

the Buddhist sects. In fact, this question seems to be regarded as inconsequential. Soka Gakkai experience Buddhism as a life philosophy and way of being in the world which is in some ways closer to everyday life than the more established Japanese Buddhism which typically focuses on funeral rites. Buddhist practice here involves maintaining a constructive forward-looking attitude and trying to encourage others to do the same. This is generally regarded as involving a spiritual transformation.

Soka Gakkai members remind themselves of Nichiren and his struggles in 13th century Japan. One of his most famous writings, a text most people in Japan will have heard of, is *On establishing the correct teaching for peace of the land* (1260). Written at a time when Japan was facing a number of natural and social disasters, Nichiren proclaimed these the outcome of incorrect teachings and ways of thinking. Yet, the meaning he attached to this changed over time: from a focus on avoiding slander of the Buddhist Dharma to emphasizing opportunities for the propagation of the Dharma. ‘Dharma’, or ‘Law’ here indicates principles or values by which people try to live.

For the last few decades in particular, Daisaku Ikeda, as the long-term spiritual leader of Soka Gakkai, has emphasized that propagation of the ‘Law’ refers not simply to the narrow goal of propagating a particular sect, although that is clearly part of it, but the wider objective of cultivating societal values that correspond with the principles of human dignity and selfless care for others. Ikeda’s reading of Nichiren stresses that Nichiren

admonished leaders – political and otherwise – when they were not working on behalf of the people. This is, more controversially, linked to Soka Gakkai’s support for its own political party.

At the local level in Japan, the individual is normally understood as standing in the way of collective national, political or economic interests. This is increasingly seen as political rhetoric devoid of substance which caters to elite interests. The Tohoku disaster has prompted people to ask what the ruling party did, with their majority of more than 400 lawmakers, when they could have responded with much more urgency and political will than they did. This opportunity to focus on the need for a transformation in political culture is not lost on religious organizations at the forefront of the relief efforts for this disaster, including the Soka Gakkai. They also do not hesitate to use this to score political points. However, as elsewhere, this disaster has equally highlighted a gap within Soka Gakkai itself, as there is a quiet murmuring from youth leaders that Komeito national politicians are too involved in their world of elite political diplomacy. The disaster in Japan has therefore had two major impacts: first, an impetus on the part of the government and of political parties (religious groups and NGOs were fairly well-prepared) to plan better for future disasters, and second, an impetus towards addressing the gaps between elite political interests and issues that relate to ordinary people’s lives across the spectrum of all political parties. The crescendo of voices calling for reform and improved planning is likely to prove a major challenge for Tokyo-based national political culture. ●

narrative

MEMORY IN THE DEBRIS: THE 3/11 GREAT EAST JAPAN EARTHQUAKE AND TSUNAMI

When the news reached me that Japan had been rocked by a massive earthquake, causing unbelievably huge tsunami waves swallowing up coastal towns, I was on the other side of the globe in Argentina. Worried about my family and friends in Japan, and staring blankly at the constant flow of disaster images, I felt utterly helpless and restless. The news about Fukushima further rubbed salt into the wound.

Later, I was interviewed by the local media in Argentina about the aftermath of the disaster in relation to the role of art, as an exhibition I curated had just opened in Buenos Aires and had given a talk at the Embassy of Japan on the day of the disaster. I was asked what art could do, and whether artworks in the region had survived. At such a distance from the disaster, it was much too early even to contemplate these questions. All I could say at that moment was that, regardless of whether physical beings survived or not, their memories would survive. We could probably find a future in the past.¹

Perhaps with a kind of survivor’s guilt and desire to do something, I went off to Miyagi in Tōhoku, northeastern Japan, soon after I returned to Tokyo in May. As the first anniversary of the disaster approaches at the time of writing, I wish to share some reflections on the aftermath of 3/11 and the relief activities I was involved with in Miyagi from late May until late August 2011. The group I volunteered with was established two days after the disaster and was active within the first week, delivering goods and supplies in the region. It was started up by a group of people involved with eco-

tourism and nature schools who used an extensive local network in Tōhoku, especially in the rural areas, and managed to open a local headquarters for their relief activities by 20 March.

I volunteered in three locations, but was mainly based in Utatsu in Minamisanriku, one of the towns swept away by the tsunami. When I first arrived, the main roads had been cleared of the debris, but the force of destruction was still evident all around (Fig. 1). The survivors, living in evacuation centres and shelters had endured first the cold in March and later the boiling summer heat. The basic lifeline of water, electricity and gas had been destroyed in Minamisanriku, and some areas such as Utatsu, did not have drinking water restored until August. The volunteers camping at the Utatsu centre had to rely on river and rain water until water finally began to be delivered at the end of July. It was one of the least equipped volunteer centres with the hardest living conditions, but it was also a centre built through the creative use of whatever was available. Because of the difficult situation, there was a lack of volunteers in Utatsu compared to the other centres elsewhere in the region, and the process of relief and recovery activities was thus slow.

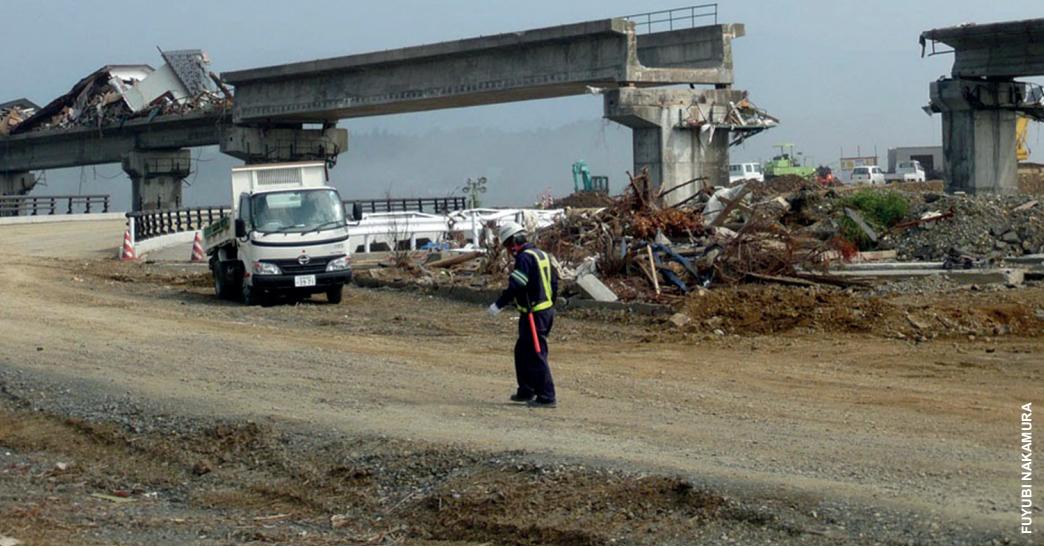
Debris and mementos

One of the major relief activities after rescuing the survivors and providing food and shelter, was removal of the ‘debris’ or *gareki*. The debris included not only the wreckage of buildings and ships, but just about anything and everything we would normally have at home or

work – tables, shoes, bags, bathtubs, clothes, credit cards, and family albums etc. All of these items – possessions belonging to the victims – were battered and left exposed to the open air (Fig. 2). In addition to these objects, bodies of the victims were still waiting to be recovered in the debris and under the water. By May 2011, the casualties had been calculated at 15,019 dead and 9,506 missing.² A few months later in August, 437 people were still missing in Minamisanriku alone³.

A couple of weeks after the disaster, the Minamisanriku town volunteer centre launched the *Omoide sagashi-tai* (‘memory search’ team) with the aim of rescuing local residents’ possessions found in the rubble.⁴ Many other volunteer centres and groups, including the one I was involved in, followed suit. The ultimate goal of the rescuing and cleaning activities was to reconnect these rescued objects with their owners.⁵ Among huge piles of debris, objects which had retained their familiar shapes became candidates for *omoide no shina* or ‘objects of memory’. The rest were gathered together and taken to the debris collection points. *Omoide*, a Japanese word for memory was frequently used to refer to the rescue activities of objects in the aftermath of the disaster, as in: *Omoide* salvage album online;⁶ *Omoide wa nagrenai* (memory doesn’t wash away) project;⁷ *Omoide kaeshi-tai* (returning the memory team);⁸ and several others with the *Omoide* tag.⁹

As in any post-disaster zone, judging what might be worth rescuing is a difficult task.



Figs 1 & 2. Utatsu Isatomae in Minamisanriku, in June and July 2011.

People can be attached to particular objects, which may seem inconsequential to others (Fig. 3).¹⁰ Because it was easy to recognize their value, photos and family albums were the most frequently rescued objects. Although these objects were part of what made up the ‘debris’ – *gareki* – many survivors and volunteers felt uncomfortable referring to them as such. Yet, at the same time, for other survivors such sentiments seemed unnecessary: for them, *gareki* was what these were. They did not wish to recover their personal belongings, which had now become something else in their eyes. They did not want to cling on to the past. However, for most of the survivors, reclaiming pieces of their past in a material form, gave them strength, as proof of their life and the hometown they had lost. But, was it these material forms called *omoide*, that the survivors sought?

Rescuing objects of memory

At the Utatsu centre, we started to rescue photo albums and other objects of memory including bags, ornamental figures, rings and fishermen’s flags, as we continued to remove the debris – which we called *hyōchaku butsu* (items washed ashore) – everyday. Rescued objects piled up quickly. They were covered in seawater, mud, and sludge full of bacteria or particles of asbestos. Photographs in particular required immediate attention and treatment before the summer heat worsened their condition (Fig. 4). Photos had to be cleaned with care and dried, otherwise bacteria would eat up the gelatine in the prints and whatever was left of the image remaining on the surface would disappear. As long as there was a recognizable figure, no matter how small it might be, we decided to rescue and clean the photo. It could be the only extant photographic image of someone.

The cleaning process is not complicated but is time consuming, requiring care and concentration. Surviving images on photographic prints can easily come off in the cleaning process, especially when the surface of the print is already very fragile. As volunteers struggled over what to do with rescued photographs, the Fuji Film corporation launched a ‘Photo

Rescue Project’ and started to provide information on how to clean damaged photographs after receiving a number of enquiries.¹¹ Fuji Film staff visited volunteer centres in the devastated areas and taught the volunteers how to clean damaged prints and film negatives.

With no water or electricity and a shortage of volunteers, the cleaning process was particularly challenging in Utatsu. After much trial and error, we came up with the following procedure, though it was far from ideal (Fig. 7). There were nine steps:¹²

1. Classify the albums and photographs according to the levels of damage and condition to identify the priority;
2. Remove the photographs from the albums, by cutting the album pages and carefully lifting cellophane protection sheets (we attached numbered labels to each album so that photographs would not get mixed up and kept a log of cleaning, as new volunteers came and went each day);
3. If photographs are wet, hang them on lines with pegs to dry before cleaning them (this process was unnecessary if there were enough volunteers to clean them immediately);
4. After they are dried, dust dirt off the print surface with a paint brush and wipe the back with a damp cloth;
5. Carefully wash and rinse them under water with fingers;
6. Hang them vertically on lines with pegs to shake off water;
7. Place them horizontally on stands to dry properly;
8. Put photographs in compact albums;
9. Place two photos which would be easily recognizable by the owner or his/her family/friends which are not too personal on the first page in the album. Cut windows on the cover to show these two photos only and tape the album covers. Show all the photos only when the survivors searching for photos need to confirm if the albums are theirs.

After cleaning rescued photographs for some time, we began to come across the same faces and started to recognize who they were. Without knowing whether all these people were still alive or not, we started to feel a certain connection to them through their photographs.¹³

Through their family albums, we began to trace the life histories of local people, but there was always a sense of guilt over being privy to their private life. The privacy of photographs was an issue, but without showing these photographs, there was no way to find their owners. Most of the affected areas were small rural communities and local residents tended to know each other quite well. This has pros and cons in terms of finding the owners of rescued photographs. While most of the groups displayed all the rescued photos openly, we decided to show only a couple from each album to protect their privacy as much as possible.

We displayed the cleaned objects from time to time outside the shelters, temporary housing and a local Buddhist temple with a graveyard in the search for their owners (Figs 5, 8, 9). As batches of survivors arrived, they looked intently through the albums. It was rewarding, but poignant at the same time, to be present at these displays. Witnessing the moment when someone found their photos and cried for joy was very moving, but there were always some people who could not find a single photograph.

In Japan, it is common to display a photographic portrait of a deceased person, called *iei*, at a funeral and/or at a family altar. Many people were looking for a photograph of their lost family members, especially when the bodies of their loved ones were still not found. A middle-aged woman brought the only photograph of her husband, who was killed in the disaster, and told us she found it among the rubble and wanted us to clean it so that she could use it as an *iei*. The image was digitized and retouched by another group. She felt that her husband’s resilience and strength was transformed in his photographic image and that is why it survived.

The Japanese word for photography, *shashin*, literally means ‘copying truth/reality’. As Chris Wright argues: ‘notions of photographic embodiment continue to underwrite many European/North American uses of the medium and despite, or perhaps as a direct result of, the advent of digital media, individual photographs can retain an aura and assume the role



From top to bottom, and left to right:

Fig. 3. Rescued figurines of Gods of Good Fortune displayed at Utatsu Isatomae Bay, 13 June 2011.

Fig. 4. Damaged photographs, 13 June 2011.

Fig. 5. Cleaned kokeshi dolls at a temporary display at the Saikō-ji temple, Utatsu, 6 August 2011.

Fig. 6. Photo cleaning session in Tokyo, 11 February 2012.



Fig. 7. Photo cleaning session in Utatsu, 27 June 2011.

Fig. 8. Cleaned schoolchildrens' satchels at a temporary display at the newly built Saikō-ji temple, Utatsu, 6 August 2011.

Fig. 9. Photo albums a temporary display at the Saikō-ji temple, Utatsu, 6 August 2011.



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of relics'.¹⁴ This idea is particularly relevant to rescued photographs in the tsunami-stricken areas, as none of digital photographs stored on hard disks, CDs or memory sticks survived. It was the materiality of photographic prints that enabled these images to survive. Photographs thus became objects of memory and relics at the same time.

On 11 February 2012, I attended a photo cleaning session in Tokyo (Fig. 6). Off-site cleaning sessions like these have been held in various parts of Japan, as the mountains of rescued photos are still waiting to be cleaned and returned to the owners. This time, we cleaned photographs from Yamada-machi in Iwate. The weekend session had a capacity of 80 volunteers a day and the places filled up quickly. Almost a year since the disaster, many of the volunteers tried cleaning photos for the first time and talked about how rewarding it was to be able to do something in the aftermath of the disaster. There have also been a couple of exhibitions organized by volunteers to display rescued but badly damaged photographs at art galleries outside the Tōhoku region.¹⁵ Showing recovered victims' possessions at art galleries raises questions regarding privacy, but these volunteers also wanted to do something to ensure that we do not forget what happened.¹⁶ Photographs somehow connect many Japanese to the recovery activities as they allow the nation to identify with the disaster.

Any post-disaster scenes look dramatic, and striking and sensational images are often published.¹⁷ Journalists and volunteers, including myself, wanted to record what we saw there for various reasons. Most volunteers photographed the disaster scenes and/or their activities as personal mementos. Having been unfamiliar with these locations prior to the disaster, I was initially reluctant to take any photos out of respect for the sentiments of the local people. After spending some time there however, I took a small number of photos of the devastated areas featured in this paper (Figs 1-2, 10-11). The local photographer Shinichi Sato, who runs a photo studio in Minamisanriku, grabbed his camera as he escaped from the tsunami. He kept photographing as he witnessed his hometown being battered by the tsunami. He says it is his duty to keep recording how his home-

town would recover from the disaster: 'I hope that the photos which I take now will send a message to the future. I believe in the power of photography...'.¹⁸

What do photographs tell us? Surviving photographs as objects trigger memories, emotions and imaginations. Even though fragmented, the images in rescued photographs survived the disaster, just like them. These photographs embody strength in the eyes of the survivors. One year on since the tragic disaster, not all the images in the uncleared photographs have faded, as many imagined they would half a year ago. These photographs are not just objects of memory but remind us not to forget the disaster and the continuous efforts of many survivors to recover and rebuild their lives. There is a future for our memory through photographs. ●

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1. I was recalling the idea behind the exhibition of works by Masao Okabe, curated by Chihiro Minato at the 2007 Venice Biennale, entitled Is there a future for our past?: The dark face of the light, as Minato was participating in the exhibition in Buenos Aires. Okabe's frottage, made in Hiroshima's Ujina district, which retained traces of the atomic bomb explosion, made up the show. <http://www.tokyoartbeat.com/tablog/entries.en/2007/09/is-there-a-future-for-our-past.html> (accessed 13 February 2012). The idea of seeing 'a future in the past' has been with me since the disaster.

2. The statistics as of 13 May. <http://www.rescuenow.net/2011/05/post-1583.html> (accessed 2 February 2012). The data is based on the official data published by the National Police Agency, the Fire and Disaster Management Agency and Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, but these websites show only the latest data. As of 2 February 2012, the total casualties include 15,846 casualties and 3,321 missing. <http://www.npa.go.jp/archive/keibi/biki/index.htm> (accessed 2 February 2012).

3. At the time of writing in February, 310 are still missing in Minamisanriku as of 1 February 2012 (<http://www.pref.miyagi.jp/kikitaisaku/higashinohondaisinsai/higaizyoukyu.htm>).

4. <http://sankai.jpm.msn.com/life/news/110327/trd11032718090006-n1.htm> (accessed 30 January 2012).

5. Report by Wakabayashi, Daisuke. Survivors seek Japan's past, in photos, 11 May 2011 on the photo rescue activities in Rikuzentakata in Iwate, another town battered

by the tsunami. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704810504576305221636774088.html> (20 July 2011)

6. <http://chikyu-no-cocolo.cocolog-nifty.com/blog/2011/06/post-1332.html> (10 July 2011); <http://jsis-bjk.cocolog-nifty.com/omoide/> (30 January 2012).

7. <http://ameblo.jp/kberry/> (accessed 15 June 2011; 31 January 2012).

8. http://blog.livedoor.jp/shashin_senjo/ (accessed 31 January 2012).

9. Collaborating with local governments and several NPOs (nonprofit organizations), Ricoh is creating a digitalized database of rescued photos using their cloud service. The project is called 'Save the Memory Project': <http://savethememory.jp/>. Rescued and cleaned photos in Utatsu in Minamisanriku are being digitalized by them. The 9/11 debris was similarly spoken of in relation to memory and objects. For example, <http://objectsandmemory.org/> (accessed 2 February 2012), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-14750251> (accessed 2 February 2012).

10. Masahiro Ogawa. 'Great Japan Earthquake: What is your treasure now?', *Mainichi Newspaper*, 12 April 2012. <http://mainichi.jp/select/jiken/graph/takaramono/index.html> (accessed 20 June 2011).

11. http://www.fujifilmholdings.com/en/investors/annual_reports/2011/message/quake_revival.html (accessed 31 January 2012). Detailed information in Japanese: <http://fujifilm.jp/support/fukkoshien/index.html>.

12. I produced a manual with detailed instructions so that the photo rescue activities could continue regardless of who was around at the centre to be in charge of the project. 17 June 2011.

13. Atsuko Ōtsuka, a photojournalist, who volunteered at the Utatsu centre wrote a short piece about her experience of photo cleaning: Omoide shahin kuriningu-shashin wo tōshite no tsunagari (Cleaning photographs of memory – connecting through photography), Tomo ni ikeru from the world (Living together from the world), NHK Heart-Net, 9 June 2011. http://www.nhk.or.jp/heart-blog/people/otsuka/post_537.html (Accessed 18 June 2011).

14. Wright, C. 2004. Material and memory: Photography in the Western Solomon Islands. *Journal of Material Culture* 9 (1): 73-85.

15. The exhibition in Tokyo just ended on 11 February 2012: <http://lostfound311.jp/en/> (accessed 31 January 2012). Another was held in Aichi by a volunteer who did photo cleaning in Kesen'numa in Miyagi: <http://mainichi.jp/select/today/archive/news/2011/12/14/20111214k0000e040201000c.html> (Accessed 15 December 2011).

16. Sendai mediatheque launched 3 gatsu 11 nichi wo wasurenai tameni sentā (Centre for remembering 3/11) with archives of photos, video clips, texts and runs online TV: <http://recorder311.smt.jp/>. They also organized some events relating to the disaster and I attended one about the sense of guilt in talking about the disaster on 7 August 2011.

17. Nygaard-Christensen discusses the post-disaster rebuilding in Timor-Leste. Nygaard-Christensen, Maj. 2011. Building from scratch: The aesthetics of post-disaster reconstruction. *Anthropology Today* 27 (6): 8-10.

18. Sato, Shinichi. 2011. http://www.adk.jp/english/html/news/2011/20110927_001367.html (accessed 2 May 2012). Minami sanriku kara 2011.3.11-2011.9.11: Photo letter from Minami Sanriku. Tokyo: Nihonbugei-sha (Information about the book: http://www.minamisanriku-kara.com/index_en.html).



Fig. 10. View of Utatsu Isatomae from the top of Mt Tatsugane, 4 July 2011.



Fig. 11. A breath of new life in Utatsu, 4 July 2011.

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