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The Life of Food

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Food is more than a biological necessity. It is cultural identity, religious observance, memory, romance, creativity—the shared flavors of friendship and community, the tastes and textures through which intimacies are experienced and enriched. It is the center of our sense of home and family; the thought that is given everywhere, day after day, to the preparation of meals; and the simple ritual of eating around which families form. Nichiren, the 13th-century founder of the school of Buddhism practiced by members of the SGI, wrote in thanks to a disciple for a gift of food: “Rice is not simply rice, it is life itself.” Food is life; and not only because it enables our bodies to continue functioning.

Trace backward the path of any item on the shelf of the grocery store, and you arrive almost inevitably at a patch of earth and a farmer. The way food is produced and what happens to it on its often complex journey to our plates has major effects on our social and biological systems.

In recent decades, industrial agriculture, which relies on huge inputs of energy, pesticides and chemical fertilizers, has been seen as the most effective way to boost food productivity. But the hidden costs of this approach—poisoning of the soil, the water and the air—are becoming increasingly apparent. Moreover, although the world now grows more than enough food to meet everyone’s nutritional needs, millions continue to die each year from hunger, while increasing numbers of people suffer from illnesses related to overnutrition.

This issue of the SGI Quarterly explores alternatives to these unsustainable modes of food production and consumption and highlights the work of individuals dedicated to improving access to life-giving food in different situations around the world. It begins from the perspective that food, more than any other element of our daily lives, is the tangible thread of our interdependence with the world around us. Through the food we eat, we are connected with people near and far, with the systems of global trade and commerce, and with the Earth itself. Our food choices have far-reaching effects. Unsurprisingly, the most wholesome and delicious foods—those that best nourish our bodies and our senses—are also best for the planet.
Rethinking Food

Interview with Carlo Petrini

Italian food writer Carlo Petrini’s efforts to encourage people to rethink our relationship with food have inspired a global popular movement that is redefining the relationship between what we eat, the people who grow it, the systems that distribute it and the Earth that produces it. A key activity of this Slow Food movement is the Terra Madre (Mother Earth) gatherings that bring together thousands of food producers from around the world to discuss problems and find possible solutions. Petrini has also founded the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Pollenzo and Colorno, Italy, that offers an interdisciplinary approach to food studies.

SGI Quarterly: How has our attitude to food and eating changed since the time of our grandparents, and what effects has this had?

Carlo Petrini: In recent decades we have witnessed a gradual impoverishment of the senses—our ability to feel, taste and smell. The increasing speed of our lives deprives us of the ability to experience the genuine diversity and authenticity in the world around us. Humankind has lost touch with the land, with time, traditions, knowledge, culture and cuisine. The moments of encounter rooted in the ancient rituals of daily life and the cycle of the seasons are no longer part of our experience. The uniform flavor of industrial foods, which are the same all over the world, has impoverished our ability to recognize food.

SGIQ: What is good quality food, and why should such quality be important?

CP: According to the UN Millennium Ecosystem Assessment published in 2005, food production and transportation is now the main cause of the pollution and gradual destruction of our planet. This should make us reflect. If it is true, as Wendell Berry says, that eating is also an “agricultural act,” then good quality foods that are produced in ways that respect the natural environment and local traditions can encourage biodiversity, equity and sustainability.

Beyond Consumption

If you are concerned about the fate of the planet, the definition of good food goes beyond gourmet considerations; it must be eco-gastronomic, that is, we must be aware of the potential impact of our choices. For eco-gastronomes, quality is defined by three adjectives: good, clean and fair. Good refers to the pleasure derived from the qualities of the food, but also the complex realm of feelings, memories and sense of identity that arise from our emotional associations with food. Clean products are those that do not stress the land, that are produced with respect for the natural environment. Fair means it conforms to the concepts of social justice with regard to its production and marketing.

SGIQ: What are the aims of the Slow Food movement, and what is it in practice?

CP: There is a lot that needs to be done to spread a conscious perception of food. We begin by focusing on taste: promoting school gardens, taste workshops, theater, our Master of Food courses and other initiatives that help retrain and revive the senses, especially among the younger generation.

Food is not only food but also pleasure, culture and conviviality—the mediator of values and attitudes, a catalyst of our emotions.”
search for information, through producers communicating their processes, through large retailers rethinking their systems and supporting local production. It can be restored by our desire to return to being coproducers, by creating new “food communities” in which the gastronome is simply the final link in a whole functional chain.

**SGIQ:** Choosing conscientiously produced food might simply be considered a luxury that many can’t afford. What is the movement’s relevance in developing countries?

**CP:** In Italy after World War II until the early ’70s, most of the family budget was allocated to food purchases. In Europe today statistics show much lower figures of between 16 and 17 percent. The importance of food has declined in relation to other products. In the global South and developing countries the figures are much higher, but entire nations are losing their food sovereignty, the direct relationship between production and consumption at the local level.

Our Terra Madre network brings together farmers and fishermen, artisans and agri-food producers, chefs and academics. This is the positive face of globalization. It gives a voice to those who do not approve of inhumane models of production and of attaching market values to the living world. It is precisely from the global South—from those at daily risk of being crushed by overwhelming market dynamics—that the cry for solidarity arises.

**SGIQ:** How do you see the future relationship between local food producers and the international trade networks?

**CP:** Terra Madre was born out of the need to embrace a new concept of the economy, beginning with agriculture, which is at the center of local communities, to the food of the local community, its culture and the local region. We’re seeing now the enormous limitations of the market economy.

The Terra Madre food communities establish a “short chain,” or at least a chain based on mutual understanding between those involved. A simple example is the farmers’ markets that are found globally. We are not talking about closed economies, or about not being able to enjoy products and dishes we love. The term “local” should be understood as an economic system that is well integrated with the region; not a forced expression of the law of supply and demand but a recognition of the historical heritage of a community. The dignity of the local economy is the only thing that will allow us to realize what is becoming an oxymoron: sustainable development.

**Preserving Knowledge**

**SGIQ:** In our rapidly changing world, what do you see as the value of traditional knowledge and wisdom?

**CP:** Food is tied up with the traditional culture of peasant communities, not only in the culinary sense, but also with its crafts, poetry, music and local history. The disappearance of traditional knowledge, already experienced in communities in the West, is now occurring in the rural societies of the poorest countries. Dignity and value have been discarded in the name of scientific progress to make room for a “modernity” that knows only about the culture of the market. This is why at Terra Madre in Turin we started a “dialogue between different fields of knowledge,” bringing representatives of the scientific and academic world into dialogue with representatives of food communities.

In addition, in the 2008 meeting of the food communities, we launched a new initiative, Sounds of Terra Madre, in which 49 nonprofessional music groups from 30 countries shared the culture of their traditional feasts and celebrations. We plan to do a similar thing in coming years with languages that are at risk of dying out.

**SGIQ:** Why do you believe the Slow Food movement has grown so quickly?

**CP:** Humanity has almost reached a point of no return. Our way of life, the speed with which we “consume” each moment of our existence, is beginning to pose serious questions. Many feel the need to reappropriate their time, to go deeper, to recover their roots. In developing countries, there is a need to preserve culture, cultivation techniques and recipes.

In helping to build the Terra Madre network, what has impressed me most has been the incredible humanity expressed by these farmers, fishermen, gatherers of wild fruit and artisans from around the world. Their stories, their daily struggles, are the true expression of the farming community and a sign of hope. It is a heritage that the world cannot afford to lose.

“Good refers to the pleasure derived from the qualities of the food, but also the feelings, memories and sense of identity that arise from food.”

Brian Yap CC BY-NC
People the world over are experiencing profound psychological disorientation in the face of the current economic and ecological situation; the stories long used to make sense of the world, and to envision the future, have failed. But when a tree falls, we can for the first time see its roots. Today, the toppled “tree” is our increasingly globalized economic system. What is the deepest root now exposed?

While only a decade ago development experts expressed dismay that hunger was spreading by several million people a year, in just the last two years hunger has grown by over 100 million—bringing its toll to nearly 1 billion.

There’s only one thing powerful enough to make human beings create a world violating our common sense and sensibilities. It is the power of ideas. We humans create the world according to largely unconscious mental maps. They determine what we see and cannot see, and therefore what we believe to be possible.

Reconsidering Scarcity

My first clues as to the inadequacy of the dominant mental map came in 1968, as I began the research that led to Diet for a Small Planet. Experts warned that we had hit Earth’s limits. But I soon realized that we were—and still are—actively generating scarcity from plenty. The world produces more than enough food to make us all chubby, even on what’s left over after feeding more than a third of the world’s grain to livestock, and after turning a third of the world fish catch into feed, and feeding corn to cars via ethanol.

“We continue to create more food and yet, at the same time, more hunger.”

The world produces 15 percent more calories per person than in 1970. Yet the frame of scarcity still defines the debate. It drives us single-mindedly to focus on production, while blinding us to the obvious: that dependence on costly (and eco-destructive) inputs and ever-larger farming operations (justified as “efficient,” despite contrary evidence) ends up undercutting people’s access to what is produced. So we continue to create more food and yet, at the same time, more hunger.

The other face of this premise is the belief that human beings are simply selfish, materialist and competitive. From here it follows that we best turn over our fate as much as possible to experts and officials—and even better, to an automatic, infallible force shielded from human tampering: “The magic of the market.”

Market exchange has served human society for millennia, certainly, but in the last 50 years we’ve hit upon a peculiar variant: a market driven largely by one rule, by highest return to existing wealth—corporate chiefs and shareholders.

Today’s complex, pervasive problems entail changes in behavior involving us all. They cannot be solved simply from the top down; they rely on the active engagement of citizens who know their voices count. Thus, feelings of powerlessness, paralyzing citizens, are arguably the greatest threat to our planet’s future.

If so, the central question on which our future hinges is this: How do we transform powerlessness? In its deepest sense, empowerment depends on aligning ourselves with what we now know about our nature. What conditions have proven to bring out the worst in most of us? At least three: extreme concentration of power, in-group/out-group scapegoating and anonymity. And, frighteningly, the dominant world order—wealth in ever-fewer hands controlling ever-longer and more anonymous supply chains—generates precisely these three conditions.

Equally obvious, however, are hardwired prosocial capacities: empathy, cooperation, fairness and efficacy. MRI studies reveal, for example, that when we cooperate, areas of our brains are stimulated that are the same as when we eat chocolate!

Acknowledging the truth of our mixed capacities enables us to consciously design rules and norms that encourage the ongoing creation and
dispersion of power, mutual accountability, and thus basic fairness. To seize this horrific crisis and turn our planet toward life requires not a leap of faith but a giant jump onto firmer ground. It means rejecting faith-based economics, which tells us that if we only produce more, we can alleviate suffering, and moving rapidly toward evidence-based economics, with our laser focus on realigning human relationships and our relationships with our ecological home.

This transition is already under way, though largely invisible. Healing our beleaguered planet depends on consciously celebrating the human need for agency and, on that basis, generating relationships of mutuality in which power is cocreated.

To move in this direction—given that as creatures of the mind, we humans are creatures of story—we can, through empowering stories, spread the emergent, new, evidence-based way of seeing.

**India, the High-Tech Miracle?**

Through the dominant lens, India is the rising economic star, but while those of us in the North hear only of this country’s high-tech information boom, as of 2004 this sector employed fewer than 1 million Indians, or one-tenth of 1 percent. Nine out of ten Indians still work in the informal sector, where three-quarters make less than 20 cents a day.

Also absent in the media-fed view of tech-booming India is the employment with dignity that poor urban dwellers and villagers themselves are creating, relying not on centrally controlled capital but on relationships of mutuality. In just three decades, for example, 12.3 million rural Indians, mostly women, many landless, have created a network of 100,000 village-level dairy co-ops—generating many times the number of jobs the high-tech information industry boasts. Although these cooperatives provide over a fifth of the country’s total milk supply, few beyond India have heard of them.

“The key is a shift of frame from powerlessness to possibility, from bringing in more things to building new relationships of mutuality.”

Or, consider another Indian breakthrough, one emerging in a context of tragedy. From 1997 through 2006, 166,000 Indian farmers committed suicide, in part responding to overwhelming indebtedness. Many had experienced catastrophic losses when Monsanto genetically modified cotton seed, for example, failed to yield promised returns.

The southern state of Andhra Pradesh, termed the “pesticide capital of the world,” ranks second in farmer suicides. A few years ago, civil society organizations began initiatives to reduce farmer debt driving the epidemic. Credit went to rural women’s self-help groups for a non-pesticide approach. The state rural development ministry then supported the movement.

Rejecting GM seeds and using natural pest-control practices did not significantly affect farmers’ yields. But without expensive inputs, costs went down. With lower costs, farmers in one village using the non-pesticide approach enjoy 23 percent more net income than their chemically dependent neighbors, and farmers report their health improving as well.

Forgoing chemical treatment is also allowing more complex human and ecological relationships to emerge. Simple monoculture and dependency on distant markets are giving way to diverse cereals, fodder and fuelwood for exchange locally. With varied crops maturing at different times of the year, a farmer’s income is spread out. The non-pesticide movement has spread to 3,000 villages across 18 of the 23 districts of Andhra Pradesh, reaching 340,000 farmers.

**A Different African Story**

If India is framed as a winner in the global economic race, Africa is cast as the loser. We hear only of the continent’s degraded soils, absent infrastructure and endless wars.

What’s to be done? For many aid and development agencies the solution is clear: poor African farmers have been left out, so help them buy into, literally, the dominant model in which abundance is purchased. Link small farmers to corporate vendors of new seeds, fertilizers, pesticides.

This solution starts with things, more things, within a construct designed to perpetuate and intensify existing, extreme imbalances of power, and thus to deepen dependencies.

Burkina Faso, in the Sahel region of Africa, ranks third from the bottom in the Human Development Index of 177 countries. Within Burkina Faso, soils in the northern Yatenga region had long been viewed as the most degraded. In the 1970s and 1980s, environmental degradation, drought, harvest failures and famine brought despair. Many left. But despair also triggered something new.

Farmers began to reestablish and improve on traditional planting pits called zaï—shallow holes that collect...
rainwater and to which farmers add manure. The compost attracts termites that dig channels and digest organic matter, making it easier for plants growing in the pits to absorb nutrients. The approach can rehabilitate “rock-hard, barren land” and quickly increase yields, according to a report for the International Food Policy Research Institute.

Civic groups began helping to spread the approach. Then a local farmer started an Association for the Promotion of Zaï, and he now holds an annual “zaï market,” attracting farmers from about 100 villages who share experiences. In a nearby area, another farmer began a “zaï school,” and his district association of such schools now claims about a thousand members.

In Burkina Faso in only 15 years, farmers using zaï have made tens of thousands of badly degraded acres productive. And, with the help of development organizations, contour stone bunds that reduce erosion have been built on at least 250,000 acres. With added manure, the results are stunning: cereal yields jumping sevenfold or more without chemical fertilizer.

Since the 1980s in neighboring Niger, moreover, a similar farmer-engaged process of regenerating cultivated fields is succeeding on at least 12.5 million acres, which probably makes it the largest positive environmental transformation in Africa.

A survey of 45 sustainable agriculture initiatives in 17 African countries involving 730,000 households found that agroecological practices substantially improved food production and household food security. In almost all these projects, cereal yields improved by 50 to 100 percent. Author of the survey Professor Jules Pretty emphasizes that “new configurations” of “human relations are prerequisites for improving nature.” Behind sustainable success, he notes, is trust within organized groups generated through what he calls “social learning” in which farmers participate directly and share what they learn.

Such a process seems relevant to the breakthroughs in Niger, where, according to soil and water conservationist Chris Reij, “some of the doom and gloom stories about Africa’s drylands are not based on facts, but on fiction.”

**Shifting the Frame**

The dominant scarcity frame scares us into believing that the alternative approaches described above are not possible—that we can’t have a future in which we relate to the Earth healthfully and are still able to meet survival needs. A multidisciplinary study at the University of Michigan concluded that if the whole world shifted to sustainable, organic practices, our total food supply could increase by about half. And this approach, which enables the dispersion, not concentration, of power, means that the increase in output is more likely to reach those who most need it. The key is a shift of frame from powerlessness to possibility, from bringing in more things to building new relationships of mutuality.

I believe that solutions are known, not just to the crisis of hunger but to our planet’s other major challenges as well. If true, then the only thing we have really to worry about is the widespread feeling of powerlessness, preventing so many from finding the courage to work for solutions that already are evident.

If also true, then nothing is more important to our future than disciplining ourselves to search out stories of possibility—spreading them not as panaceas but as proof that we have a fighting chance of turning our planet toward life. Since human beings didn’t evolve to be couch potatoes and whiners—and since acting is infinitely more satisfying than sitting back depressed—that confidence in possibility may be all most people need to jump in and to give our all in this momentous time of planetary opportunity.

**“Feelings of powerlessness, paralyzing citizens, are arguably the greatest threat to our planet’s future.”**

Frances Moore Lappé is the author of 16 books, from Diet for a Small Planet in 1971 to Getting a Grip: Clarity, Creativity, and Courage in a World Gone Mad in 2007. With Anna Lappé, she leads the Small Planet Institute and Small Planet Fund (www.smallplanet.org). She is also cofounder of Food First, the Institute for Food and Development Policy. In 1987, Lappé received the Right Livelihood Award, often called the Alternative Nobel. This article has been adapted from a longer version in the Issues in Brief series of the Frederick S. Pardee Center for the Study of the Longer-Range Future at Boston University.
I am from a small village in Koulikoro in the central region of Mali. Unlike many youth of my generation, I was lucky to have the opportunity to continue my studies and eventually complete postgraduate studies in agronomy.

A natural career path for someone with my education would have been to go into the civil service or the NGO field, so my choice to become a farmer was upsetting to those close to me. During the colonial period, farming began to be looked upon as the lowest occupation, a perception that persisted. Now, after nearly 20 years of struggle, the farmers’ movement is changing that. But our most important battle now, as then, is to restore farmers to their rightful place in Malian society. Farmers should be proud of their noble profession—the most vital one for a poor country. It is thanks to the work of farmers that we can live with dignity.

To be a farmer in Africa still means first of all to belong to the most marginal and excluded 75 percent of the population. It means that one is underrepresented or not represented at all in those arenas where the future of our countries is decided. The result is that the major political choices and programs go against the interest of farmers. We struggle to gain access to resources, and the lack of access to credit, health care and education for our children remain issues.

African farmers are marginalized even in our own local markets, as the price of imported produce prevents us from selling our own produce at reasonable prices that will allow us to make a living.

Unsustainable methods of production are imposed upon us without our consent—genetically modified seeds, “Green Revolution” methods. These create dependence on large foreign interests: suppliers of hybrid and GM seeds, fertilizers and pesticides. When production costs increase without corresponding increases in market prices for farmers’ produce, farmers are driven into debt.

All these problems mean that farmers in the end are often forced to give up agriculture or to sell their land. They end up adding to the slums in the cities that are filled with the dispossessed, and even being tempted to cross over to Europe in small boats.

Through small-farmer alliances such as Via Campesina and ROPPA, Malian farmers collaborate with farmers in other parts of Africa and throughout the world. Small farmers everywhere suffer the same effects of neoliberal policies. What has enabled us to survive has been indigenous knowledge and practices. This is the basis for achieving food sovereignty—a country’s capability to feed itself on the basis of local food production. This is why we must preserve this knowledge at all costs; it is the route to becoming more independent and economically stronger.

In Mali, farmer organizations played a central role in drawing up a new agricultural policy that has been voted into law. It recognizes the importance of food sovereignty, of protecting family-based agriculture, of reasonable income for farmers, of protecting local markets against dumping, of greater land security for farming families, and providing social welfare for farmers. There is urgency now to see this implemented.

It is by continuing to organize, continuing to educate ourselves and continuing to learn about the political system that farmers will be able to overcome our challenges. Then, anything is possible.

I am optimistic, because in spite of the magnitude of the challenges, there has been incredible progress. Pressure from peasant organizations is influencing agricultural policies now throughout Africa.

Farmers are beginning to take their real place in the development of their countries—this will be the basis of major changes in the near future.
SGI Quarterly: What did your upbringing teach you about life?

Vandana Shiva: When I was growing up in Dehradun, India, as the child of a Gurkha family, although the local families might have starved to death during a time of famine, they did not eat the seed. In the ethics of the seed and its relationship with society, you save seed because it embodies the future and you have to defend the future, rather than consume it. The history of our region has thus definitely had a very powerful influence on me.

SGIQ: Your Navdanya movement has created bija satyagraha seed banks so that farmers can freely exchange and preserve a great variety of seed. What successes have you had with this movement, and what obstacles have you faced?

VS: I started seed saving in 1987. The laws that prevent us from saving seeds are immoral laws. So, just as Gandhi did not cooperate with the salt laws which would have made salt-making illegal in India—through the salt satyagraha (nonviolent protest)—we have also created a movement for noncooperation with any law that makes it illegal for us to save our own seeds. In most parts of the world, there is now a law that requires every farmer to get permission from a registering authority that licenses and registers seeds. So farmers’ varieties are made illegal because they are not approved in the list, and then they are wiped out from the face of the Earth.

“Farmers’ varieties are made illegal because they are not approved in the list, and then they are wiped out from the face of the Earth.”

The so-called improved varieties require more chemicals, so farmers are induced to buy both the seed and the chemicals. Then they get into debt and go hungry because they sell everything they have grown in order to pay back their loans. The result has been an epidemic of farmer suicides.

The second positive impact is that we have seeds that help us deal with climate change. We have about 52 seed banks in different parts of the country, which have had two very important contributions: First, the seed banks mean that local seeds are available that don’t need chemicals and are good with organic farming. The creation of a community seed bank also builds community awareness, so farmers don’t get trapped in the cycle of using hybrid nonrenewable seeds.

The corporations are greedy and try to patent all this rich diversity.

It is our duty to save the diversity of our seeds. We have about 52 seed banks in different parts of the country, which have had two very important contributions: First, the seed banks mean that local seeds are available that don’t need chemicals and are good with organic farming. The creation of a community seed bank also builds community awareness, so farmers don’t get trapped in the cycle of using hybrid nonrenewable seeds.
The best seeds are bred when scientists cooperate with farmers, and the best biodiversity conservation happens when local communities partner with taxonomists; the best organic farming happens when soil scientists work with producers.

**Finding Food Security**

**SGIQ:** How is helping small farmers preserve biodiversity linked to developing food security?

**VS:** It has been assumed that monocultures produce more food. In fact they produce more commodities that can be sold in the global marketplace—they produce less nutrition and less food security. Food grown by industrial agriculture also has more hazards linked to micronutrient deficiency. Real food security is to let the small farmers of the world grow more biodiversity. From this comes more food and nutrition for the farmer and the family. Some of the food is sold locally, some of it is traded long-distance, and then you have genuine food security for all, based on good food and high nutrition.

We have had a whole generation of people who have forgotten how to farm with biodiversity. We run farmers’ training courses at our farm in Dehradun, a conservation, teaching and research farm, and I run a school about seed called Bij Swaraj. Fifty-year-old farmers see the different crops and respond like children: “This is what the sesame looks like; this is what the tuber looks like!” The richest source of biodiversity is the soil, which is least known by humanity because so many of the organisms are so tiny that the eye cannot see them; it is wonderful to show the farmers under a microscope how rich and living the soil is.

**SGIQ:** How does returning to biodiversity fit in with the global trend toward renewable resources?

**VS:** All economic science in recent times is based on linear calculus with externalities, which means you get raw materials, ignore their cost and the cost of fossil fuel in the fertilizer and the environmental impact of all of this. You measure the commodities, saying, “We produced so much.” But in fact everything is depleted: the biodiversity, the water, soil fertility and farmers’ lives. Focusing on renewability means you recognize your production is based on the law of return, not just the law of appropriation. Through organic farming, we reduce water use—water comes out of organic farms as pure water, as opposed to the dead zones and rivers created by the runoff of chemicals. Nature made everything renewable. We are trying to work to make the resources renewable again.

**Self-Sufficiency**

**SGIQ:** How are small farms linked to the wider community?

**VS:** The public good and the social good are the most important consideration. People are not pitted against one another in the kind of food and farming systems we practice and promote. Farmers gain, in the form of higher incomes, better food and better health; and of course the environment is protected, so you have a win-win-win situation all the way from farmers’ livelihoods to the environment and public health.

India is a land of 650 million small farmers feeding 1.2 billion people. We are basically food-sufficient although we are sometimes forced to import food to generate profits for large corporations. In agriculture, the larger the farm, the more you destroy biodiversity and move toward large-scale monocultures with lots of chemicals and fossil fuel use. Each small-scale farm would not produce huge amounts of surplus, but millions of farms added up produce large amounts of surplus. All our farmers are less than one-hectare farmers. Some of them maybe have 500 kg extra, or 200 kg extra, which adds up to be the surplus for feeding the cities. The small farmers are able to give quality attention to biodiversity, to their animals and to the soil. Farmers feel proud of farming when they work with us; in fact we bring dignity back to farming. Young people are either staying on or moving back to the land.

In the biodiverse organic systems we have developed, families can look after themselves for future generations. We are also giving scientists a new paradigm to work with, new partners, so there is a larger base of knowledge.

**SGIQ:** In what way do you see what you have started in India as contributing to world peace?

**VS:** Our annual lecture on Gandhi’s birthday is a celebration of nonviolent farming. Peace with the Earth, not to kill biodiversity, organisms, the birds, the bees. Our model establishes peace with the land and the farmers. Privatization creates competition and conflict. By recovering seed as a commons, we are creating peace. If you make people hungry, they will turn violent. By ensuring an agriculture of abundance, we are establishing an agriculture of peace, so people don’t have to fight each other over food.

“By recovering seed as a commons, we are creating peace.”

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An Evergreen Revolution

Interview with M. S. Swaminathan

Professor Monkombu Sambasivan Swaminathan is known as the father of the Green Revolution that dramatically increased agricultural yields in India from the 1960s on. He is a strong proponent of the responsible use of technology to improve the livelihoods of the rural poor. His M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation in Chennai (www.mssrf.org) engages in a variety of programs to bridge the rich-poor and gender divides in the areas of information, knowledge and skill empowerment. He is past president of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs.

SGI Quarterly: Why did you first become involved in food and agricultural issues?

M. S. Swaminathan: My personal motivation started with the great Bengal famine of 1943, when I was a student at the University of Kerala. There was an acute rice shortage, and in Bengal about 3 million people died from starvation. All of our young people, myself included, were involved in the freedom struggle, which Gandhi had intensified, and I decided I should take to agricultural research in order to help farmers produce more.

I approached it from a pure science degree. My family had wanted me to get a medical degree because my father had been a doctor. But I decided I must do agriculture because that is the area in which I thought I could be of the greatest help to independent India.

In colonial India, famines were frequent, and our average yields were very low. For example, even in 1947 Japanese farmers were producing 5–6 tons of rice per hectare, while in India it was less than 1 ton, and our population was growing. So my major aim was to break the yield stagnation and help our farmers double or triple their yields.

The semidwarf, short wheat varieties with high yield came from Japan where they were first developed by Dr. Gonjiro Inazuka. Seeds were then taken to the U.S. by Dr. S. C. Salmon, who was with General MacArthur. We got our material from U.S. scientists, particularly from Drs. Norman Borlaug and Orville Vogel, and then developed our own varieties, which triggered the wheat revolution and then the Green Revolution.

SGIQ: The Green Revolution and biotechnology in agriculture later came under criticism.

MSS: The Green Revolution was a term coined in 1968 by Dr. William Gaud of the U.S. It pointed to the fact that we are all living on this planet as guests of green plants, which photosynthesize the energy of the sun.

From the 1970s onward there were two kinds of criticism of the Green Revolution. One was from environmentalists. Already Rachel Carson in her book *Silent Spring* had pointed out that excessive use of pesticides and fertilizers will do harm. The other criticisms came from economists, because technologies are not resource-neutral.

“Even in 1947 Japanese farmers were producing 5–6 tons of rice per hectare, while in India it was less than 1 ton.”

If I am a small farmer, I need more productivity, so the new technologies are very relevant. But they require inputs for output. From 1972 onward the price of gasoline started going up. Before that it was very cheap. Many of the inputs for the Green Revolution, like mineral fertilizers, come from petroleum derivatives. If the cost of production goes up, the small farmers cannot afford them. So both ecologists and economists were concerned. If farm ecology and economics go wrong, nothing will go right in agriculture.

But even as early as January 1968, before the term Green Revolution was coined, I gave a lecture in the Indian Science Congress, warning that the excessive use of pesticides and fertilizers, the excessive exploitation of groundwater, growing monocultures instead of varietal diversity—all of this would be very harmful. I said that instead of progress we may see agricultural disaster if we don’t incorporate environmental parameters in agronomic technology. I coined the term Evergreen Revolution, which means increasing production in perpetuity without ecological harm.

The issue of genetic modification is not really related to the Green Revolution. The Green Revolution was not a product of genetic modification but what we call Mendelian breeding after Gregor Mendel [cross-breeding different varieties], while the genetic revolution is at the level of molecular manipulation—DNA technology.

There are many differences of opinion here, but what is important is the safe and responsible use of biotechnology. We must weigh the benefits and risks objectively and transparently, then decide.

A lot of work is going on in genetic...
modification in the medical sciences without much objection—to produce treatments for Alzheimer’s or Parkinson’s disease, for example. But in food biotechnology there are real concerns—environmental concerns, impact on biodiversity, impact on human health, and so on. But every country has a biotechnology regulatory authority which examines the product and says whether it is safe or not. In India cotton is the only genetically modified crop approved for cultivation.

Ecotechnology means marrying the best of modern science with the best in traditional wisdom and traditional ecological prudence. You can use biotechnology for bioterrorism, or you can use it for biohappiness. I feel we must try to use all the technologies in this world for biohappiness, which means people have a good life, better health, better food, as a result of the technology.

Ensuring the safe and responsible use of biotechnology has to be done by regulatory mechanisms and also by public opinion—by the non-governmental movement, organizations which go into the ethical aspects of technology.

**Benefiting the Poorest**

**SGIQ:** How has your thinking been influenced by Gandhi?

**MSS:** My father was in the Gandhian movement of nonviolence, and Gandhi stayed in our home a few times. Gandhi’s principles are those I received from my childhood: such as *swadeshi*, that is, self-reliance; the principle of nonviolence; of *sarvodaya*—having no winners and losers, nobody exploiting another person; and *antyo-daya*—whatever you do, let the benefits go to the poorest person you have seen. These are the basic principles of my life—harmony with nature, harmony with each other, making a difference in the lives of others.

My foundation is based on the principle of a pro-nature-, pro-poor- and pro-women orientation to technology development and dissemination. We ensure that all our work conforms to these principles.

**SGIQ:** Part of the suspicion toward biotechnology in agriculture is that the technology is controlled by corporations that profit from it without regard to the adverse effects it can have.

**MSS:** This is a genuine concern. Unlike the Green Revolution that was a product of public-sector enterprise—there was no patenting, and the smaller farmers benefited more from the new seeds—the gene revolution is controlled by multinational companies which are based on intellectual property rights and social exclusion in access to technology.

The answer is for governments to provide more funding to public-sector institutions like universities, government institutions or institutions such as our ecotechnology center in Chennai, to enable them to develop technologies that are available to the poorest farmer.

In my own center, most of our research is participatory research with the local farming families. We have many examples of technology which helps through resistance to salinity, resistance to serious drought. We have a rice variety that is rich in iron, since iron deficiency among pregnant women is very widespread and a serious problem.

**SGIQ:** What are the biovillages that your center is promoting?

**MSS:** The biovillage involves human-centered development. It has two major components. One aspect is the conservation and improvement of natural resources, particularly soil health, water and biodiversity. The other aspect is improving the income of the farmers—higher productivity on farms and value added to primary products. For example in rice-growing areas, there is a whole series of rice by-products such as rice bran, rice husks, rice straw. Rice straw can be used for example for growing rice-straw mushrooms and you can make it into paper and board. The purpose of biovillages is to convert natural resources into wealth and jobs.

Most of the villages in the state of Pondicherry are now biovillages. Bangladesh has also started biovillages.

**SGIQ:** Why is hunger increasing?

**MSS:** Endemic hunger does not get as much media attention as famine. It is shameful that we are not achieving the number one UN Millennium Development Goal of reducing hunger and poverty by half. You cannot have unsustainable lifestyles and unacceptable poverty coexisting in the world. If we don’t achieve the MDGs, we’ll find a world full of violence, terrorism and unrest. So it is in the interests of everyone that we work hard to ensure that hunger, the most important enemy of humankind, is eradicated.□
Feature

From Industrial Agriculture to Community Culture

Interview with Grazia Mammuccini

The Tuscan government was the first region of Italy to pass a law to protect local agricultural varieties and breeds from extinction. This has helped revive not only the agriculture and ecology of Tuscany but also its economy, culture and cuisine. ARSIA, the Regional Agency for Development and Innovation in Agriculture and Forestry, has played a central part in this transformation. There are two planks to its conservation policy: one is setting up a regional seed bank, located in the botanical gardens of Lucca; the other is establishing a network of “farmer guardians.”

Maria Grazia Mammuccini is director of ARSIA, Tuscany.

SGI Quarterly: Can you describe what your agency does?

Grazia Mammuccini: The Regional Agency for Development and Innovation in Agriculture and Forestry (ARSIA) is a technical and scientific agency for the region of Tuscany, which encourages links between scientists and researchers, farmers and rural communities. In the last 15 years, we have changed farming in the region from industrial to local agriculture, based on biodiversity.

One of the positive steps toward this was the law to ensure the protection and development of the natural heritage of local breeds and varieties, which the region of Tuscany passed in two phases, in 1997 and 2004. With this law, which was overseen by ARSIA, we have identified 690 different local varieties, of which 568 are at risk of becoming extinct. This was a major undertaking for us, because farmers and local communities were able to come to us and say, “We have these varieties, come and monitor them.” If they had an identifiable variety, we could add them onto the list. We could conserve the different species and start cultivating them again. So we restarted the idea of farmer guardians, who maintain all the varieties, plant them and then collect them to keep them going, giving the seeds to the local seed bank.

We started to work on the land, getting to know the different species and to cultivate them not only for the seed bank but also for sale and consumption. Then we had to establish markets to sell these varieties which are not adapted to global markets: as there is a reduced quantity of yield, it has to be sold locally. So we also started farmers’ markets; shops for farmers to sell their products locally, and now, after 10 years of hard work, the situation in the region has really changed.

SGIQ: What was the reaction of the farmers when you started this program?

GM: It was not easy. From the farmers’ point of view, they risked not having the means to make the changes, so the intervention of a publicly funded institution was vital. If the public institution keeps going, however, the small businesses will follow the strategies for themselves. We encourage the participation of young people and women. They are very motivated for economic reasons—they can find a means of work—as well as for ethical reasons, to develop a good way of life. So we have helped a lot, by activating the network. Through the network, people exchange ideas and information and help each other out. We give them a hand, whilst alone they cannot do it. Right now, the small farmers are benefiting from biodiversity.

SGIQ: How do you maintain the seed bank?

GM: Each year we package the seeds and put them in a refrigerator to keep them at the same temperature. Then we had to establish markets to sell these varieties which are not adapted to global markets: as there is a reduced quantity of yield, it has to be sold locally. So we also started farmers’ markets; shops for farmers to sell their products locally, and now, after 10 years of hard work, the situation in the region has really changed.

“Biodiversity is not just cultivation; it is also culture and tradition—local understanding which is tied to that product.”
makes up the total bank for local strains and varieties in Tuscany. Now we have nine sections of the bank.

**SGIQ:** Are you connected with similar projects in other parts of the world?

**GM:** We started this idea in 1997, without knowing about the work of Dr. Vandana Shiva, but in 2000 we started to collaborate with her. Up until then we had thought of preserving biodiversity for scientific ends, but, with her example, we realized that by giving back seeds to agriculture, a local government institution can completely change agriculture.

### Regional Revival

**SGIQ:** How would this also change the culture and cuisine of the region?

**GM:** Because seeds are the origin of so many things, you have to actually change the economy of the region, in the sense that we have scientifically researched the local products, the local strains and varieties. Biodiversity is not just cultivation; it is also culture and tradition—local understanding which is tied to that product.

Maintaining biodiversity means looking after the plants and the animals too; and all the knowledge of how to cook them, to conserve them and to give them their own cultural dimension. This has helped many local regions rediscover their own identity, many of them through a local product. From culture comes traditions, festivals, family knowledge. The change in agriculture has helped to regenerate links at a local level.

**SGIQ:** So it’s like a renaissance?

**GM:** With a system of industrial agriculture, rural culture seems useless because all the understanding comes from technology, not from the rural population; but with the reintroduction of biodiversity, local populations have reclaimed their own. There is a very fruitful exchange between science and local knowledge, which is highly appropriate to the challenges of sustainability. It was vital for Tuscany to make this change because 80 percent of farms in Tuscany are small farms. Without this type of farming our farms would disappear in a few years.

**SGIQ:** Have the scientists also learned something?

**GM:** They have discovered the value of their own activity; they can see immediate results because their work has done something important for local communities and for the heritage of the region; this collaboration is mutually rewarding.

Maria Grazia Mammuccini lives in Montevarchi, Italy. She was previously vice president of the Commission of Agriculture and is now the director of ARSIA, Tuscany (www.arsia.toscana.it), and with her husband she runs an organic farm.

A farmers’ market: Tuscany has moved toward a direct sale system whereby farmers make direct contact with consumers at markets or in shops. This “short chain” system of selling means that the farmers set the value of their own products while allowing consumers to assess the quality for themselves and become reacquainted with farm culture.
Personal Reflections from Darfur

By Margie Buchanan-Smith

Margie Buchanan-Smith, a consultant and policy researcher on humanitarian assistance, reflects on what her experience in Darfur, Sudan, has taught her about the long-term challenges of creating food security in conflict areas.

I first flew into El Fasher, then capital of Darfur, on April 1, 1987. After leaving Khartoum and the Nile, we had flown for three hours over an apparently endless terrain of parched red desert. As the plane started to descend, I got my first glimpse of the place that was to become home for the next two years, and where I have continued to work for much longer.

From a height, El Fasher looked like a toy town—a scattering of houses around a small central lake, with tracks drawn across the sand like veins connecting the nearby villages. My first thought was to wonder at how people survived in such harsh, dry conditions. Learning about their livelihoods—how well-adapted and fine-tuned they are to that environment—has been at the heart of much of my work in Sudan since. My second thought was to marvel at the sense of space.

I had arrived to join a small team that was working with Darfur Regional Government. Funded by the British government, our job was to help build local government’s capacity to plan and direct large flows of international aid in the wake of the devastating famine of the mid-1980s. That famine explained a large part of my motivation for working in Sudan. I wanted to be part of the recovery effort.

Finding ways of preventing such terrible famines in the future seemed to me to be one of the biggest challenges the world faced. I was fortunate to find myself working on a well-conceived and sound project (not always the case in the aid world!), with excellent colleagues—both within local government and within the aid-funded team.

In the two years I lived in Darfur, drought revisited the region. Relief food had to be distributed once again, but on nothing like the same scale as during the “Famine that Kills” (as it was known locally) of the mid-1980s. Our overall aim was to find ways of strengthening people’s access to food—their “food security”—in the long term. During that time in Darfur Regional Government we set up an early-warning system, we bought up food stocks in a year of good harvest to act as a strategic reserve for future years, and we drafted a long-term food security strategy for Darfur. Unfortunately the project came to an abrupt and premature end. A coup in 1989 ended Sudan’s experiment with democracy. The new government supported Iraq in the first Gulf War; soon after, British government development aid was suspended.

The 1990s was a difficult decade in Sudan. Relations between the Sudanese government and Western governments were hostile and aid flows were limited for all but emergency interventions. During this period, I stayed connected with Darfur in a minimal way, but when the current conflict erupted in 2003, I was strongly drawn to reengage. The impact of the violence was devastating as the fabric of Darfur’s society was rapidly torn apart. I wanted to find a way of contributing to the huge international humanitarian effort that was unfolding in response, to make use of my...
longer-term perspective on Darfur, and above all to find ways of working with and supporting Darfuri friends and colleagues.

As a freelance consultant and policy researcher, I have been able to work with a number of international NGOs and UN agencies in the last four years, for example helping Oxfam draw up a strategy to support livelihoods in Darfur during the conflict (i.e., to go beyond immediate life-saving interventions), and carrying out a study for the UN’s World Food Programme (WFP) to investigate the wider impact of the world’s largest humanitarian food aid operation on livelihoods, markets and agricultural production. In all of these assignments I have been privileged to work closely with long-term Darfuri colleagues.

Beyond the Crisis

Amidst the many stories of atrocities and failure in Darfur, WFP’s work was an unsung success story. Against great odds and with very poor road infrastructure, WFP has maintained a life-saving food relief operation since 2003. Our study revealed how significant this has been as a form of income transfer as well as a source of food to those who have been displaced and to those still living in their villages but struggling to survive. Some people told us that food aid that they sold brought in up to 40 percent of their income. This has had a positive knock-on effect on the grain market.

Just as flows of locally produced cereals were drying up as local production all but collapsed, traders could switch to buying and selling food aid cereals instead. This has kept many of them in business at a time when there has been a high rate of bankruptcies amongst other traders in the marketplace. Maintaining this basic market infrastructure is extremely important for Darfur’s eventual recovery.

So how could Darfur’s story have been different and this conflict avoided? It is easy to see Darfur as an impoverished, underdeveloped territory, torn apart by war. In many ways this is an accurate perception, but it is not the whole picture. This is a multi-ethnic region with a long history of different groups living together harmoniously, with interdependent livelihoods (for example, farmers and pastoralists), and tried and tested means of resolving differences.

Darfur is also an area rich in agricultural and livestock production, renowned for the entrepreneurialism of its traders. (Darfur’s sheep, for example, produce the most sought-after mutton in the Middle East.) With the right kind of commitment, strategic vision and investment, Darfur’s development could have been secured and its story very different.

Holding that sense of potential is essential in the current crisis, and it requires a long-term perspective. But that is not a perspective that comes easily to the international aid community, driven by short-term planning horizons and agendas that are often far removed from the realities on the ground. For example, international efforts to forge a peace agreement in 2005 to end Darfur’s conflict appeared to be driven more by the political urgency of “delivering” in Washington and London than by the slow and painstaking process that was needed to ensure all key parties were involved and that an agreement was negotiated that had a chance of working.

This is not the only war that Darfur has experienced, but it is the first that has been brought to the world’s attention, triggering the world’s largest international food aid operation. That is one of the benefits of a more globalized world.

But it has also become a more complex world. One of the unfortunate consequences of having to navigate such complex structures has been a tendency to simplify the message, whether that message is an analysis of Darfur’s conflict, or what can be done about it.

Voices on the Ground

Servicing such a complex structure is extremely demanding, and that can act as a disincentive to engage locally, in Darfur, with those directly affected. Instead, meeting the political needs of those at higher international levels, whether in the capital cities of Europe, North America or the Middle East, can easily dominate.

The challenge we are yet to master is how to hold a localized analysis, that is true to and gives voice to the reality on the ground, while at the same time influencing the processes and structures within the wider international community.

These reflections on the Darfur crisis have resonance for food security planning more generally. Development is a long-term process requiring long-term perspectives. Short-term and immediate responses must always be balanced by more considered and more strategic longer-term plans, vision and commitment. A more sophisticated and interconnected international system must still value and depend upon local-level analyses, and give space for local voices in the powerful international forums that now play such a dominant role in our world.

Margie Buchanan-Smith has worked as coordinator of the Humanitarian Policy Group at the U.K.’s Overseas Development Institute and as head of the Emergencies Unit at ActionAid.
The work of farmers is essential for our survival: the life of our societies is dependent on their efforts. Yet there is a tendency to forget this and even to look down on farmers. For a society to lose sight of its close dependence on the soil and the people who cultivate it is ultimately to lose regard for life and drift toward barbarity. This perspective, expressed by SGI President Daisaku Ikeda in a number of essays and speeches, was the inspiration for the formation of the Soka Gakkai’s Farming Communities Division in October 1973. “Valuing food means valuing life, valuing labor and human beings,” Mr. Ikeda writes. “That is the very foundation of civilization.”

It is difficult for anyone who isn’t a farmer to fully appreciate the struggles involved in agricultural work, which is pitted always against the vagaries of nature, the variability of markets and the flow of young people out of rural communities and into the cities. The Farming Communities Division, like other vocational groups within the Soka Gakkai, assists its members by providing a network of spiritual support and encouragement. It is also a forum through which members are inspired to engage with the Soka Gakkai’s broader vision of social contribution.

Mr. Ikeda, himself the son of seaweed farmers, has encapsulated this vision in encouragement for the division’s members to become pillars of their respective communities—“great trees unshaken by the fiercest winds and firm stakes supporting your neighbors in your communities.”

This is in line with the Soka Gakkai’s core philosophy that change in society begins with change in the life of a single individual.

The annual meetings of the division, held at numerous locations around Japan, are attended by more than 200,000 people, not only those engaged directly in farming but also retailers and consumers.

Members’ Stories

Kiichi Saito, 38, first began to think about the importance of farming while working on a reforestation project for a Japanese NGO tackling desertification in Mongolia. Working with poor Mongolian communities opened his eyes to another pervasive problem, that of child malnutrition. When his job with the NGO ended, he went to the U.S.A. to study agriculture, with the hope of eventually being able to somehow contribute to “a revival of agriculture in Mongolia.”

He decided a necessary step would be to get practical experience of farming in his own country, and he returned to Japan two years later with that determination. Coming from a non-farming family in the suburbs of Tokyo, without access to land, few finances and little real experience posed a number of challenges. One of the things that kept his determination alive was Mr. Ikeda’s writings dedicated to the Farming Communities Division. “Farming is not a very prestigious job in Japan,” Kiichi remarks, “but his encouragement made me realize that it is the noblest occupation. Every time I read it, I felt renewed and refreshed.”

There were a number of unused plots of land on the outskirts of his city, which had become garbage dumping grounds. Kiichi tracked down the owners to ask about leasing them for farming. His persistence eventually won out, and one landowner agreed to let him cultivate a 0.6-hectare plot. When he began clearing the land, offers of help and other vacant land started to trickle in from people in the community impressed by his determination. These included the use of a
greenhouse from which, in 2006, four years after his return to Japan, he harvested his first crop of tomatoes. These are now eagerly bought by local residents.

One of his discoveries has been that by mixing Mongolian rock salt into the soil he gets tomatoes that are particularly flavorful. He talks happily about one customer who informed him that her son will only eat tomatoes grown by him, because they are so much tastier than those from the supermarket. “When I heard that, it made all my hardships worthwhile!” he says.

After many struggles and his fair share of failures, Kiichi is now successfully cultivating eight hectares of wheat and rice as well as his greenhouse tomatoes. “I get a lot of positive feedback from people. My greatest joy is to be able to grow food that makes people happy,” he says. “My goal now is to bring youth from Mongolia here and train them in agricultural techniques. It’s a drop in the ocean, but a drop that will eventually expand and contribute to friendship between our two countries.”

**Rice That Nurtures Life**

Yoshihiko Watanabe was born into an old farming family in Japan’s Fukushima Prefecture. He initially went into business after graduating from university. When he later decided to take up the family profession, he was determined to do something new. “I was inspired by Mr. Ikeda’s encouragement that we should take on the most difficult challenges,” he says.

He visited various rice production regions to learn about innovative growing methods. His goal was to produce rice that surpassed the Koshihikari variety, considered to be Japan’s highest-quality rice. After much painstaking experimentation he achieved his goal with “Milky Queen,” a variety that is now rated superior to Koshihikari and has been featured on television, eliciting huge sales through a direct mail-order business that Yoshihiko set up.

However, a conversation with an elderly woman inspired a complete change of direction. “Her husband had a kidney ailment and had to eat specially processed food. She complained that it cost several times more than normal food and tasted horrible. Her husband was really frustrated about having to eat it every day.”

This inspired Yoshihiko to begin researching the production of what he calls new grain character rice varieties—hybrid rice varieties with specific properties that make them suitable for people with certain medical conditions: low allergen rice for the growing number of eczema and allergy sufferers, high amylo rice for people with diabetes, low protein rice for people with kidney ailments.

Yoshihiko has successfully cultivated a number of new varieties of rice targeted to specific medical conditions and is currently engaged in negotiations with the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries to further develop this field. “I’m determined to create varieties of rice that respond to people’s needs, not only varieties that sell successfully,” he says.

He adds: “Rice varieties high in amylo and low in protein are better grown in poor paddy fields than in fertile ones. It’s usually thought that good rice doesn’t grow well in poor soil, but every paddy field has its individual characteristics and, I’m inclined to think, its own appropriate mission.”

Yoshihiko is now exploring ways of sharing Japan’s farming know-how and appropriate technologies with other countries, which he sees as an important potential aspect of the country’s overseas development assistance program. “Japan has some of the best rice production technology and varieties,” he confirms. He is also exploring the possibility of using idle farmland to grow food for a global food bank to help address food shortages. “I hope my efforts might inspire a younger generation of farmers and help them see that there is a lot that can be done.”

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“For a society to lose sight of its close dependence on the soil and the people who cultivate it is ultimately for it to lose regard for life.”

© Seikyo Shimbun
A vast canvas of scintillating blues and greens stretched before my gaze: the azure sky, the emerald forest and the deep sapphire of the ancient waters of Lake Towada.

It was August 1994, 15 years since my last visit to Aomori Prefecture in Japan’s Tohoku region. The previous year, Japan’s rice crop had suffered the most serious cold-weather damage in almost a century, and Aomori was hit especially hard. Some even harkened back to the nearly forgotten famines that had wracked the area in earlier centuries. That made the sight of the flourishing rice fields near the lake all the more cause for joy.

The history of the Tohoku region—the northeastern part of Japan—is the tale of humanity’s struggle with Nature. In the past, no fish lived in Lake Towada. The story of the introduction of sockeye salmon to the lake by Sadayuki Wainai (1858–1922) is known throughout Japan. Realizing that the lives of local residents would be greatly improved if fish could be harvested from the immense body of water, Wainai engaged in a long succession of experiments before finally meeting with success. He endured criticism and abuse and exhausted his personal finances until, after two decades of uninterrupted endeavor, at last fish swam in the lake waters.

A “dead lake” created by a volcanic eruption was transformed through human effort into the waters of life.

Protecting the environment is not the same as leaving it completely untouched. In Japan’s case, at least, the natural environment has been enormously enriched through human effort. If people of previous generations had not planted trees on the mountains, today’s lush forests would not exist. A tree takes 50 or 100 years to mature; the person who plants it rarely sees it reach maturity. Japan is a green archipelago because those of former times had the foresight to diligently plant trees for their descendants, for future generations.

With Japan’s mountainous terrain, much of the level land in use today was created through human effort—cleared, terraced and irrigated by redirecting the courses of streams and rivers. The Japanese people created through their hard work the arable land they needed for paddies to grow rice.

The Oirase River flows east from Lake Towada toward the ocean. The stretch of the river below its source is known as Oirase Gorge, and the greenery on both sides of the tumbling waters as I strolled along the bank with my friends was almost overpoweringly rich and vibrant.

The Sambongihara Plain near Lake Towada was also transformed into fertile agricultural land with water drawn from the Oirase River. Prior to that it had been a barren wasteland without a single tree. After five years of nearly superhuman effort by the Tsuto Nitobe family in the mid-19th century, the land produced an initial harvest of 45 bales of rice. When at last the Nitobes saw rice plants (ine) rising from the fields, they...
celebrated by naming one of their grandsons Inenosuke. The boy eventually grew up to be the famous educator and under-secretary-general of the League of Nations Inazo Nitobe (1862–1933).

It was through this kind of tireless effort and hard work that rice paddies were created throughout Japan, on both mountain slopes and level plains. Each and every paddy has a story. Each irrigation ditch represents the lifeblood of our ancestors.

In the summer, the paddies across Japan are filled with water, from which rise green rice shoots—the life-supporting sustenance of the Japanese people. These paddies are another form of the waters of life.

Nor do they only produce rice. The water in the paddies seeps down into the water table, feeding the rivers and helping avert ground sinkage. Evaporation from paddies cools the air. Rice paddies protect the natural environment and human health and are in many ways one of Japan’s great treasures.

The Heart of a Society

Rice is life. Rice paddies are the waters of life.

One of the very first things for which I prayed after becoming president of the Soka Gakkai was a rich harvest. We cannot live without food. Valuing food means valuing life, valuing labor and human beings, and that is the very foundation of civilization—which is nothing other than a way of living that values life.

In addition to education, the professions most concerned with nurturing life are agriculture, forestry and aquaculture. How noble they are! At the same time, there are many other professions dedicated to protecting life, and those laboring toward that end are truly civilized people who deserve the highest honor and recognition.

On the other hand, a society that does not genuinely value food or the agricultural workers who produce it is barbaric and has little regard for human beings or life. It is only to be expected that such a society will be troubled in every respect.

When farming communities die, the heart of the nation dies.

Throughout history, the Tōhoku region has consistently been subjected to oppression and exploitation by the central authorities. Even its way of speaking has been disdained, and in the past students were rebuked for speaking their own dialect, and forced to wear a placard around their necks as a humiliating form of punishment.

What an abomination! What is wrong with local forms of speech? They are the living language of the people of a particular region, their birthright, born from the land that gave them life. They are the expression of the spirit of love of home, an essential part of one’s identity.

So-called outlying regions are not inferior in any way to the centers of power. Since sovereignty resides in the people, wherever they live is a center of power.

In May 2002, an All-China Youth Federation (ACYF) delegation came to Yamagata Prefecture in Tōhoku after visiting many other areas of Japan. At first, local Soka Gakkai members were at a loss as to what sights they could show the members of the Chinese delegation, thinking their home region had nothing special to interest visitors. They finally decided to show the Chinese youth the ordinary farming communities of the area.

When they brought their visitors to a farm, they were surprised to see them suddenly become animated. It turned out that many of them were from farming communities in China. One of the delegation members was a popular singer in his homeland. “When I was a boy, I planted rice, too. In China, most fields are planted by hand—like this!” he exclaimed, vividly pantomiming the motions. Suddenly the entire group began to talk enthusiastically, and a discussion of Chinese and Japanese agricultural practices began on the earthen embankment running between the paddies.

The group also visited a cherry orchard at harvest time. The head of the ACYF delegation, viewing the cherries hanging from the trees like sparkling jewels, commented that it was his first time to see cherry trees. He expressed astonishment at their beauty, and he and the other members asked many questions about cherry cultivation.

It was an eye-opening experience for the Soka Gakkai youth who arranged the tour. One of them remarked: “I realized that agricultural products are also a kind of culture that can transcend national boundaries just like great works of music and art. Farmers communicate with people around the world through the foods they produce.”

Life knows no boundaries; that is why farming communities, which are devoted to producing and nurturing life, are directly linked to the entire world.

I have called the 21st century the century of life. It is the green century, the century of water and earth. Farming regions like Tōhoku are not the distant backwaters they are sometimes thought to be, but the very center of things, the cutting edge of our times.”
Activities for Nuclear Weapons Abolition

On April 15, the exhibition “From a Culture of Violence to a Culture of Peace: Transforming the Human Spirit” opened at the City Hall Gallery in Oslo, Norway. Guests were welcomed by SGI Vice President Hiromasa Ikeda, who in his address noted the important role Oslo has played in peace efforts over the years.

Speaking at the opening, former Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik said that visitors to the exhibition had been reminded of perhaps the most important question of our time, one which relates to the physical and spiritual survival of humanity.

Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre emphasized the importance of working for nuclear abolition. “What makes human life unique is the scale of our choice, the degree to which we are free to act for good or evil, to help or to harm, to choose between a culture of violence and a culture of peace—the very title of this exhibition.”

In a message for the opening, SGI President Daisaku Ikeda urged: “We must remind people that these weapons...are fundamentally incompatible with the conscience of humankind.”

Later the same day, a seminar, “Nordic Initiatives for Nuclear Abolition,” was held at the Nobel Institute, moderated by Stein Tonnesson, director of the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO). Speakers were Steffen Kongstad, director general of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Sverre Lodgaard of the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI).

SGI representatives then traveled on to Rome to participate in a conference on “Overcoming Nuclear Dangers” cosponsored by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Nuclear Security Project and The World Political Forum. Attended by Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini, former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and former senior U.S. administration officials, the conference was a two-day strategy session among political and civil society leaders on ways to free the world of nuclear weapons.

From May 5 to 11, SGI representatives including Hirotsugu Terasaki, executive director of the SGI Office of Peace Affairs, participated in meetings held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York preparatory to the 2010 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference.

On May 11, the SGI held a symposium “Nuclear Abolition and Human Security: Shared action to meet a common threat.” Speakers were Kazuo Tase, chief of the Human Security Unit, UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs; Patricia Lewis, deputy director of the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies; and Kathleen Sullivan, education consultant to the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs. The event, which was cosponsored by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), explored how the perspectives of human security can be brought to bear in countering the threat of nuclear weapons.

On May 7, SGI-USA’s New York Culture Center hosted a visit by five hibakusha (survivors of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) who had traveled to present their testimonies to participants in the official NPT meetings. Over 400 SGI-USA members welcomed them and listened to their accounts. One of the group was a 12-year-old girl, Yuki Tominaga, who accompanied her grandmother, hibakusha Emiko Okada, and who also suffers health problems linked to the bombing.
SGI Hosts Discussion on Climate Change

SGI representatives took part in the 17th UN Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) session held at the UN Headquarters in New York from May 4 to 8. On May 6, the SGI and the CSD Education Caucus co-organized a related panel discussion on adaptation to climate change entitled “Voices from the Frontlines.” Focusing on the need to combine traditional knowledge and scientific knowledge in order to empower people to prepare for life in a changing environment, the event brought together perspectives from the Arctic and Africa and a report from the Indigenous Peoples’ Global Summit on Climate Change, held in Anchorage, Alaska, from April 20 to 24.

Nick Illauq, cochair of the Ittaq Heritage and Research Centre and Deputy Mayor of Clyde River, in Baffin Island, Nunavut, Canada, introduced innovative ways his community is using GPS technology and traditional wisdom to map hunting grounds and warn of dangers such as thinning ice. Arame Tall of Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies described work she undertook with the

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in West and Central Africa to bring results of climate change science through Red Cross networks to the local level. A short film made by villagers in Mphunga Village in Malawi to share climate change adaptation techniques with other nearby communities was also shown. The film was facilitated by SGI member Fernanda Baumhardt with the Malawian Red Cross.

The event was also cosponsored by the Indigenous Information Network, the CSD Indigenous Peoples’ Caucus and the CSD Youth Caucus.

On May 4, SGI representative Joan Anderson also introduced the SGI’s philosophy of grassroots empowerment in tackling environmental education as a panelist in a symposium entitled “Common Ground: Science and Religion in Dialogue for a Sustainable Future” organized by the Center for the Study of Science and Religion, part of the Earth Institute at Columbia University.

“Seeds of Change” in Iceland and India

The SGI’s exhibition “Seeds of Change: The Earth Charter and Human Potential” was on show at Reykjavik City Hall in Iceland from March 8 to 26. President of Iceland Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson spoke at the opening. He thanked the SGI members for providing the opportunity for students to learn more about our collective responsibility for the planet and to see from the examples the exhibition showcases that it is possible to effect change.

Árni Pétur Gudnason, a well-known Icelandic actor, was the event’s MC, and singer Anna Klara Georgsdóttir performed. Students from a local high school dramatized parts of the Earth Charter. Reykjavik’s Board of Education for elementary schools introduced the exhibition to all the elementary schools in Reykjavik and arranged for school groups to visit the exhibition.

The “Seeds of Change” exhibition was also hosted by Bharat (India) Soka Gakkai (BSG) in the Noida area near Delhi, from April 3 to 5, where it was opened by former Indian Ambassador to Nepal Deb Mukharji at the Khaitan Public School. Six thousand visitors attended the showing.

A Kids’ Corner provided a space for children, including students from underprivileged schools, to creatively express their opinions about the environment through art, poetry and drawing.
March 2009 marked the three-year point in a Bharat (India) Soka Gakkai (BSG) project to support children affected by the tsunami that struck the coast of India on December 26, 2004. Following the tsunami, BSG began looking for ways to address the nutrition and education-related needs of children living in Nagapattinam, one of the worst-hit areas in Tamil Nadu. In 2005, the BSG Trust signed an agreement with the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) and donated a grant of 3,380,450 rupees (US$ 72,000) for a project to support affected children implemented by the Chennai-based NGO Guild of Service (Central).

A survey to identify the most vulnerable children found that while those who were orphaned by the disaster were already receiving support from the government, many of those who had lost one parent were in serious need of assistance. Often the children had been taken out of school to work.

Four villages were selected for the project, and 47 children were enrolled, all first-generation learners. Each child receives food for his or her family and further annual funds to cover school fees, uniforms and supplies. The food packages were designed in consultation between an MSSRF nutrition specialist and village elders.

Usually the school dropout rate increases after a disaster, but the BSG project has helped ensure that children, especially girls, stay in school. The project’s success is exemplified by the experience of Saraswathi, aged 16, who lives in Thiruvengedu. On the day of the tsunami, her brother saved her from drowning. “I like school because I have lots of friends there,” she says. “Calamities will come, we need to be courageous in life. I want to finish school and become the best nurse in the district.”
Tree Planting in Malaysia

On March 21, about 50 Soka Gakkai Malaysia (SGM) members participated in a community tree planting activity at the Raja Musa Forest Reserve in Selangor. The event was organized by Malaysia’s Global Environment Centre, Selangor State Forestry Department and CIMB Islamic Bank’s EcoSave program. The reforestation project, involving around 500 volunteers from various groups, replanted trees in the fire-damaged Raja Musa peat swamp forest. Peat swamps play an important ecological role and when damaged or drained release significant amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, contributing to global warming.

Promoting Peace in Canada

On February 26, SGI-Canada representatives led a “Victory Over Violence” (VOV) workshop at a teachers’ conference held in Winnipeg. They also brought the VOV exhibition to the event. The Associated Schools Project Network (ASPnet), linked to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), organized the conference. Some 80 principals, teachers and national and provincial government representatives attended. Participants reported that the workshop enabled them to better understand the effects of passive violence, and many expressed interest in bringing the VOV exhibition to their local schools.

On April 2, the Hon. Douglas Roche, O.C., delivered the inaugural lecture of SGI-Canada’s Distinguished Speakers Series at the SGI-Canada Toronto Culture Centre. Mr. Roche, a Canadian parliamentarian and diplomat, spoke about the importance of shifting from a culture of war to a culture of peace and of “believing that we can make a difference,” basing his remarks on two of his recent books, *The Human Right to Peace* and *Global Conscience*.

Mr. Roche served as the Canadian Ambassador for Disarmament and as chair of the United Nations Disarmament Committee. From 1998 to 2008, he headed the Middle Powers Initiative, an international network of eight non-governmental organizations specializing in nuclear disarmament issues.

China Youth, Friendship Delegations in Japan

Delegations from the China-Japan Friendship Association (CJFA) and the All-China Youth Federation (ACYF) visited Japan in March and April. ACYF is the largest youth organization in China, with 370 million members. The group was in Japan at the invitation of the Soka Gakkai youth as part of an annual cultural and educational exchange between the Soka Gakkai and ACYF initiated during SGI President Daisaku Ikeda’s sixth visit to China in 1984. During their visit, the ACYF delegation traveled to Hokkaido, attending a Japan-China Youth Environmental Forum at the Soka Gakkai Hokkaido Culture Center in Sapporo on April 6. CJFA Vice President Jin Dunquang, visiting the Soka Gakkai Headquarters in Shinanomachi, Tokyo, on March 18, expressed his hope for the development of friendships between the younger people of China and Japan, and Soka Gakkai President Minoru Harada stressed his desire to further promote Sino-Japanese friendship through cultural exchanges.

Interfaith Conference in Tunisia

From April 20 to 22, representatives of the Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research participated in a conference on “Justice and Peace in the Holy Scriptures and in Philosophical Thinking” in Nabeul, the Republic of Tunisia, organized by the Ben Ali Chair for the Dialogue of Civilizations and Religions. Established at the initiative of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the Ben Ali Chair promotes interfaith dialogue as an essential instrument of peace and understanding in international relations. The conference brought together a number of eminent scholars, representatives of civil society, writers, journalists and artists from around the world. SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, founder of the Toda Institute, sent a message of support, and Institute Director Dr. Olivier Urbain spoke on Mr. Ikeda’s philosophy of peace.
On January 2, 1942, just weeks after Pearl Harbor, Japanese troops marched into Manila, occupying the Philippines until General MacArthur drove them out in early 1945. The Japanese occupation of the Philippines was a period of brutality and oppression, and left lasting scars in the relationship between the two countries in the postwar years.

Many in Japan, however, have refused to confront or apologize for the horrors committed during this period of brutality. In the words of Dr. Jose Abueva, former president of the University of the Philippines, “Japanese leaders still stubbornly refused to admit, and apologize for, the grievous wrongs they had committed in the countries they invaded in World War II. Japanese history textbooks purposely concealed the truth or justified the wrongs. Fellow Asians were outraged by the insensitivity and dishonesty of the Japanese. How could they gloss over the sordid truth that so many had witnessed and endured, recorded and remembered?”

Dr. Abueva himself is one such witness to the atrocities of those times: his parents were brutally murdered by the occupying Japanese army just a few months before the islands’ liberation. It is against this backdrop that the efforts of SGI President Daisaku Ikeda to build peace and understanding between the two countries can be understood. He has consistently confronted the truths of history, insisting that the Japanese people face up to the injustices and atrocities of the past. He sees cultural and educational exchanges involving the citizens of both countries as the most certain means of building trust and friendship to ensure this tragic history is never repeated.

Ikeda made his first visit to the Philippines in April 1991 at the invitation of the University of the Philippines, at the time headed by Dr. Abueva. There he received an honorary doctorate in law and delivered a lecture to the college of business administration.

The visit came just a few years after the nonviolent “People Power” revolution of 1986 had swept aside the Marcos regime. This in many ways marked the culmination of the independence struggle that dated back to the 19th century and the liberation movement inspired by the great Filipino hero José Rizal (1861–96). A prolific writer whose output included essays, novels and poetry, Rizal was fluent in a number of Asian and European languages and was qualified as a medical doctor. An advocate of popular empowerment and national independence through education, Rizal was executed by the Spanish authorities on December 30, 1896, a day still commemorated in the Philippines.

As Ikeda stated in his lecture, “Is it not correct to consider the revolution of February 1986 as a great step forward toward the realization of the dream Rizal cherished? The fact that an entrenched dictatorship of 17 years was toppled through the power of the people, without recourse to violence, is an extraordinary accomplishment that will shine brilliantly in the annals of world history.”

The day after his visit to the University of the Philippines, Ikeda met with President Corazon Aquino. Aquino’s husband, Ninoy, had been a leader for democratic reform who was assassinated within minutes of returning from exile on August 21, 1983. His widow, Corazon, determined to take up the struggle, and unleashed a peaceful revolution which restored democracy to the Philippines.

In a poem he gave Aquino when they met, Ikeda described these events as “a grand drama of reversal by the people’s hand / It was the triumph of a husband and wife’s beautiful love. / . . . Against the threat of tanks / the people formed ‘human chains’ / to turn them back. / ‘Into the streets!’ they cried, / ‘Let us show them the power of the people!’ / It was a magnificent victory of nonviolence.”
During his second visit to the Philippines in 1993, Ikeda met with President Fidel V. Ramos, Aquino’s successor. President Ramos spoke of the importance of Japan’s role in working for the peace and security of the Asia-Pacific region, Ikeda expressed his desire to promote peace, cultural and educational exchanges toward that common goal.

A Bridge of Culture

The next day, Ikeda attended the opening of the University of the Philippines’ facility for international educational exchanges, “The House for Peace (Daisaku Ikeda Hall),” at the university’s Diliman campus in Quezon City. At the ceremony, quoting José Rizal’s words that “Education brings security and peace to a nation,” he expressed his desire that the new facility would bring together the world’s leaders and scholars in their quest for peace.

Soka University in Japan, which was established by Ikeda in 1971, has been engaged in academic exchanges with the University of the Philippines since 1988. The Soka Gakkai-affiliated Min-On Concert Association has also promoted numerous cultural exchanges between the two countries. The first such event was the “Pearls of the South Seas—Music and Dance from the Philippines” tour in March 1990 by the Ramon Obusan Folkloric Group. The prestigious Ballet Philippines troupe has also toured Japan twice under the auspices of Min-On.

These performances have been supported by the Cultural Center of the Philippines, whose former president, Maria Teresa Escoda Roxas, met with Ikeda in 1991. Recalling how her parents suffered at the hands of the Japanese militarists during World War II, Mrs. Roxas described how an encounter with Japanese traditional arts had finally enabled her to see the Japanese through new eyes. “I came to love Japanese arts, and through them, at last, to open my heart to the Japanese people. Art can lead us to transcend love and hate. Culture is the strongest tie that can bind human beings together.”

A further example of how such ties of culture can be created is “Happy Tales,” a series of animated stories in the Tagalog language that have been shown by television channels throughout the Philippines. The 12 animated films are based on children’s stories by Ikeda, including “The Cherry Tree” and “The River of Peace.” The series won an award for the most outstanding television program for children from the Southeast Asian Foundation for Children’s Television in December 2004.

Ikeda’s third visit to the Philippines took place in 1998 at the invitation of the Order of the Knights of Rizal, an organization dedicated to promoting the vision of José Rizal. It was the centenary of Philippine independence, when the Philippines cast off the yoke of colonial rule and became the first democracy in Asia, fulfilling the dream of the martyred national hero.

Ikeda received the Grand Knight Cross of Rizal in 1996, and the First Rizal International Peace Award in 1998. At the award ceremony, the Supreme Commander of the Order of the Knights of Rizal, Sir Rogelio M. Quiambao, said that Rizal and Ikeda were inspired by similar humanistic ideals.

In his acceptance speech, Ikeda pledged himself to the effort to share the spirit of Rizal with the world, to convey his message of peace and nonviolence into the coming century.

“Before us,” he stated, “lies the vast path that Dr. Rizal pioneered at the risk, and finally the cost, of his life. This path is first of all a path toward victory for ordinary people, for the common person.” Referring to Japan’s invasion of the Philippines, he continued, “To ensure that there is never a repetition of this cruelty and barbarity, we must create waves of friendship, a flowing river of peace that deeply and firmly binds together the hearts of our young people. It is my belief that cultural and educational exchanges are the means to achieve this; I have devoted myself to this effort, and will continue to do so.”

SGI-Philippines youth members have an ongoing tree-planting project in different parts of the country.
Olivier Meulenyzer is from Brussels, Belgium. After working as a chef in a number of restaurants, he ran a catering business for eight years. In March 2009, he opened his own restaurant, “O.”

Tripti Khettry, originally from Kolkata, India, now lives in London where she is senior chef de partie at “The Collection,” a fashionable restaurant and nightclub that serves pan-Asian cuisine.

Olivier and Tripti are both members of the Marronier University group, open to professional chefs within SGI in Europe.

How did you become a chef and what does your job entail?

**Tripti:** Although I was always fond of cooking, I studied fine arts during college. I would cook for friends who praised my cooking abilities and encouraged me to use them. At a point when I felt stuck with my art, I started thinking about doing something with my culinary skills. I had begun to practice Buddhism and, bolstered by that, decided to take the plunge. I was fortunate to be able to receive training at a five-star hotel in Kolkata, India. The first thing that I had to learn was that this was an industry, not home cooking; it was very hard physical work over long hours in the kitchen, and there were many different kinds of skills to acquire.

My job entails checking my mise en place—the preparation of ingredients, etc., for the shift—knowing how many people I need to cater to and, most importantly, working as part of a team.

**Olivier:** I got my taste for good food from my grandmother and mother. When I was around 11 years old, I knew that I wanted to be a chef. I started my first internship in the kitchen of a restaurant owned by family friends and studied at the CERIA culinary school in Brussels. During school holidays, I would take whatever opportunity I could get to work in kitchens. For me it was such a pleasure.

My job consists of preparing all that is served in our restaurant with all the love I can, and providing the best to our customers.

What are the keys to being a good chef?

**Olivier:** Above all, you must love what you do. This is what enables you to train hard for several years to gain the experience necessary to continue in this difficult profession without burning out.

I try to bring happiness to people, create a connection with them, and give them the best of myself with all my heart.

**Tripti:** I feel one of the first key points is good hygiene. Also, your ability to deal with stress: the kitchen can be quite crazy during service—it’s like a battleground. If you get bogged down by what’s happening around you, you cannot deliver. Each day my goal is to provide complete satisfaction to my customers and, most importantly, not to betray their trust. A good chef is like a good doctor: your customers/patients trust you completely—that’s why they come to you.

Do you usually cook for yourself or do you prefer to eat food that other people have cooked?

**Tripti:** I love cooking, creating, but I don’t like cooking just for myself. If I do, it is simple food. I love cooking for my family and friends. At the same
time I enjoy when they cook for me, especially my mother, because I grew up on the food that she cooked for me. **Olivier:** I prefer to eat what others cook. I have difficulty eating what I prepare. For me, cooking a dish is already eating it.

**What are the important considerations for you when you buy food for the kitchen?**

**Olivier:** That I like what I see. I do my own shopping, and that’s how I come up with ideas for new dishes. I am very interested in learning about the ingredients, where they come from and their stories.

**Tripti:** I would like to buy only locally grown food so that I can contribute to protecting the environment, but in the restaurant I work for we have to import a lot of our ingredients.

**What are the most enjoyable aspects of your work and what are the most challenging?**

**Olivier:** I enjoy sharing my cooking with customers. I try to offer a unique and special journey that will delight their senses. The harmony between the culinary adventure and a warm welcome is what gives customers joy.

It’s a challenge to continue to question oneself and the world around one with a spirit of discovery—a process of continual evolution.

**Tripti:** I love my job, so I long to go to work. My team is very good and a mixture of different cultures and ages. We are all very personally supportive of each other. The challenging part is the same, human relationships, because we spend so much time together. There are days when people feel negative and cranky. Some days your seniors might be arrogant or partial and that’s what I find most challenging—when we are not united and there is a lack of respect.

**How does your Buddhist practice influence your approach to your work?**

**Tripti:** Buddhism helps me to have control over my negativity and maintain a positive outlook. The financial crisis has closed down restaurants that have been around for decades and are part of the history of London. My colleagues are anxious about our future. Buddhism teaches that the environment is a reflection of the inner self: our deepest thoughts—our fears or our sense of confidence—are reflected in our surroundings. I am convinced that as long as we are positive when we take action, we will have positive results. The greatest thing that I have learned from Buddhism is that I might not like or get along with everyone, but I must still respect them. This is something I am trying to incorporate in my character, to respect everyone and not to judge anyone.

**Olivier:** My Buddhist practice gives me confidence and strength to believe in my dreams. It gives me the courage to take on this new adventure of running my own restaurant and not worry on days when things are quiet. A powerful groundswell of friends and family supported our effort to transform our catering business into a restaurant. The big challenge is to keep going and to make it a success.

**What do you see as the relationship between food and culture?**

**Olivier:** As a chef, one always has one’s own culture as a backdrop. Since I was young I have been immersed in a variety of culinary universes and my kitchen is a mix of these influences—French, Belgian, Japanese, Thai, Mediterranean. This gives me a wonderful opportunity to open a dialogue about taste and good food; an opportunity to talk about common points in all the cuisines of the world, as we all have the same basic ingredients to draw on. Eating is synonymous with life, because food is what enables us to live. In every culture food provides occasions for the bringing together of family and friends.

**Tripti:** From olden times, cultural festivals were always centered on the harvest. Before humans started to travel, food was seasonal and locally grown, hence this relationship. In every celebration, and even at the sad moments in our lives, food is the most important part. Even a depressed person can be made to smile and change their outlook when we cook something for them that they have enjoyed in the past.
Our lives are supported by an intricate web woven by the effort and consideration of countless people. The unseen daily exertions of others are behind each of the innumerable elements that sustain and enhance our daily existence, from the food we eat to the products and amenities we use. Moment by moment, the natural environment supports and makes possible our lives. Gratitude is the joyful recognition of this fact.

While the admonition to “count one’s blessings” may seem trite, in times of trial a sense of gratitude for what is good in our lives can ground us and provide a basis for meeting and overcoming difficulties. In this sense, gratitude is the key to unlocking a more open and rewarding perspective on life. Feelings of appreciation are always accompanied by the elevation of one’s state of life and the broadening of one’s perspective. And, the more our life expands, the more profound our sense of gratitude becomes, to the point where we can feel appreciation even for the problems we face in life.

SGI President Daisaku Ikeda frequently calls on young people to take on difficult challenges, in order to be able to grow. To be able to look back on one’s struggles with appreciation is proof of spiritual victory. To be able to greet even the most severe hardships with a sense of gratitude, rooted in a firm confidence of ultimate triumph, is an expression of the free, unfettered life condition of Buddhahood.

This is why the 13th-century Buddhist priest Nichiren could state that he felt the deepest gratitude toward Hei no Saemon-no-jo, the government official who persecuted him and attempted to have him killed. It was precisely because of Hei no Saemon-no-jo’s persecutions that Nichiren was able to test and prove the power of his convictions, drawing forth from within profound strength and sense of purpose.

Nichiren’s letters to his followers almost always open with a detailed and heartfelt expression of thanks for their offerings and support. Citing various examples from history, Nichiren writes of gratitude as an essential component of our humanity. Daisaku Ikeda has described it as the very essence of Buddhism.

In contrast, ingratitude is an outgrowth of the arrogant delusion that we are fundamentally detached and separate from each other and our surroundings. To lose sight of the reality of our mutual interdependence makes us prey to the destructive impulses of envy and greed.

Nichiren describes three categories of people on whom our lives depend and to whom we owe gratitude. These are, in the language of his time, the sovereign, the teacher and the parent. Our gratitude toward our parents is elemental, since it is through them that our individual lives arose and that we are connected to the larger web of existence. The teacher in the Buddhist context refers specifically to one’s mentor in practice and faith. In a broader sense it refers to the indispensable role of education in human life and all those who help shape the development of our character through their positive influence. The sovereign, in contemporary context, refers to society itself.

In this sense, sovereign, teacher and parent all function to enhance life. They can even be understood to represent the fundamentally compassionate nature of the universe, the core evolutionary impulse of life to move toward fulfillment and expression of its potential.

Maintaining a sense of appreciation connects our lives to this impulse. To honor and act on that sense of appreciation—to “repay one’s debt of gratitude”—is to act in accordance with the core direction of the cosmos. It is to make efforts to develop our character, to support that which enhances and oppose that which diminishes life, to take action based on a courageous and humanitarian spirit—this is what gives full, beautiful expression to our humanity and the inherent dignity of life. This could be considered the core spirit of religion. It is the essential focus of the SGI movement, which centers on the question of what each of us can do now to benefit those around us. Peace and the transformation of society begin from the exercise of this spirit in our immediate surroundings.□
New Antinuclear Resources

On April 2, the SGI launched a new website, www.peoplesdecade.org, as part of its People’s Decade for Nuclear Abolition, which began on September 8, 2007, following a proposal by SGI President Daisaku Ikeda commemorating the 50th anniversary of second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda’s antinuclear declaration.

The site features facts about nuclear weapons, experts’ views and the experiences of survivors of the nuclear bombing of Japanese cities in August 1945. These are excerpted from a new DVD produced by the Soka Gakkai Women’s Peace Committee, “Testimonies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Women Speak Out for Peace.” Another educational tool is a downloadable version of the exhibition “From a Culture of Violence to a Culture of Peace: Transforming the Human Spirit.”

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The Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is a worldwide association of 82 constituent organizations with membership in 192 countries and territories. In the service of its members and of society at large, the SGI centers its activities on developing positive human potentialities for hope, courage and altruistic action.

Rooted in the life-affirming philosophy of Nichiren Buddhism, members of the SGI share a commitment to the promotion of peace, culture and education. The scope and nature of the activities conducted in each country vary in accordance with the culture and characteristics of that society. They all grow, however, from a shared understanding of the inseparable linkages that exist between individual happiness and the peace and development of all humanity.

As a nongovernmental organization (NGO) with formal ties to the United Nations, the SGI is active in the fields of humanitarian relief and public education, with a focus on peace, sustainable development and human rights.