and psychology dissolve, but also those between religions (in her album Tina Turner combines Buddhist and Christian elements).

On the other hand, the quote includes a “self-reference” to current religious offers that are currently experiencing mass dissemination in contemporary society as practices of self-optimization. Building on this, the main thesis of this paper is that “traditional” religious ideas and practices are currently undergoing a

transformation that is an expression of contemporary social dynamics and that this is particularly (but not exclusively) evident on the fringes of institutionalized religions and in new religious movements. The transformation is characterized by an increasing psychologization and an accompanying “universalization” of religious offers. Religious ideas and practices are detached from their traditional contexts and universalized as techniques of self-optimization. The “self” and its “optimization” become the focus of religious practice.

Buddhist practices of self-improvement are of interest to many Western devotees. The new religious movement Soka Gakkai adapts Buddhist philosophy and practices such as reciting sections from the Lotus Sutra or chanting the sutra title *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō*. These practices are disseminated as the true path to happiness. This paper explores the popularization of Soka Gakkai in Austria and Germany and shows the success of Buddhist practices functioning as techniques of self-improvement and healing in postmodern societies. In both countries, the organization is officially committed to inter-religious dialogue and peace, is active in the fields of culture and education, and offers spiritual seekers an extensive range of lectures and workshops centered on Buddhist practices of self-improvement.

2. Soka Gakkai in Austria and Germany

2.1 Soka Gakkai in Germany

Soka Gakkai has been active in German-speaking countries with local groups since the end of the 1960s, but with around 8,000 followers in Germany and a few hundreds in Austria and Switzerland, of which around 15% are Japanese, it remains what Hutter defined in 2001 a comparatively marginal religious phenomenon (Hutter 2001, 253).

The history of Soka Gakkai in Germany can be traced back to the 1950s. As part of Daisaku Ikeda’s (1928–2023) mission plan, the first pioneers migrated to Europe, including ten Japanese who settled in Germany (Ionescu 2000, 188–89). The aim of the followers was to convert people to Nichiren Buddhism through *shakubuku*, the method of proselytizing used at that time (Kötter 2006, 48–51). Initially, missionary work was carried out only among Japanese immigrants, but in

the subsequent decades non-Japanese also became the focus of missionary endeavors.

In September 1961, Ikeda visited Düsseldorf. At that time, there was only one woman practicing in Germany. The number slowly grew in the following years. However, the first general meeting was not held until 1965 in Frankfurt, where the issue of expanding Soka Gakkai in Germany was discussed. One of the goals that was set was to increase the group membership to 1,000 followers. In 1970, “Nichiren-Shoshu” was registered as an association called “Deutsche Nichiren Shoshu e.V.” This existed until Soka Gakkai separated from the Nichiren Shoshu monks in 1991. At the time, the religious community consisted of 516 members, who were mainly Japanese migrants (Schweigkofler 2014, 49; Kötter 2006, 24).

The umbrella organization Soka Gakkai International was also founded in 1975, but this had little effect on the structures in the various localities. Until the 1980s, the group consisted mainly of Japanese members who were particularly well represented among the functionaries. However, this began to change in the 1990s. In his 2006 research paper on Soka Gakkai, Kötter stated that over 82% of members were German and showed that the internal structures of the organization had also changed (Kötter 2006, 25).

To this day, the group is divided into men’s, women’s, and youth divisions. Meetings usually take place in small groups of around ten people who meet regularly to recite the *Daimoku* together and discuss various topics. However, meetings also take place in larger units at certain locations, including nationwide meetings. Today, according to the Soka Gakkai in Germany website, there are around 500 groups in Germany where regular events take place, and which are open to non-members. In addition, larger Buddhist gatherings take place at Soka Gakkai centers (Soka Gakkai in Deutschland 2024a).

The national center of Soka Gakkai in Germany has been located in the “Villa Sachsen” in Bingen am Rhein since 1994 and was officially opened in 1997. Regular Buddhist weekend seminars take place there, as do other cultural events which are also organized in cooperation with the town of Bingen (Soka Gakkai in Deutschland 2024b). Soka Gakkai centers are also to be found in Hamburg, Bremen, Berlin, and Frankfurt, where regular large Buddhist gatherings also take place. The social activities of Soka Gakkai communities include exhibitions, cultural events, conferences, and interfaith dialogues. In addition, Soka Gakkai is involved in campaigns for non-violence, charitable activities, and humanitarian

aid programs. In Germany, for example, Soka Gakkai has co-operated with UNESCO and UNICEF on an exhibition of children's pictures and is part of the Earth Charter Initiative. In addition, the organization is a member of the anti-nuclear-arms movement *Atomwaffenfrei.jetzt*. In 2023, Soka Gakkai in Germany was granted the legal status of a public corporation by the State of Hessen, where it is headquartered. It was the first Buddhist religious community in Germany to be recognized as a public corporation (Soka Gakkai in Deutschland 2024c).

2.2. Soka Gakkai in Austria

In Austria “Österreich Soka Gakkai International—Verein zur Förderung von Frieden, Kultur und Erziehung” (SGI Austria—Association for the Promotion of Peace, Culture, and Education), incorporated in 1991, is the largest Japanese Buddhist community in the country (Pokorny and Dessì 2023, 236). In 2001, it was admitted into the Austrian Buddhist Religious Society, an official representative body of Buddhists in Austria. There are currently 23 groups and institutes of different schools and traditions registered as members of the Austrian Buddhist Religious Society, 15 of which are based in Vienna (Österreichische Buddhistische Religionsgesellschaft 2024). The Austrian Buddhist Religious Society was officially recognized by the Austrian government in February 1983 (BGBl 33/1983) and according to the society's statutes, its main tasks are to represent Buddhism to the public and to create an organizational framework for the best possible development of the religion. Austria was the first European country to officially acknowledge Buddhism as a religion, and thus to offer a range of state support benefits, e.g., religious school education (Pokorny 2014, 3).

According to the historical narrative, the foundation stone for the establishment of Soka Gakkai's Austrian site was laid by Ikeda, who also visited Vienna on his first trip to Europe in 1961, setting an important “identity marker” in the history of Soka Gakkai:

On May 3, 1960, Ikeda Daisaku was inaugurated as third president of Soka Gakkai, expediting the internationalization of the movement. Five months later, on October 2, 1960, he departed for his first overseas ‘peace journey’ (*heiwa tabi*), an event which marked the official beginning of *kōsen-rufu* on a global scale. This date is thus celebrated today by members of SGI as World Peace Day (*sekai heiwa no hi*) (Pokorny 2014, 10).

Ikeda's journey to Europe was viewed by members as the official kick-off of *Kōsen-rufu*, the dissemination of the teachings of the Lotus Sutra in Europe. At this time only a few Japanese members had settled in France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, and the UK and “were pioneering small-scale missionary activities” (Pokorny 2014, 10).

The first member in Austria was a Japanese immigrant called Yoshio Nakamura (b. 1942), who moved in 1969 as a missionary from Tokyo to Geneva (Switzerland) and then to Vienna. He founded the Austrian Soka Gakkai, which was called the Austrian Nichiren Shoshu until the separation from the monks in 1991. The community developed slowly but steadily over the following decades. While the group initially consisted mainly of Japanese immigrants, since the 1980s non-Japanese members have gradually been attracted to its programs (Interview with Larry Williams, February 24, 2024).

The first non-Japanese follower joined at the beginning of 1975. In May 1981, shortly before Ikeda's second visit to Austria at the end of June, two thirds of the 37 formal members (half of whom were considered active) were already non-Japanese (Pokorny 2021, 237). Since the 1980s, Soka Gakkai in Austria has also made public appearances. Important events that brought the group to the attention of the media and thus also contributed to the popularization of the movement included the world tour exhibition (1982–1988), and “Nuclear Arms: Threat to Our World” (1983), held at the Vienna headquarters of the United Nations. Since 1981, Soka Gakkai has also been accredited by various United Nations organizations and maintains a UN presence in Austria (Pokorny 2021).

After the founding of SGI-Austria—Association for the Promotion of Peace, Culture and Education in 1991, the Austrian headquarters moved into a new center at the Villa Windisch-Grätz in Vienna (1995), which still serves as its national center and where larger meetings are held several times a year (Interview with Larry Williams, February 24, 2024). In December 2013, Soka Gakkai Austria had 853 members (Pokorny 2014, 3). In the same year, Nakamura stepped down from his role as General Director and was replaced by long-time supporter (since 1986) Lawrence “Larry” Williams (born in 1956), who still leads the Austrian group today.

There are currently around 1,200 Soka Gakkai members in Austria, most of whom live in Vienna. There are local groups in all Austrian federal states,

consisting of between 3 and 10 people. In total, there are around 30 local groups in Austria, 23 of which are in the various districts of Vienna. Followers meet in small groups to chant together, share experiences, and discuss problems. The groups are also divided into women's, men's, and youth groups. According to Williams, there is a pragmatic reason for this: the gender and age-specific group structures minimize the potential for conflict due to gender and age differences (Interview with Larry Williams, February 24, 2024). Larger meetings take place two to three times a year at the Vienna location of the Villa Windisch-Grätz, where the leadership of the organization is located and where all organizational and administrative matters are handled.

In addition to the practice of chanting, the study of Buddhist teachings also plays a central role in the group. Members meet to study both in small groups and at the head office in Vienna, where once a year they have a "test." Since the pandemic, the relevant courses have also been held online (Interview with Mr. H., February 24, 2024). However, the courses are only accessible to members, and information about group meetings and other offers is also restricted to members. Membership itself includes a formal act of application and requires a serious interest in religious practice and Buddhist teachings and active involvement in the group. As a visible sign of belonging to the religious group, the member receives a *Cohonzon*, an object of worship containing a scroll and mandala on which the *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō* is inscribed (Interview with Larry Williams, February 24, 2024).

3. The Popularization of Soka Gakkai in Germany and Austria

Particularly important for the popularization of Soka Gakkai in Germany and Austria is the change from missionary practice, which had come under criticism, to an organization that focuses on socio-ethical and cultural engagement.

The group's socio-political commitment is now at the center of its identity in both countries, which becomes evident in the interviews with members:

This type of Buddhism is not so easy to understand. By practicing you can understand slowly, and I need my time to understand. And there are a few topics that triggered me. Like world peace. (...) And world peace is simply the most important thing. We have no

other options and Soka Gakkai offers a way to achieve it (Interview with Mr. A, February 15, 2024).

An important aspect for the popularization of Soka Gakkai in the West, especially in German-speaking countries, was the adaptation to social and cultural conditions in the respective countries. In addition to the softening of hierarchical and patriarchal structures by allowing women to have leadership positions, the opening of the group to non-Japanese members and the inclusion of these in positions of leadership was an important moment in the establishment of the community.

Beyond the democratization of the group structure, the reduction in group size (3–10 people) was also a contributing factor that met the needs of Western members (Schweigkofler 2014, 73). In small groups, for example, interpersonal problems can be discussed more openly than in large meetings, the usual form in Japanese structures. There is also room for individual needs and the discussion of religious experiences, such as those gained through chanting (Interview with Larry Williams, February 24, 2024).

Another promising aspect of Soka Gakkai is the concept of religious practice consisting of chanting the Lotus Sutra as a vehicle for self-optimization, thus offering a technique that meets the needs of Western spiritual seekers. This is also reflected in the self-descriptions of German Soka Gakkai members, who place particular value on individualism, self-determination, religious experience, and individual development in matters of religiosity (Schweigkofler 2014, 64). The aspect of self-optimization is also emphasized in interviews with Austrian members. Chanting is said to have a direct effect that can be practiced “several times a day” and “anywhere, even on the toilet” (Interview with Mr. A., February 15, 2024).

The teachings of Soka Gakkai, which are offered in the form of self-help literature on the organization’s website and in its bookstores, also offer Western seekers a comprehensive range of tools for coping with the contingencies of life. Based on the Buddhist doctrines of karma and reincarnation, it offers content on how to deal with individual crisis situations and overcome fate, which also strengthens the self-empowerment of members and draws on current spirituality discourses (Schweigkofler 2014, 75).

In addition to its practices and teachings, Soka Gakkai presents itself as an organization based on ethical principles that are fully in line with Western values

and reflect Western aspects of current social discourses. In particular, cultural diversity, (Buddhist) humanism, intercultural endeavors, and the commitment to “world peace” remain at the heart of Soka Gakkai’s activities:

By endeavoring to set positive examples of non-violence, hope and civil courage in their everyday lives, [members] want to contribute to a sustainable culture of peace. Their actions are based on the understanding that individual happiness and the realization of a peaceful world are inextricably linked (Soka Gakkai in Deutschland 2024d).

This structural openness to socially relevant topics appears to be an important factor in the popularity of Soka Gakkai in Germany and Austria and thus attracts people from all walks of life who try out Soka Gakkai’s offers and often decide to become permanent members.

Conclusion

In Germany and Austria, Soka Gakkai is a central representative of Japanese Buddhism. The openness of the group, the fluidity of its structures, and the availability at different local locations ensure the presence of Soka Gakkai throughout both countries and also offer those who live outside major cities, where there are larger locations, the opportunity to join the group. The existing structures, such as the formation of small groups, also offer the opportunity to fulfil individual needs and at the same time to strengthen the sense of community.

In addition to the structural framework, however, it is the religious teachings and Buddhist practices in particular that make Soka Gakkai attractive in Germany and Austria. While chanting can be easily integrated into everyday life, the teachings also offer a simple and understandable answer to complex social, psychological, and socio-political questions and challenges in life. Soka Gakkai thus offers the postmodern seeker something that can be customized to their needs, an “education for the happiness of the individual” (Ikeda 2010).

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