

**Musical Bodhisattvas:
African American Musicians in the Soka Gakkai**

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ABSTRACT: The American branch of Soka Gakkai is known for having achieved a remarkable racial balance, which makes the criticism formulated by Rima Vesely-Flad against the hidden racism in meditative Buddhist sanghas difficultly applicable to its organization. The paper explores the experience of African American musicians who embraced Soka Gakkai's Buddhism, including Tina Turner, Herbie Hancock, and Wayne Shorter. While their experience was remarkably different from the one described by Vesely-Flad, they were always aware of the presence of racism in the world of American entertainment. They found in Daisaku Ikeda's idea of global citizenship a tool to combat it.

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai, Soka Gakkai in the United States, Musicians and Soka Gakkai, Tina Turner, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Daisaku Ikeda.

Racial Balance in the American Soka Gakkai

This paper is a continuation of research started last year. I summarized my first findings in a presentation at the 2023 EASSSR (East Asian Society for the Scientific Study of Religion) meeting, entitled, "Religion, Anti-Racism, and Race in the American Soka Gakkai Association" (Folk 2023). As someone who studies Buddhism in America, I am aware of the racial realities characterizing the religious landscape. Many scholars put forth the view that there are "two Buddhisms": communities of first- and second-generation Asian practitioners with practices consistent with their countries of origin, and non-Asian converts to forms of Buddhism that stress meditation, such as Vipassana or Zen, and "Shambhala." It is well-known that the latter form, sometimes called "white Buddhism," has a distinct membership population: highly educated professionals who are, in fact, overwhelmingly white Americans.

It is difficult to put Soka Gakkai (SGI) under either umbrella, and many studies of Western Buddhism have failed to address SGI at all. But when they do, scholars marvel at how Soka Gakkai has managed to “crack the diversity code,” being the single form of Buddhism in America to successfully achieve racial balance. As I looked into this topic, I was surprised to see how consistent scholarly literature was in stopping at that observation. That is to say, despite the longstanding awareness of Soka Gakkai as different in its engagement across racial lines, there has been astonishing little research. The sparse interpretations I found tended to reify stereotypes about both Soka Gakkai and Black religiosity: depicting Nichiren Buddhism as a form of “prosperity theology,” and citing “deprivation theory” to explain the receptivity of African Americans.

I believe better explanations can be found in observations about Soka Gakkai and the statements of its African American practitioners. My research last summer revealed that many African American converts started out hoping for practical success, but they very soon turned their attention to chanting for things like personal transformation, social justice, or world peace: things associated with the enlargement of their goals for themselves and humanity. African American participants in Soka Gakkai value the practice as a means of personal and psychic transformation. They also cite the diversity in membership and the commitment to social justice as elements that draw them to the tradition.

It should not go unnoticed that despite having a distinct understanding of Buddhist philosophy, the focus on chanting makes Soka Gakkai practice more similar to Asian Buddhism than the meditative (“white”) systems. One could go so far as to invert the question—rather than ask why is Nichiren Buddhism popular among people of color, to recognize that the atypical, meditative emphasis of Western Buddhism has rendered it inaccessible except for a narrow demographic.

Rima Vesely-Flad’s Anti-Racist Critique of Meditative Buddhist Sanghas

Chanting is one of the elements of Buddhism Rima Vesely-Flad notes as “congruent” with African American religious practice, in *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition: The Practice of Stillness in the Movement for Liberation*. Vesely-Flad sees chanting, ancestor veneration, and the maintenance of altars as practices of special meaning to African American Buddhists. Vesely-Flad’s study focuses on meditative Buddhism, and not all her findings transpose. As an

anti-racist activist, she writes from the perspective of Black radical politics, and her understanding of Buddhism emphasizes psychological healing from racism. For Vesely-Flad, “trauma” is the defining experience for African American people in a raced society (Vesely-Flad 2022).

While Vesely-Flad understands Buddhist meditation as something that provides self-quieting, she notes in her work that racial identity and experience are important to African American people. Buddhist philosophy, which emphasizes non-dualism and no-self, is in tension with that. Vesely-Flad seeks to redefine certain Buddhist concepts to fit an anti-racist framework—for example, framing suffering as the Black experience under racism.

Vesely-Flad makes a cogent critique of meditative Buddhist sanghas being “white spaces”: upper-middle-class and characterized by a culture of “respectability.” In such environments, it is difficult for people of color to feel they belong. Vesely-Flad is one of several African American Buddhist teachers and practitioners calling for affinity groups within sanghas in order to provide a certain amount of protection from systemic racism. There have been a number of reactions in the American Buddhist world to this development. Especially for younger Buddhists, it is vital that Buddhist communities confront their own, raced histories. Others worry such discussions give unnecessary power to social constructs like race, so as to misdirect people away from Buddhist teachings.

African American Musicians’ Encounter with Soka Gakkai

I would like to talk here about an alternative vision of Buddhism expressed by a group of African American Soka Gakkai members: musicians who first encountered Nichiren Buddhism in the 1970s in Los Angeles, when they knew each other from the world of jazz music. Their circle encompassed many artists, including Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter (1933–2023), and Art Blakey (1919–1990). Along with their wives and families, they created a close community of Nichiren Buddhism practitioners.

Their story is discussed in many books, including *Reaching Beyond: Improvisations on Jazz, Buddhism and a Joyful Life* (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017), and *Dancing in My Dreams: A Spiritual Biography of Tina Turner* (Craig 2023).

The musicians articulate a very different type of solidarity than what emerges in Vesely-Flad’s study. It is important that their wives are Buddhists, too, and that many of them are in interracial marriages. We learn how important women are to this network in the biography of Tina Turner (1939–2023), whose life story is one of the best illustrations of how Soka Gakkai practice effects psychological transformation.

Tina Turner’s escape from an abusive marriage is well-known. In the film, *What’s Love Got to Do with It*, her introduction to Nichiren Buddhism coincides with a new quest for agency. For Tina Turner, chanting the *Daimoku* first began as an act of rebellion—even though her husband Ike Turner (1931–2007) forbade her from chanting, she could and did still do so whenever out of his sight. Chanting next became the means by which Turner developed a human support system, as women from the Los Angeles jazz circle started coming to her house to chant with her. After leaving Ike, Turner lived with several members of the jazz-Buddhist community, including Wayne and Ana Maria Shorter (1953–1996).

Tina Turner described her finding Nichiren Buddhism as a “cosmic turnaround” (Craig 2023, 160). For her, Buddhist principles were the means to personal transformation.

After I embraced Buddhism, I never doubted I would get where I wanted to go. But much of the time I had no idea how exactly I would get there. I left the “how” up to the universe and the mystical workings of my mind and soul. All along, I kept this encouragement from Daisaku Ikeda close to my heart: “One thing is certain: The power of belief, the power of thought, will move reality in the direction of what we believe and conceive of it. If you really believe you can do something you can. That is a fact. When you clearly envision the outcome of victory, engrave it upon your heart, and are firmly convinced that you will attain it, your brain makes every effort to realize the mental image you have created. And then, through your unceasing efforts, that victory is finally made a reality.” As I worked through mastering my mind in this way, and approached obstacles as catalysts for growth, continually changing poison into medicine without complaint, I experienced a deep-seated shift (Craig 2023, 148).

Like Tina Turner, Herbie Hancock believes Nichiren Buddhism offers a psychic empowerment that, distinctly, enables one to achieve their goals:

Before I embraced the faith of Nichiren Buddhism, I didn’t realize what it was that I was fighting for. It was as though I was in a deep sleep. Now I feel that I am awake—far more aware than before. I have a long way to go, but I’m not afraid anymore. I have the confidence to shoot for bigger and bigger dreams, and I’m not afraid to be proactive and assertive, and move forward in my life (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017, 203).

Hancock, Shorter and Turner all use the phrase, “Turn poison into medicine,” to describe the Soka Gakkai belief that adversities, when understood correctly, are a means to growth and empowering change. Hancock writes,

I really came to understand what my mission is in life after I began practicing Buddhism. I began to see more deeply into what life is all about. It’s so wonderful. Most people, whether they realize it or not, see themselves as victims. In Nichiren Buddhism, our main concern is taking whatever negative things happen to us and transforming them into positive things. What we need to do is take any negative effect we experience and reframe it as a new cause, a new stimulus for enhancing and elevating one’s life (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017, 193).

While Vesely-Flad presents Buddhism as a way to heal from ongoing trauma, Hancock’s view leans to self-reliance:

Nichiren teaches that we must accept full responsibility. This means that we have to accept responsibility for our own behavior and role in whatever is happening around us and all that happens in the social arena. I think this is a really marvelous concept (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017, 193).

The artists are connected by both music and Buddhism, and they see the two as linked. All three credit Nichiren practice with enhancing their creativity. Hancock writes,

Through my practice of Buddhism, I discovered a new way of looking at myself that has opened up a completely new dimension of creativity for me. This new perspective has provided me a broader canvas that continues to open up possibilities I had never before imagined, in my performances as well as in every aspect of my life (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017, 148).

For Hancock, Buddha nature is a universal creative force. Improvisational jazz unleashes a certain type of creative energy, which Nichiren Buddhism also unleashes. Shorter agrees, writing,

Jazz is a creative process, an improvisational dialog that can break through the superficial constraints of dogma, decrees, and mandates (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017, 7).

In Soka Gakkai, chanting transforms persons, awakening their possibilities. This first brings individual empowerment, but in the stories of Turner, Hancock, and Shorter, this impulse is quickly directed outward. For the Soka Gakkai musicians, it is not only their own individual creativity that is released in their performances. Collectively, the three put forth an interesting idea: that their performances are intended to unleash the Buddha nature—the creative power—of their audiences even more than their own. Hancock writes,

Even though the roots of jazz come from the African American experience, my feeling has always been that jazz really developed from a noble aspect of the human spirit common to all people (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017, 8).

All three artists talk about chanting before performances, in order to get in touch with themselves so as to reach their viewers, with each note arriving at the awareness that their music is “for others.” Hancock writes,

As a Buddhist and a performer, I came to realize that the value of the performance had changed for me. I began to think that my performance was not just for my own sake—for my own pleasure and to lift my spirits. Yes, it was fun, and it could lift my spirits. But it became more important for me to use that platform as a way to encourage people to realize their own greatness (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017, 64).

For Hancock, music becomes both a form of self-transcendence, and a kind of healing work.

Buddhism teaches the principle of practice for self and practice for others. In other words, while we are engaging in Buddhist practice for our own benefit, we must also practice so we can help uplift others.

Advancing Buddhism is an even more pronounced goal in the life work of Tina Turner. Turner was introduced to Soka Gakkai Nichiren Buddhism in 1973, publicly declared herself a Buddhist in 1975, and formally converted in 1976. In 1982, Turner sang at the SGI Buddhist Peace Festival (Aloha, We Love America), by which time she described her desire to become a “musical bodhisattva.” In an interview with Larry King (1933–2021), Turner told of her ambition to become a Buddhist teacher—a goal that was realized in several projects, including a set of instructional CDs for chanting, and a memoir about Buddhism entitled, *Happiness Becomes You: A Guide to Changing Your Life for Good* (Turner 2020).

Music, Anti-Racism, and Global Citizenship

It should not go unmentioned that the artists are from an older generation, and articulating a different message from Vesely-Flad, who was born in 1976—the same year in which Tina Turner formally converted to Soka Gakkai. Part of her challenge to meditative Buddhism is generational, and it is consistent with efforts by young adults in many new religions for more recognition.

But it would be a mistake to present the Buddhist musicians as overly optimistic because of their era. A statement from Tina Turner is evidence of her awareness of the concerns of the present age, which only the global recognition of Buddha Nature will resolve:

I believe that only by awakening to this shared identity can we save ourselves, individually and collectively, from the problems we face around the world. We must urgently work together to find solutions that can transform the global poisons of systemic racism and homophobia, climate crisis, pandemics, loss of the Amazon jungle, factory farming of animals, fossil fuel consumption, nuclear weapons, plastic pollution, and more. The universal solution to all of the problems confronting humanity is for us to unite as one global team, honoring our truest roots as members of the same circle of life (Craig 2023, 212).

The Buddhist musicians are aware of systemic racism, and each one experienced racism personally. Tina Turner makes her feelings explicit: “[In America] it hurts to be a minority. I am looked down upon because I’m black. It’s forever. It’s like a curse on you” (Craig 2023, 169). For Turner, racism in America was among the main reasons she chose to live in Europe, moving to Switzerland in 1994 and becoming a citizen there in 2013.

The other musicians made different choices, but all three respond to racism as “global citizens.” Shorter writes,

On the road, I have shared with people my experiences of prejudice and bigotry. I incorporate stories of breaking through such obstacles without using words like bigotry, hatred, and prejudice. I always relate or lead them to the level of happiness (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017, 85).

It is important to note that all three artists have traveled extensively as a result of their work, including to Africa. Their global vision is undergirded by many intercultural experiences.

Hancock sees jazz as political subversive and highlights its association with the civil rights movement. It is relevant here that under Daisaku Ikeda (1928–2023), Soka Gakkai International developed social models of intentional inclusion that included peace work with known civil rights leaders like Vincent Harding (1931–2014). Ikeda writes,

We must not permit discrimination of any sort. Our Soka Gakkai International movement is based upon the fundamental principles of Buddhism—peace, equality and compassion—that compel us to build a society protecting human rights and the dignity of all life (Harding and Ikeda 2013, 26).

Ikeda had a unique understanding of global citizenship:

(1) the wisdom to perceive the interconnectedness of all life and living [beings]; (2) the courage not to fear or deny difference, but to respect and strive to understand people of different cultures, and to grow from encounters with them; (3) the compassion to maintain an imaginative empathy that reaches beyond one's immediate surroundings and extends to those suffering in different places (Ikeda 2008, 444).

This ideal resonates with Hancock:

I feel that it's very important to embrace cultures outside my own. Doing so represents the wisdom of inclusion, the wisdom that stems from openness and respect for others, respect for something outside myself (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017, 86) .

For these musicians, Soka Gakkai communities are a major vehicle for breaking down social boundaries. They all cite the basic dialog sessions held in Soka Gakkai meetings, where people are encouraged to share personal stories of their lives. These settings are interracial and egalitarian—anyone can speak, and everyone is encouraged to speak. These forums create inclusion and offer a structural model different from meditative Buddhism. I believe they are an important factor in why there have been so few calls to address systemic racism within the Soka Gakkai movement.

It would not do, however, to say that the dialog sessions are the key to solving the “diversity code.” The metaphor implies that once a solution is found, it might be applied universally, so as to “fix” the problem of racial inequities in every form of Buddhism. Soka Gakkai practice shows reconciliation is both closer to and farther away from that abstract goal. Reconciliation starts with people working together, lovingly, toward a shared goal, whether interfaith dialog, jazz improvisation, or the chanting of the *Daimoku*. Like the activities on which it is based, it is a dynamic practice.

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