

## **The Response of Soka Gakkai to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Personhood, Interiority, and a Civil Society in Crisis Mode**

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents a discussion based on research into what Buddhist practice looks like in Soka Gakkai (SG) in times of crisis and growing uncertainty, and explores how Soka Gakkai members and organizations responded to the COVID-19 pandemic as a globally attuned civil society network. The paper is based on reviews of organizational responses, the examination of Soka Gakkai news materials published in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, including regular articles published in the *Seikyo Shimbun*, as well as members' experiences, observations, and informal conversations, particularly with youth members in Japan and overseas, from around mid-February to mid-June 2020. From this preliminary research, two underlying themes emerged: 1) the SG felt the need to respond practically and with urgency as a global civil society network; and 2) the SG felt the need to tackle fear as an equally significant issue, to facilitate the most appropriate response to the crisis from the perspective of Nichiren Buddhism as practiced in Soka Gakkai. This article is an exploration into the actual mode of hope and future-making in times of crisis in Soka Gakkai, as an organization, and as displayed in practical social situations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**KEYWORDS:** Soka Gakkai, Soka Gakkai and COVID-19, Religion and COVID-19, Buddhism and COVID-19, Religion and COVID-19 in Japan.

### *Introduction*

The dominant mode in the world today may present a global sense of tragedy, which has resulted both in people turning to strengthening solidarity, new community life, and appreciation for the importance of good governance, or in contrast, in a sense of greater fragmentation, and populist approaches that steer towards self-protection and the exclusion of others. Like the notion of “epoch,” COVID-19 may come to frame and channel current social phenomena to help us

make sense of “fluid presents and uncertain futures” (Knight and Stewart 2016, 5), in meaningful ways. Still, the significance of the trope of hope taken on by grassroots initiatives may also reflect high aspirations for a better future, and the way hope shapes up under specific conditions as indicated in this paper.

At a time of rising uncertainty and social and economic needs, what might the idea of almsgiving mean for a Buddhist organization such as the Soka Gakkai? Offering to others is one of the six *pāramitās*, or six kinds of practices required of bodhisattvas. The “Devadatta” (twelfth) chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* describes Shakyamuni in a past existence as the ruler of a kingdom who, in order to fulfil the six *pāramitās*, diligently distributed alms, never stinting in heart, no matter how precious were the goods he gave away. He did not begrudge, the sutra says, even his own life. Among the various kinds of almsgiving, two may be best known as the offering of goods and the offering of the dharma: the former refers to food, clothes, and other material items, while the latter refers to sharing the Buddha’s teachings. There is also a concept of three kinds of almsgiving, which in addition to the two mentioned includes the offering of fearlessness. The offering of fearlessness is meant to inspire courage and remove fear.

The global crisis arising from COVID-19 and related responses has shown how intricately connected is the need to combat fear. We have seen various social and political responses, ranging from acts of solidarity to increased social tension, discrimination, and outbreaks of conflict, which intersect with the nature of governance and the state of economic, social, and healthcare systems. Soka Gakkai members, as all members of their respective societies, are entangled in the crisis as individuals, and as civic groups who live amidst the wider threat the pandemic poses. Soka Gakkai President Minoru Harada captured this mood for Soka Gakkai members when he stressed: “This is an unprecedented time in history where feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and loneliness can either exacerbate divisiveness or bring a deeper sense of community.” He then continued to praise the actions of SGI members by saying, “It is deeply inspiring to see how people are showing resilience, compassion and solidarity in this most difficult period” (Harada 2020b).

By April, this sense of resilience and solidarity was visible in the Soka Gakkai communities, now gone online. The paper explores how the Soka Gakkai came to work increasingly as a global network of human connectivity, which first sought to replace fear and anxiety by providing hope through a clear message of resilience

within and solidarity without, and as a movement that aimed to bring people together amidst the many forces that were pulling them apart. Secondly, this paper discusses how the Soka Gakkai stepped up to be a local and global forum for disseminating correct information about the coronavirus, amidst the widespread misinformation on social media.

*Buddhism Is About “Human Behavior” That Inspires Others and Brings Hope*

How did the Soka Gakkai organization and members respond to the challenging, difficult, and unexpected circumstances that the pandemic brought? The response to COVID-19 of Soka Gakkai members in Japan, as of their counterparts in Soka Gakkai International (SGI), appeared rather different to what was summed up by the Shingon priest, Reverend Asahikawa, in a recent article investigating Japanese religious organizations’ responses to the coronavirus in Japan. Asahikawa explained that,

the Japanese people believe in a theory of destiny (*unmeiron*). Even if they don’t use the word “destiny” openly, they are part of a culture of accepting everything that happens to them (McLaughlin 2020, 3).

Although words such as destiny or karma can be heard, the overall sentiment of what that means in Soka Gakkai is different in significant ways. Rather than accepting “destiny,” actively changing “karma” is more characteristic of Nichiren Buddhism in Soka Gakkai. That is, changing one’s habitual tendencies to think and act in certain ways that are seen to create a person’s “destiny.” Particularly, this means changing the tendencies by which a person acts based on sentiments of fear, lack of self-confidence, or disrespect towards oneself and others. Such internal change is achieved through *daimoku*, or the chanting of *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* that was advocated by Nichiren (1222–1282), coupled with Buddhist study, and by actively trying to contribute to others, ultimately “removing” fear and replacing it with the courage by which members testify to internal changes that they perceive as reflected in actual life experiences and circumstances.

Sometimes, members talk about the difficulty of maintaining the intensity and focus of practice, and that it is often some sort of personal crisis that spurs individuals into practicing or continuing to strive to do their “human revolution,” or change negative tendencies. The response to the pandemic could be seen as a collective sense of crisis, which spurred on a collective urgency in practice. Soka

Gakkai members could be observed to address the situation with a renewed focus on their daily Buddhist chanting of *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*, and a new resolve to find ways to encourage people around them. This response may not be surprising, since a key social dynamic in Soka Gakkai is to try to find ways to encourage others to believe in their inherent “Buddhahood” or “dharma” nature. This is promoted as the way to not only overcome problems and suffering, but see these as opportunities, which can lead to new creativity and positive change. When viewed in this way, challenges become springboards for personal growth and for spurring social action. This life-affirming philosophy and practice seemed to propel members to confront the pandemic with the ever-present principle of “changing poison into medicine.” Harada restated in his message on April 10 that this principle,

teaches that even the darkest and most desperate of times can contain the seeds of new learning and possibility, [and] will help strengthen humanity’s indomitable network of global citizens (Harada 2020b).

Most people have had to adapt to a new sociality of everyday life over the past few months, from late February to June, and have felt the immediacy of the interdependence of daily life on many levels. One key issue in Soka Gakkai has been to make people deepen their understanding of how their actions can have immediate consequences for others’ welfare. The measures to deal with the pandemic presented the paradox that the situation simultaneously required distancing oneself from those on whom one in fact depended. For example, many climate activists from across the world, including many Soka Gakkai members, also hoped for long-established mindsets to have jumped on to the Petri dish of possibilities that would help in the long overdue response to the climate crisis. Soka Gakkai is one of those civil societies that also has continued to stress support for the Sustainable Development Goals through this pandemic, and SG in Japan committed itself to 100% renewable energy use by 2050 in April this year, to support the institutions working on this. There is a general awareness in SG that the pandemic is intricately related to the destruction of natural habitats, as many environmentalists stated (see e.g. Lambertini, Maruma Mrema and Neira 2020; Carrington 2020).

At the same time, the pandemic is likely to cause one of the deepest recessions since World War II, which may result in national protectionism, disruption to supply chains, and growing distrust towards others and other nations. As a long-

time committed supporter of the UN-led global governance system, Soka Gakkai's outlook is highly supportive of an internationalist approach to strengthening international governance, and sees the need to raise a sense of international solidarity to address global issues, and was also part of the faith-based organizations (FBOs) that organized a panel with the UNHCR during the crisis. Typically, we see members' views as a civil society position generally informed by the content in the yearly peace proposals to the United Nations made by the SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, such as this year's "Towards Our Shared Future: Constructing and Era of Human Solidarity" (Ikeda 2020a). Also, on April 21, Nobuyuki Asai, of the SGI office of Peace and Global Issues, and Elisa Gassotti, of the SGI Office for UN Affairs, participated in an online meeting about the role of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in the fight against COVID-19. The event was hosted by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioners for Refugees (UNHCR), together with representatives from 11 FBOs, to raise awareness of the infection risk for refugee populations. Asai also introduced initiatives launched by SGI organizations around the world to fight against COVID-19 (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020n).

At the same time, the practical question as to what will make people care for strangers in times of crisis, particularly when their own livelihoods may be threatened, is an increasingly central dilemma. The old question that was posed by Adam Smith (1723–1790), the Scottish moral philosopher who saw moral sentiment and the everyday activity of exchange, for which he is better known, as two fundamental human conditions that would come to bind the world in myriad ways, both to keep it fed and to maintain our sense of humanity, offers a way to begin exploring this question. Like his friend David Hume (1711–1776), Smith believed that it was sympathy that moved people to care about others. Moral behavior of course does not stop at sympathy, which can be a fickle friend too. However, if sympathy arises out of a willingness to let oneself feel the situation of another, COVID-19 has brought many people across communities into action to help others, including people in the Soka Gakkai communities. Smith argued that, out of sympathy for one's fellow human beings, the conventions emerge that guide our morality. Sympathy as the starting point of what it means to be human can also be found to resonate in Nichiren's writings. In "The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind Established in the Fifth-Five-Hundred-year Period after the Thus-come One's Passing," Nichiren states: "Even a heartless villain loves his

wife and children. He too has a portion of the bodhisattva world within him” (*WND* 1999, 358).

Like many people in this pandemic, who amidst immediate challenges of stay-home or lockdown measures also found a new sense of purpose in altruistic actions, such a response from SG members quickly became apparent as the seriousness of COVID-19 escalated. While advice on handwashing, mask-wearing, and social distancing had come early on February 1 (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020a), by February 20, as the coronavirus was beginning to spread in Japan, and legislating on a state of emergency bill was being discussed, Harada’s message from February 20 (Harada 2020a) was used to remind everyone that, although they may be encountering an unprecedented situation, Nichiren had written that when “great evil occurs, great good follows” (*WND* 1999, 1119).

This is a well-known passage to most SGI members, but as Harada emphasized, this is not to be confused with the idea of an already decided destiny. Rather than waiting till great good follows, what would ensure the “great good” was courageous actions. Harada was presenting Nichiren as having wanted people to resolve to take a new step forward, with the perspective that difficulties are an opportunity to grow regardless of the situation He quoted from *The New Human Revolution*, written by the long-term Buddhist leader and SGI President Daisaku Ikeda,

If you continue to move powerfully toward the future with brilliant hope no matter what happens, that itself will be your victory. That is the proof of your faith (Ikeda 2008, 204–05).

Similar messages, which were aimed to inspire people to vigorously practice (chanting to raise their life-state, or consciousness), to study Nichiren’s teachings, and to have the spirit of “turning poison into medicine” continued to characterize the world of Soka Gakkai in crisis mode.

For example, a week later, on April 17, the English translation of Ikeda’s monthly editorial was released, and read by the majority of active Soka Gakkai members, now facing lockdown in many places:

Now, as the world confronts the coronavirus pandemic and other serious global challenges, our members everywhere are striving in the spirit of the Daishonin’s treatise “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land.” They are praying earnestly together, uniting across borders, to bring ‘order and tranquility throughout the four quarters of the land’ (*WND* 1999, 24), and change poison into medicine, while

making sincere and wholehearted contributions to their respective societies. The powerful sound of chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* permeates the entire universe. We now have built a network of ordinary people, Bodhisattvas of the Earth, that is undaunted by any of the ‘three calamities and seven disasters’ described in the Daishonin’s writings. Let us continue, limitlessly into the future, to forge ties of respect and trust among people far and wide, based on our conviction that “All people have the Buddha nature” (*WND* 1999, 756) (Ikeda 2020c).

This was both stating an ideal, a hope, and expectation, but was also based on past knowledge of how members would likely respond. As indicated below, members struggled in various ways to cope with the challenges they faced, but also simultaneously wanted to be inspirations to others by trying to respond with courage and compassion. Much has been written about the production of specific formation of hope as a response to a rising sense of uncertainty with an emphasis on specific social, cultural, and political settings (Appadurai 2013). This article perhaps is one empirical example of such “hope production,” hope as an engagement with the future, and as a mode for internal and external transformation, a highly sought after value-orientation in Soka Gakkai, whose members could also in this pandemic be found seeking to try to transform mindsets to states of hope, as a step towards social transformation.

Soka Gakkai organizations could be seen to respond to the pandemic according to their size and situation in each country. For example, in the USA, they donated masks to hospitals facing shortages of medical supplies, and in Italy, they donated funds toward fighting COVID-19. In Japan, before the state of emergency was declared on April 7, the youth division members launched a Stay Home project on Twitter, to encourage young people to stay home, as well as to seek out and share correct information. During the months of March, April, and May, Soka Gakkai members’ spontaneous responses could be witnessed across the social media, from India and Europe, to the United States. This gave the impression of a surge in human connectivity, and a new sense of energy and vitality, as new songs, and messages, and worldwide *daimoku* campaigns emerged. Through the new technology available, Soka Gakkai members shared messages of hope, for example by showing how they remained optimistic and were taking on the organizational ethos that “obstacles and difficulties are great opportunities to become stronger” (Ikeda 2018, 19). These messages, which make up a common language in SG, were now felt to be increasingly significant. The visibility of a human network, whose sensibility rested on providing hope and

strengthening solidarity, emerged with social media posts encouraging SG members nationally based on their fellow members' responses cross-nationally, and as an international movement to create hope and solidarity amidst a pandemic.

Different campaigns led by young people emerged from each country. One such example is the “123 Be the Light” campaign in Europe begun on March 2, which had been inspired by an article about the response to the 2003 SARS outbreak by members in Hong Kong and Taiwan featured in the *Seikyo Shimbun* (2020b). This campaign was then taken up by the Soka Gakkai European Youth Committee (personal communication with Robert Harrap, SGI-UK general director). This, amongst other things, reminded people of the *Lotus Sutra*' message of “casting off the transient and revealing the true,” which refers to the concept that individuals have a deeper self that transcends one's immediate sense of personhood of the here and now, and connects with others on a more profound level. This is an identification with the law of *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* or dharma, the principles by which Nichiren, for Soka Gakkai members, is seen to have experienced life based on a vow to cut through his own internal negativity, i.e. fundamental darkness in Buddhist terms, and to enable others to do the same, as expounded in the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of *Lotus Sutra*. The determination or desire for all people to attain the way is seen as the path to Buddhahood. Confronting fundamental negativity refers to confronting what is seen as the deepest illusion that disconnects from the world and from others. The ultimate reality is seen to be one of interdependence, and connection with others.

Ideally, this means that others' welfare is equally important as our own. Vowing to “be the light” means striving to feel this deeper sense of purpose and connection with others, which is reflected in the concept of *myoho*. Nichiren wrote in a letter sent to one of his disciples in 1255 that,

the ultimate reality ...is the Mystic Law (*myoho*). It is called the Mystic Law because it reveals the principle of the mutually inclusive relationship of a single moment of life and all phenomena (*WND* 1999, 3).

This frequently read letter in Soka Gakkai postulates the essential oneness of the ultimate reality and the manifest world that is characterized by each individual. Practically, the meaning of “123 Be the Light” referred to everyday chanting for one hour, studying Nichiren Buddhism for twenty minutes, and talking to three people to encourage them. Through such practical daily effort, each person could



become that “light” in her environment, a person who tries to connect with others at a deeper level of consciousness, by reaching out to people and showing empathy for another’s situation, while demonstrating how to deal with the fear felt, and the frustrations the restrictions imposed were generating, in a creative and positive manner. Such campaigns are not new, in fact they are rather typical as the mainstay of growth in Soka Gakkai. Similar campaigns could be observed in SGI-Canada, SGI-USA, and other branches. However, a renewed sense of purpose and significance brought about by the immediacy of the pandemic was visible.

Technology and social media became the practical tools by which to deliver messages of hope, with Zoom meetings in many places soon becoming normal. Those who in the past might have been apprehensive about the use of teleconferencing, or other digital media communication tools, witnessed a smooth transition to digital conferencing as a way to hold meetings. While many felt this could not substitute face-to-face meetings, it seemed to have worked well in many countries. In fact, an increase in member participation in meetings could be observed in European countries, the US, and other places where digital communication was easily implemented, and where the members tend to be younger and more digitally savvy. Other places, like Japan, saw fewer official meetings conducted via digital conferencing such as Zoom, largely due to the concern that the higher number of older members would not have the same access. Yet, many smaller, informal group meetings in local areas did take place.

In the UK, leaders told of the ease by which some members now participated in online meetings, who in the past had struggled to attend meetings in person because of either responsibilities that conflicted with meeting times or the long-distance travel to meeting places. For example, a typical local chapter study, which in the past may have been attended by around 30 people, now had around 50 or even 60 members participating via Zoom. Undoubtedly, the immediacy of the situation, and the crisis or challenges that people faced, had intensified their Buddhist practice, and raised an interest in the teachings of Nichiren, while their ability to participate was being facilitated by the practical use of modern technologies.

As other community and civic groups have witnessed during this pandemic, a focus on empathetic action and connecting with others could be observed. As indicated, for Soka Gakkai members this “connection” began with a daily practice

of chanting to connect with themselves on a deeper level. As a particular layer of civil society whose objective is *kosen-rufu*, literally “to declare and spread widely,” or the propagation of Nichiren Buddhist philosophy, the movement is based on a personal practice of having faith in one’s own “buddha” nature, with a socially engaged practice based on the belief that others equally possess such inherent dignity and wisdom. The quotes above point to a Buddhist view of personhood as something intertwined with how one views other people’s lives, and work on manifesting “the dignified attributes that they inherently possess” (*WND* 1999, 832). Since members have learned to see difficulties as opportunities for change, Soka Gakkai’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic brought a renewed sense of purpose and mission to “display inherent dignity,” and bring what they regard as a humanistic social practice to others.

Yet, Soka Gakkai’s success so far as a global civil society has rested on emphasizing local, grassroots activities based on face-to-face exchange. The very social fabric, the face-to-face interaction that made much of the organization so far, was brought to a halt. As indicated, newly found ways to recreate local and global sentiments of social engagement and provide a sense of empowerment became visible, while this also required a more organized commitment to new practical issues, such as ensuring accurate information was communicated, as discussed in the next section.

### *Beyond Sympathy: Information and Education as Keys to Combatting Fear and Discrimination*

As indicated in the last section, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be closely intertwined with human interiority, which has ranged from sympathy to antipathy, shaping how people imagine, see, and react to the world. Central to the pandemic are also questions about the freedoms envisioned by Smith to “truck, barter, and exchange,” which came to underpin people’s livelihoods in our modern capitalist world. Lack of freedom soon manifested both as new forms of cooperation, as well as protests against lockdowns (Wilson 2020). Society was never the equilibrium and state of order Smith had seen coming, something the coronavirus has highlighted all too well as the social and economic fault lines of inequity are revealed, as is clearer than ever in places such as India (Vasavi 2020). Sympathy alone will never be enough as a sufficient

affective tool, even if it involves the more egalitarian feelings of empathy. Bringing about equity and humane societies require good governance, leadership, and cooperative action on many levels of civil society, all of which will be significant for what kind of “moral consciousness” will come to predominate in a post-COVID-19 world.

Soka Gakkai is an organization that exists at the level of civil society, and particularly in communities across Japan. It is an organization with a vast grassroots reach that has extended into support for a political party (Fisker-Nielsen 2012), which has been part of coalition government for most of the past two decades. Soka Gakkai is growing in many localities across Asia, Europe, and North and South America, with around 2 million members, and is rapidly increasing in such areas as India and Italy. Note that precise membership figures are somewhat difficult to obtain, as some fluctuation in participation exist. Numbers in Japan are counted in households which makes it also difficult to discern accurate numbers of individual members.

Apart from its doctrinal study and focus on the practice of chanting, face-to-face meetings have been the mainstay of the organization, creating its extensive local community networks. The sudden new “common sense” caused by the pandemic made social gatherings effectively anti-social, and face-to-face interactions came to suggest moral carelessness about transmitting a potentially life-threatening infection. It seemed obvious that the organization needed to respond in a coherent way.

Undoubtedly, if mistakes had been made, this would have rapidly generated negative publicity. However, more significantly, it could have had far-reaching impact on people’s lives. As an organization with around 7-8 million households in Japan, the leadership of Soka Gakkai understood the way members reacted to the pandemic was significant not only for themselves but also for the wider society. As previously indicated, a collective response from SG was taken early on, directed by President Harada. As an organization that thrives on face-to-face grassroots relations, its activities could potentially become a major point of spreading the virus if preventative measures were not taken in a comprehensive manner. As one of the first countries to experience the coronavirus outside of China, in Japan meetings were stopped from February 20. At the time, stopping meetings that makes up a large part of members’ social network outside work

seemed over-precautious, and for young single people such as students this was particularly challenging.

The youth division took various measures, as will be discussed below. Soon, media reports emerged in Japan about the impact on mental health occurring across Japanese society. Yet, it was deemed necessary to give priority to prevent the spread of the virus. Anxiety and fear were increasing in the wake of rumors and misinformation being circulated on social media, and SG felt the need to begin a comprehensive awareness raising campaign about COVID-19. Furthermore, as the pandemic began to take effect in late February and early March, it was reported that young people in various countries were not taking the situation seriously enough. Soka Gakkai consists of several million young people and the *Seikyo Shimbun*, the Soka Gakkai's daily newspaper, began a series of different projects, often in cooperation with youth leaders. The aim was to provide accurate information, based on expert opinions and the latest scientific understanding of the virus.

The *Seikyo Shimbun*, with around 5.5 million subscribers, started two new series of articles under the headings, “Understanding the Coronavirus Properly” (正しく知ろうコロナ) and “Living in Time of Crisis” (危機の時代を生きる). The first set of articles began on April 6 (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020e), the day before the Japanese government declared a state of emergency, and was aimed at providing updated information about COVID-19. The articles delivered concise information with practical illustrations and charts in short pieces. The other series, begun three days later, was based on longer interviews, in which relevant academic experts shared insights into the current situation, aiming to provide professional views on the situation as the pandemic was developing both nationally and globally. Preliminary observations revealed that these serialized articles played a critical role in providing up-to-date and scientific information from relevant experts. The aim was to give readers a sense of assurance by factual and expert-based information, considering rising fear and anxiety.

News reports on rising situations of discrimination, prejudice, and disparagement of people on the front line of the crisis, including healthcare workers or supermarket staff, also began appearing. An Agence France-Presse (AFP 2020) report on April 15 stated that misinformation regarding COVID-19 was spreading, and that the WHO had coined the term “infodemic” (information + pandemic) to call attention to the problem of misinformation (WHO 2020). On

several occasions, Japan's Prime Minister also spoke out against the rise in discrimination and the unacceptable stigmatizing of frontline workers who were trying to support and save people, but still stigmatization was widespread (*Mainichi Shimbun* 2020b). Other articles appeared on the topic such as in the *Mainichi Shimbun* on May 7, in an article titled, "Corona-shock, Prejudice, Accusations and Slander—Continuing the Battle Against 'Infection-Discrimination'" (my translation: *Mainichi Shimbun* 2020a).

The *Seikyo Shimbun* aimed to combat this spread of misinformation and rise in prejudice by featuring interviews with a number of prominent academics such as Professor Emeritus Takesato Watanabe from Doshisha University, who discussed the seriousness of "infodemic," stressing the importance of media literacy (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020m). Other interviews such as one titled "Lack of Information and Work: Foreign Residents Facing Difficulties," which was published on April 29 (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020o), aimed to help readers think about those suffering from COVID-19-related issues, and how to respond to misinformation.

In the first issue of the series "Living in Time of Crisis" (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020f), an international perspective was brought to bear on the situation from Dame Claire Bertschinger, of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. She pointed out to readers the seriousness of the situation overseas, and how people were reacting to the situation by showing support for healthcare workers. As a public figure and Soka Gakkai member with a long experience as a nurse working in conflict zones, Bertschinger's life story is well-known in the Soka Gakkai community. She serves as one of the many role models for young people, who can be found to often desire jobs directly seen as contributing to welfare. In 2019, she was the guest of honor at Soka University's graduation ceremony, and gave the keynote speech on her experience working in Africa in refugee camps. Some long-term academic staff commented at the time that this had been one of the most inspiring graduation speeches they had heard over the past twenty years. It certainly, resonated with the mindset of social contribution through which students, and Soka Gakkai members in general, learn to see the significance of their work.

Based on preliminary observations in Japan, and from around 50 casual conversations with young Soka Gakkai members and Soka University students who are frequent readers of the *Seikyo Shimbun*, the overwhelming majority

talked about their concern with discrimination facing healthcare workers, and the rise in child abuse and domestic violence that was being reported on as an outcome of the stay-home measures. Many also seemed aware of the wider potentially positive changes, such as an increased focus on climate action, and the potentially changing mindsets towards creating a better life-work balance, a lack of which has been an ongoing social problem in Japan. How information was communicated about the pandemic soon became critical.

Other interviews featured the story of Dr. Moriya Tsuji, currently working on researching a possible vaccine for COVID-19 at Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Centre (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020j), as well as an interview with Professor Jeremy Shiffman, from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, on “Infection Control and Medical Support for Developing Countries” (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020p). Such articles directed readers to think about those who are involved with combating the pandemic. Articles of the series “Living in Time of Crisis” also covered broader topics such as “Seeking-help Under the Stay-home Requests,” as increasing reports were indicating a rise in domestic violence and child abuse in the face of the stay-home request (see for example *Asahi Shimbun* 2020), which as mentioned, were issues that concerned many young members. Articles included practical information, such as contact numbers for help groups. As the *Seikyo Shimbun* continued to publish such types of articles almost every other day, including May 16, after the Japanese government had lifted the state of emergency in 39 prefectures on May 14, that began raising awareness about “new lifestyles” and the “new normal.” Many members during this time said they appreciated the paper for providing useful information they could easily share.

This issue of mis- or disinformation was also specifically taken up by various youth division initiatives. For example, the Soka Gakkai Youth Division in Japan initiated teleconferences to learn correct information about COVID-19 from medical experts, held seven times as of June 18. Youth Division representatives and medical experts discussed various themes and topics based on the latest situation of COVID-19. For example, the first teleconference highlighted simple measures to take to prevent further spread of COVID-19. Changing the attitude and behavior of young people was regarded as a key step at this time, getting youth to see the importance of careful hand washing, avoiding nonessential outings, and ensuring they gained correct information (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020c). On another occasion, they pointed out preventative measures against the possible

collapse of medical services in Japan, highlighting the importance of responsible actions by individuals, such as avoiding nonessential outings (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020d).

These teleconferences led by youth leaders correspond to relevant issues as they arose in relation to the pandemic. In the context of school closures, which occurred across Japan at the beginning of March, discussions focused on ways to protect the physical and mental health of children and parents (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020g), and students, especially with regard to those living alone (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020i).

As the Japanese government lifted the state of emergency for 39 prefectures in mid-May, their discussion shifted to what people should keep in mind after the state of emergency was lifted (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020q), emphasizing the importance of people focusing on what they could do to create a lifestyle to fit each individual's situation rather than on what could not be done (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020o). As the state of emergency was lifted for all the prefectures at the end of May, discussions highlighted the importance of strengthening human bonds to serve as the foundation for creating a society that can deal with infectious diseases without resorting to prejudice and discriminatory attitudes (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020s).

These discussions were always used as opportunities to express appreciation toward medical workers on the frontline, who were facing many difficulties exacerbated by the rise in prejudice and discrimination. The youth leaders were emphasizing the importance of combatting such negative forces and tendencies by gaining correct knowledge and using one's imagination to understand their situation (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020c, 2020d, 2020g, 2020i, 2020l, 2020r, 2020s). To combat such stigmatization of health workers, the nurses group division and doctors' division confronted such attitudes with statements such as,

As Buddhists, members of the Soka Gakkai's doctors' division and nurses group, along with other medical caregivers, are steadfastly fighting their fight as they offer profound prayers for the safety and security of all people. They do so in accordance with this spirit expressed in Nichiren's writings, "If you care anything about your personal security, you should first of all pray for order and tranquility throughout the four quarters of the land, should you not?" (*WND* 1999, 24) (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020b).

While initiating such teleconferences, the Soka Youth Physicians Conference and Soka Gakkai Youth Peace Conference launched a Japanese language Twitter

account @savelifePJ, encouraging youth in major urban areas such as the greater Tokyo area to stay at home (Soka Gakkai 2020). The information from the teleconferences was regularly shared through their Twitter account. Since then, the name of their StayHome project on Twitter changed to the SaveLife project, after the lifting of the state of emergency in Japan (Soka Gakkai 2020). On June 3, SG youth representatives also held their first online gathering with eight international youth organizations, such as the All-China Youth Federation from China, and other organizations from Afghanistan, Argentina, India, Ghana, Czech Republic, and Russia. This project is a part of their project titled Soka Global Action 2030, which began before the COVID-19 pandemic. The project was launched to build solidarity among youths internationally who had responded to the current crisis through introducing disaster relief activities, and other activities that contributed to protecting the life of others, sharing what they had learned.

There were also many new musical initiatives that aimed to raise hope towards the future. Many could be found to arise spontaneously in the Soka Gakkai social media-scape, and some were e organized by the youth members, including the *Utatsuku* (song-making) project, which unfolded with many different individuals performing a different version of the same song titled “Step Forward,” an upbeat song that aimed to inspire hope (Soka Gakkai Youth Division 2020).

### *“Change Poison into Medicine” Through Earnest Prayer*

As indicated, the *Seikyo Shimbun* played a key role in providing accurate information, as well as Buddhist study and guidance. Members and leaders read and used the information with key articles by Ikeda and Harada, translated into English and other languages. Regular guidance from Harada such as reaching out to others through making simple phone calls or writing letters, which he himself was seen to do personally, took on new meaning as people were unable to meet. Everyone was keenly aware of the rising levels of anxiety across Japan, and Harada would encourage leaders to take the initiative to give hope to friends and exercise wisdom based on prayers, quoting Ikeda on March 1 (Ikeda 2020b):

Even if you can't meet with them in person, a single phone call can help them break through something that may be holding them back. Sometimes even writing an encouraging note can be all it takes to change a person's life. Often allowing a person to



speaking freely of their dissatisfaction and unhappiness resolves their problems and, in many cases, they feel much better just because they've been heard. The act of listening is in itself the Buddhist practice of compassion, a form of relieving suffering as taught in the Buddha's commitment to "relieving suffering and imparting joy" (Ikeda 2020b, 1).

Masayo Kumakura, a 52-year-old woman living in Saitama City, north of Tokyo and working in a supermarket shared her experience in the *Seikyo Shimbun* on May 20 (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020r). Quoting an essay that had encouraged her to persevere titled "Our Brilliant Human Revolution" (Ikeda 2020d), she recalled President Ikeda's words which had stated, "as well as everyone carrying out their noble mission in different areas of society. I am praying earnestly for everyone's health and safety." She then told of her recent experience under COVID-19,

I am working as a cashier at a supermarket. Under Japan's state of emergency, I keep feeling worried and nervous while working, but I earnestly chanted *daimoku* (*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*) to be able to work without any accident each morning. A few days ago, several customers came to talk to me and told me, "We wish you all the best in your work. Thank you always [for what you are doing]." This was unexpected, and I felt happy. Nichiren Daishonin writes, "It is to voice what one truly has in the mind. Thus, one's thoughts are expressed in one's voice" (*WND* 1999, 86). Facing difficulties at this moment, I resolved to polish my heart by strengthening my faith [in Buddhahood] and to talk to people using really kind words. Even though it is not possible to meet my fellow members, I am currently trying to send encouragements to three friends per day through phone calls (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020r).

Hironobu Shigeyama, a man aged 57, from Minoh City, in Osaka, related his struggle to not worry about his children who live abroad in America.

My daughter and son, 25 and 22 years old respectively, are doing their best while fighting against the COVID-19 in California in the U.S. My daughter is working as a schoolteacher at a local elementary school. Under the curfew, she is working hard to do her best in online classes. As a member of the young women division's, she encourages others together with other fellow members through sending SNS messages. My son, a university student, is doing his best in online classes under the lockdown. Since his club activities for track and field got suspended, he was feeling disheartened for a while. Thanks to the daily encouragements by local Soka Gakkai members, he finally returned to his usual self and resolved to fulfil his own mission. We are holding an "online family discussion meeting" connecting Japan and the U.S. once a week, where we are openly sharing our struggles and strengthening our resolve to overcome this hardship. I am chanting *daimoku* together with fellow Soka Gakkai members from all over the world. This has made me realize more than ever the progress of worldwide *kosen-rufu*. I am sure we will find deeper meaning in this catastrophe, while I am chanting earnestly for the

quickest possible end to the pandemic together with all the members of my family (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020k).

In Nerima City, Tokyo, Yuuki Hanajima is a vice area leader and his wife, Yuri, is a vice group leader. Together they managed a music class called “Ohana Music Vocal Class,” which was attended by students ranging from those in high school to pensioners, before they were forced to cancel all the classes because of COVID-19. The past year they had renovated the classroom where Yuri had worked as a vocal instructor for over ten years. They finally had begun to be more financially independent, when they were hit by the pandemic and forced to close. Since all events and live concerts had to be cancelled, Yuuki had watched the sleeping face of their 16-months old son, Yoshinosuke, and of his pregnant wife, as they were now supported by his work at a call center where he had previously worked.

I was almost crying. The situation felt like I was walking through a tunnel with no exit, losing my balance on the way... However, as the days went by, I came to realize how precious my Soka Gakkai friends were. All the heartfelt letters in my mailbox such as our *Ukubo District Newsletter* made by local Soka Gakkai members asking me, “How is your wife feeling?” and “Let’s do our best together.” Friends from the young men’s division also sent me encouragements through calling and using LINE (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020h).

Coming to Tokyo to find work related to music, he felt the warmth of the Soka family, which also helped him when he was anxious about his mother who was fighting against illness. The reason why they named their class “Ohana” (which means “family” and “precious person” in Hawaiian) is that they had wished their classes to be a space where people would always smile, and feel like they were part of a family. While everyday reality is harsh for many people, and it is difficult not to be anxious, Yuuki wanted to bring a smile back into people’s lives in the classroom and he deeply vowed to,

strive together with his family and fellow members of Soka Gakkai to transform adversity into a springboard that leads to further advance (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020h).

They are now exploring the best ways to implement online lessons. Yuuki concluded with a much-quoted passage from Nichiren that he and his wife have deeply ingrained since they joined the organization, and now remember to respond to the situation.

Suffer what there is to suffer, enjoy what there is to enjoy. Regard both suffering and joy as facts of life, and continue chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*, no matter what happens (*WND* 1999, 86).

*Preliminary Conclusions on a Crisis Response in the Making*

There is a matrix of factors for calculating the many different human, economic, and political risks that the pandemic has come to present, as both very complex challenges as well as opportunities to address global issues such as the urgent action necessary to combat the climate crisis. In Japan, for instance the pull towards investing in new greener jobs and focusing on building resilience for communities to cope with a changing climate was already underway before the COVID-19 pandemic, and investment has doubled since (DeWit 2020). New thinking and changing old mindsets can occur while the challenge to provide economic safety for redundant workers and failed businesses, while also addressing the rising level of poverty, remain. There is a high possibility that we may have to learn to live with the virus (Sample 2020). As a result of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, a difficult balance between reinforcing a new green economy while keeping old jobs will remain the key tension. Reworking the politics of fear away from increasing social and national antagonisms, a successful global governance will more than ever need the support of a global civil society. The Soka Gakkai as a global civil society and grassroots network, together with similar civil society groups, working at this intermediate level that support international institutions such as the UN, may play a significant role.

How can the Soka Gakkai response tell us something about what it means to be a practicing Nichiren Buddhist now, with so many interrelated global issues facing humanity? Personhood and the meaning of human social action are intricately intertwined with how individuals relate to their society, others, and how they imagine the future of the world. The Soka Gakkai is a diverse organization and, as shown by anthropologists, what personhood means intertwines with the perceptions of situations people find themselves in. Yet, the nature of collective and organizational reactions to the current pandemic also tell us something general about how Soka Gakkai members see themselves in relation to others and to the wider world. While personhood and sense of self are always a lot messier than any neat ideal type may indicate (Conklin and Morgan 1996), and who one is or becomes in particular situations is not fixed, but continuously negotiated, is also indicated by the experiences described here.

Zoom and other digital conferencing tools may also both extend and change the boundaries of personhood. The immediacy of the crisis seems to have

“brought the present into consciousness,” as suggested by Bryant (2016, 20), in a way that intensified what it means for Soka Gakkai members to use their Buddhist practice and principles of Nichiren Buddhism to assess and respond to their specific situation. Many in the process found a deepening sense of their Soka Gakkai identity, as persons with a mission to transcend ordinary perceptions of self-other dualities, and to find deeper sources of what connects them as human beings.

The situation did not move into the domain of fate or destiny, which as suggested may be a common sentiment in Japan, but perhaps could be said to take on a new moral consciousness of social obligation. There is no single philosophical model for personhood, but there are tendencies that play out. In most Western countries, concepts such as individualism, autonomy, and ideas of independence have dominated ideals of personhood. Philosophers such as René Descartes (1596–1650) inaugurated a pervasive tendency to see individualism as typical of a well-developed person, proposing sharp boundaries between self and other, as well as between mind and body. Both boundaries have been challenged by this pandemic. Individuals persuaded of being autonomous have infringed several social obligations to others for a fairer and sustainable society, and our social contract with the future. Across the Soka Gakkai organizations, many members arose spontaneously to turn the immediate COVID-19 pandemic into strengthening a sense of “social obligation,” to recommit and address existential issues faced collectively, which undoubtedly affect different groups of people unequally. Just as the crisis was emerging, there has been a rising momentum and focus on support for Sustainable Development Goals across the Soka Gakkai organizations, and these continued to be reinforced through organizational news organs that aim to educate readers about the immediate actions necessary, as well as the longer-term goals to create a more sustainable world order.

It is the priority of personal well-being that has always challenged the need to address collective social obligations to both the near and the far-away. This was the central political problem of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s (1712–1778) Republicanism, with the present adding stark obligations towards the survival of future generations. The idea of the body as a material, biological entity belonging to an individual whose comfort mostly trump the consequences this may have for others is being challenged by the pandemic. Many would never have such choices to act according to simple individual consumer desire, as demonstrated for

example by the edited volume by Cooper and Pratten (2015). Whether the pandemic will result in deeper understanding and actions based on a reality of deep interconnectedness, which an organization such as the Soka Gakkai and other civil society groups argue, remains to be seen. The pandemic has given rise to new perceptions of the boundaries of the body as more permeable, making personal behavior increasingly the focus of self-discipline and a new moral consciousness, which may be used for public critique or praise, or for stigmatizing of others, as in the case of Japan's healthcare workers who faced a changed moral consciousness from people around them, who were now asking them to stay away (*Japan Times* 2020).

Judgments and actions are always part of specific sets of social, cultural, and political attitudes, which come to play out in terms of how self and body management is used to either deepen boundaries and separation, or overcome the conceptual classifications to create connections, and deeper understanding of existential relatedness. This will be greatly informed by the way the pandemic is communicated and interpreted, and the fundamental debates about what it means to be a person, and what our social responsibilities are to both those nearby, the far away, and future others. Soka Gakkai's particular concepts of personhood and Nichiren Buddhism as a social practice that now spans into a global network of people rooted in their local community, who seek global solidarity, has so far proven to be particularly well suited for a crisis that, together with other like-minded civil society groups, SG tend to engage with as "risk and crisis management," in a way that seek to address today's bigger issues without falling victim to a myopic view of the self and the other as existing in a dual world of competition.

Good governance has proven critical for governments, to deal effectively with the COVID-19 pandemic, something well supported by this layer of civil society. Soka Gakkai actively promoted scientifically informed, comprehensive, and detailed strategic responses, while keeping an eye on the bigger issues of furthering sustainable and equitable societies. Soka Gakkai's aptitude of linking individual behavior and collective solidarity, to create a new way of imagining a better future, is one way of creating hope.

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