

## The Political Globalization of Soka Gakkai: Center or Periphery?

Rosita Šorytė

*FOB (European Federation for Freedom of Belief)*

rosita\_soryte@hotmail.com

**ABSTRACT:** Daisaku Ikeda's yearly Peace Proposal for the year 2021 focuses on the COVID-19 crisis. Its themes may be divided in three parts, examined in this article by showing both their Buddhist roots and their practical implications. The first deals with appropriate and inappropriate personal reactions to the COVID-19 crisis, interpreted through the lenses of Buddha's poisonous arrow parable as told in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, and Nichiren's letter to a woman who lost her husband in a time of epidemic. The second is about the need for international cooperation in times of crisis, and Ikeda finds hope in the story of the cooperation between the Soviet Union and the U.S. in testing new anti-polio vaccines in the 1950s. The third is about the interaction between the COVID-19 crisis and human rights, examined by Ikeda through several Buddhist and Western precedents.

**KEYWORDS:** Soka Gakkai, Daisaku Ikeda, COVID-19 and Religion, Ikeda Peace Proposal 2021, COVID-19 and Human Rights.

### *Introduction*

The concepts of global and local, center and periphery, were studied with respect to religion long before the COVID-19 pandemic. These terms do not have the same meaning now. Since quarantine prevented most of the world's citizens to leave their homes or at least their cities and villages for long months, everything became local. But at the same time, we all experienced that conferences, seminars, and meetings did not diminish, and in fact, by moving to Zoom or other online platforms, we had more rather than less of them. Everything also became global, or perhaps we became part of a planetary experience blurring the boundaries between global and local.

Not surprisingly, this also involved Soka Gakkai and its political and social activities on behalf of world peace. As others have noted, Soka Gakkai answered COVID-19 by moving its activities online, and spreading among its members information about the best practices to contain the pandemic (Fisker-Nielsen 2020). This was not unique, as other religious movements did the same, although they rarely received credit for it (Šorytė 2020a, 2020b).

At the same time, Soka Gakkai proposed a theoretical reflection on what President Daisaku Ikeda called an unprecedented crisis in the history of humanity (Ikeda 2021, 1). Significantly, Ikeda saw the COVID-19 crisis as unprecedented and unique not only because of the exceptional number of those affected and those who died, but because it was both local and global. Everybody experienced it as local, but at the same time its global character made it initially impossible for other countries to rally in support of the most affected regions, since all countries had their own domestic COVID-19 problems. As Ikeda wrote, for example,

Following the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan in 2011, numerous countries extended various forms of support to people in the afflicted areas, which was a source of untold encouragement. When disaster strikes, such expressions of international solidarity provide vital spiritual support to those who have been impacted and who are unable to see what lies ahead. The COVID-19 crisis has struck almost all nations simultaneously, and this creates conditions of even greater complexity, chaos and confusion (Ikeda 2021, 7).

I will examine here three main points of President Ikeda's analysis of the COVID-19 crisis in his yearly Peace Proposal for the year 2021. While, as it happened in previous documents, Soka Gakkai shows a noteworthy professionalism in dealing with United Nations bodies and activities (see Šorytė 2019), I will particularly focus on the spiritual side of President Ikeda's analysis.

### *1. Personal Reactions to COVID-19*

President Ikeda notes that a large part of the population in developed countries became addicted to look for COVID-19 statistics every day, checking out in the media how many died in their countries and others. The risk is that, by watching for signs of concern or hope, we forget that behind each number there is the unique story of a human being. Ikeda quotes Angela Merkel, who in her famous COVID-19 speech to the German nation told her fellow citizens that,

These are not just abstract numbers in statistics, but this is about a father or grandfather, a mother or grandmother, a partner—this is about people (Merkel 2020).

Another risk is that, by cultivating “social distancing” for valid health reasons, we learn to become more insular and individualistic. Ikeda agrees with those who prefer to call it “physical distancing” (including World Health Organization officers: van Kerkhove 2020), to emphasize that we should put some meters between us and our friends and neighbors, but should not feel less socially engaged with them.

Finally, there is the risk that living as we did in the quarantine will become the “new normal.” We should aim to go back to what was good and valuable in our pre-COVID-19 lives, but at the same time, Ikeda writes, should consider that our old life at a global scale was not totally “normal.” There was too much injustice, too much looking to the other side when tragedies happened by which we believe we were not affected (Ikeda 2021, 4). This played a role in spreading the epidemics, as evidenced by the case of crowded and unsanitary refugee camps, and medical aid sent to developing countries wasted because of ineffective global practices or corrupted local governments. And, although scientists are still discussing this aspect, it is also possible, Ikeda says, that our disregard for Mother Nature’s needs was also a factor in the spread of the pandemic. Symbolically, but believing this will also have an effect, Soka Gakkai is honoring those who died of COVID-19 in Brazil in tragic numbers by planting one tree in the Amazon in memory of each Brazilian victim, as part of the activities of the Soka Institute of the Amazon that Ikeda worked to establish (Ikeda 2021, 3).

Soka Gakkai is a Buddhist movement, and Ikeda also offers two keys to reflect on the situation each of us experienced because of COVID-19. The first key is Buddha’s parable of the poisonous arrow. A man is shot by a poisonous arrow, and doctors suggest that the arrow’s point, which is still in his body, should be immediately removed. The man, however, insists that he wants to know first who wounded him with the arrow, from what tribe or clan he was, who ordered the archer to attack him, what kind of arrow it was, and who supplied it. Until answers to these questions are delivered to him, the man does not want the surgeon to operate. The result, the Buddha said, is that time is wasted, and when the surgeon is finally allowed to intervene, it is too late, and the man dies (Ikeda 2021, 4–5).

Ikeda is concerned with the practical value of the parable, and does not offer us in the Peace Proposal any information on its context. The story is told in the *Sutta*

*Piṭaka*, a sacred Buddhist text which is part of the Pali Canon. The poisonous arrow parable follows Buddha's refusal to answer a set of "unanswerable questions" (ten or fourteen, depending on different versions of the Canon), despite the fact that the Indian monk Malunkya tells Buddha that he will renounce Buddhism if he fails to respond. The questions include philosophical subjects such as, "Is the world eternal?" and "Is the world finite?" (Williams and Tribe 2000, 34–8).

Rather than answering, Buddha tells the story of the poisonous arrow, which has been commented and interpreted by hundreds of Buddhist masters, and by Western scholars as well. President Ikeda believes that the Buddha

uses this parable to encourage his disciples, who have a tendency toward intellectualizing and theorizing, to focus instead on matters that actually affect human life (Ikeda 2021, 5).

He quotes the interpretation by Romanian scholar of religions Mircea Eliade (1982, 50–1), who wrote that the Buddha's teachings "were not aimed at providing a systematic philosophical theory," but functioned as "a kind of medical treatment to heal human suffering." Ikeda comments that Buddha

was wholly committed to removing the poisonous arrow; in other words, removing the underlying causes of people's suffering (Ikeda 2021, 5).

This is a teaching Ikeda applies to the pandemic. Rather than quarreling and discussing about different theories about the virus, vaccines, and governments, we should first remove the arrow and do what is needed to protect ourselves.

However, Buddhist masters throughout the centuries have also observed that it would be a mistake to argue from the story that Buddha was anti-intellectual or against reflecting on the great questions of the universe, although on Buddha's ultimate attitude to these questions opinion differ (Williams and Tribe 2020, 37–8). An obvious comment is that there is a time for considering the origin of the universe, and a time for acting immediately during a crisis and postponing the philosophical discussions. If you are about to be hit by a car, jumping to avoid the collision is more useful, and certainly more urgent, than stopping to theorize on the government's policies about the cars' maximum speed.

But there will be a time for theorizing—later. And the poisonous arrow story will still be useful. Buddha refused to consider the monk's questions because they were formulated in a way implying that the mind alone would be able to answer

them. In fact, Buddha was suggesting that questions of such relevance for our life should be answered through the heart, not through the mind only, and that a purely mental answer would just inflate our ego and be of no use to us.

The second Buddhist story President Ikeda (2021, 5–6) mentions is about the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Japanese monk Nichiren (1222–1282), the originator of the tradition of which Soka Gakkai is part. Nichiren lived in a time of wars, famines, and epidemics, and both he and his disciples went through intense periods of suffering. Once, one of his devotees lost her husband. She described her life as “frozen in winter.” She was old and weak, and had an ailing son and a daughter. She doubted she would be able to take care of them for long. Nichiren’s answer can be divided in three parts.

First, he told the woman that he felt her pain as if it was his own. To our modern, cynical mindset this may seem irrelevant, but it isn’t. We all recognize sincerity, and the attitude of a true master. In a world faced with the risk of separation and insularity because of COVID-19 and its consequences, such deep communion with a friend or a genuine spiritual master may change our lives.

Second, Nichiren told the widow that “winter always turns to spring.” This is another needed lesson in a time of pandemic. We should believe in hope. If we believe that there will be no spring, we will create a reality of desperation and will perish in despair.

Giving hope is not less urgent than offering material help, but Nichiren did not forget material help either. He concluded his letter to the widow by assuring her that, whatever will happen, he will personally take care of her children. This was a delicate way of saying that, should she die, Nichiren and his community will make sure that her children will be taken care of.

Ikeda comments that we have all met people that, because of COVID-19, have been reduced to desperation. They have lost their relatives, their jobs, their security, everything.

If a person in this state is forced to shoulder the burden of their suffering alone without the support of a social safety net or personal connections, their world will remain bleak. As soon as someone takes notice of their situation and reaches out to them, however, and they feel the warm and attentive light of others illuminating their circumstances, I believe it becomes possible for them to bring forth the strength needed to rebuild their lives and regain a sense of dignity (Ikeda 2021, 6).

## *2. International Cooperation and Vaccines*

The second aspect Ikeda emphasizes in his 2021 Peace Proposal is the need of international cooperation to fight the pandemic. In developed countries, even if not all problems have been solved, we are now busy congratulating ourselves as we did more or less well in vaccinating important percentages of our populations. But this is not the case in less developed parts of the world, particularly in Africa. Soka Gakkai is an enthusiastic supporter of the COVID-19 COVAX, a global vaccine access facility that has put together private foundations and institutional actors to provide two billion vaccine doses worldwide, with 1.3 billion going to the 92 world countries with the lowest income. Although it has also encountered problems due to the difficulty of purchasing such an immense number of vaccines, COVAX has mobilized an impressive amount of resources, and Soka Gakkai is proud to have contributed to generate a widespread public support of COVAX among both politicians and the general population in Japan.

However, the world superpowers today seem more concerned to advance their international image than to cooperate with others in bringing together vaccines and support to the poorer countries.

Ikeda does not mention a Buddhist parable to illustrate what can be done but a real-life tale, and one that personally affected him. Polio has just been declared eradicated in Africa, where it was once a deadly plague, after four years without cases (World Health Organization 2020), one of the few good news of 2020. But in the 1950, when Ikeda was a young man, it was still a very serious problem in several countries, including Japan, something the population was very much afraid of.

There was a vaccine based on a small quantity of inactive (“dead”) polio virus cells, which should be injected. This vaccine was very expensive, and many in the world cannot afford it. American scientists created a vaccine based on weakened, but still active (“live”) polio virus cells, which had also the advantage that it could administered orally, and was much less expensive. There was only one problem, that it could not be tested on a large scale in the United States, because most of the population there had already been vaccinated with the injected vaccine. Then, something many considered a miracle happened. Doctors in the Soviet Union persuaded their government to test the American vaccine in their country, which was large enough to allow for the needed large-scale testing, as the only way of

stopping a global polio epidemic that might have unpredictable consequences. Against all predictions, in the heydays of the Cold War, the Soviet authorities agreed. The new anti-polio live-virus vaccine was tested in the Soviet Union, proved safe and effective, and used globally (Horstmann 1991), averting a health catastrophe in Japan and many other countries.

I myself, remembers Ikeda, have vivid memories of the way that many children in Japan were saved from polio infection through this live-virus vaccine (Ikeda 2021, 8).

We need a similar miracle now. At the time of Ikeda's Peace Proposal, the United States had not joined COVAX, but they have done it since. Russia is not part of COVAX at the time of this writing.

Ikeda also believes that a way to address the vaccine crisis is to advance international cooperation in other areas. Soka Gakkai is famous for its anti-nuclear initiatives, rooted in the dramatic Japanese experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Japan remains the only country so far that has been attacked with nuclear weapons). It is a matter of great pride for President Ikeda that the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), of which he was one of the staunchest supporters (see Šorytė 2019), entered into force on 22 January 2021, after it reached the fiftieth ratification. Ikeda believes that,

Following the precedents set by the Biological Weapons Convention and Chemical Weapons Convention, which ban those weapons of mass destruction, the entry into force of the TPNW marks the start of an era in which the continued existence of nuclear weapons on Earth has been stipulated as unacceptable by a legally binding instrument (Ikeda 2021, 20).

It is certainly a symbolic achievement. However, the United States, Russia, China, Israel, Iran, and North Korea have not signed the treaty, and within the European Union only Ireland, Austria, and Malta are currently part of it.

To illustrate why in his opinion the TPNW and COVID-19 are connected, President Ikeda (2021, 22) mentions the story of the mythical King Midas of Phrygia, told in Greek mythology and whose political significance was already noted by Greek and Roman authors (Hadjittofi 2018). Midas, a greedy king, asked god Dionysus (called Bacchus by the Romans) to give him the gift of the "golden touch." The god agreed, and everything Midas touched was converted into gold. Soon, however, Midas discovered that even the food he was about to eat, when touched by his hands or mouth, changed into gold. When he was about to die of starvation, Midas begged the god to take away the gift from him. The god

complied, telling Midas that he will lose the golden touch by washing his hands in the river Pactolus (which still exists in Turkey, and gold was found for centuries there, allegedly because of this action by Midas). The greedy king had learned his lesson.

Ikeda says supporters of nuclear weapons are in the same situation as Midas. They may believe that being in possession of nuclear weapons is a gift, but in fact all what they touch risks becoming metaphorically radioactive. According to Ikeda, this became evident during the COVID-19 crisis, not only because maintaining nuclear arsenals froze resources that might have been used in combating the pandemic, but because nuclear weapons create a climate of distrust that makes the needed global cooperation impossible (Ikeda 2021, 22).

### *3. COVID-19 and Human Rights*

The third main reflection Ikeda proposes is about COVID-19 and human rights. Soka Gakkai, which has experienced persecution and violation of its members' human rights, has always been active in promoting global human rights education.

Ikeda (2021, 12) reports that, faced with the COVID-19 crisis, one of the literary works he was led to read again was *A Journal of the Plague Year*, written in 1722 by English novelist Daniel Defoe (the author of *Robinson Crusoe*), and, although a work of fiction (Bastian 1965), based on the experience of the author's uncle during the London plague of 1665 (Defoe 1722). Proving that nothing new happens in human history, the book reports how the most fantastic rumors and conspiracy theories circulated in London in the plague year, and unpopular social and religious minorities were accused of being responsible for the epidemic and persecuted. We witnessed exactly the same during the last two years in several countries, and the COVID-19 health crisis also became a human rights crisis.

Another book Ikeda (2021, 13–4) read again during the quarantine was *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, published in 2004 by American philosopher Martha Nussbaum, which explores the role of disgust in the history of discrimination (Nussbaum 2004). When a group is labeled as evil, it elicits feelings of disgust, and it becomes easy to blame incidents the society is

concerned about to them. This happened to the Jews and other groups several times in history and, Ikeda observes, also happened with COVID-19.

However, Ikeda deepens his reflection on COVID-19 and human rights beyond the most usual comments. It is often argued, writes Ikeda (2021, 14), that we do not protect the others' human rights because we focus our love on ourselves and the group we belong to. This criticism, Ikeda observes, may be misleading. Buddhism teaches that loving ourselves first is not only normal, it is necessary. He tells the story of the king and queen of Kosala, an ancient state in India, who asked the Buddha whether they should be concerned that both of them did not love any other being more than they loved themselves. Buddha answered by reciting a poem:

Having traversed all quarters with the mind,  
One finds none anywhere dearer than oneself.  
Likewise, each person holds himself most dear.

Hence one who loves himself should not harm others (Bodhi 2000, 171).

This poem includes two teachings. The first is that it is a basic law of the universe that we love ourselves more than we love anybody else. For Buddhism, this is natural, and trying to correct it is futile and may even have very negative consequences. The second teaching is included in the verse "one who loves himself should not harm others." In fact, not harming others and helping them when in need is part of loving ourselves. Harming others will come back to us, and damage ourselves at the same time. In a broader perspective, protecting the human rights of others is the only way of guaranteeing our own human rights.

### *Conclusion*

Even in times of COVID-19, Soka Gakkai's political and social action brings the local into the global and the global into the local. Soka Gakkai members described (in private conversations with the undersigned in 2020) how much they missed their usual and exciting in-person activities and gatherings. Yet, from their own rooms and even during the strictest day of quarantine, they believed they could really do something to create a better world.

Soka Gakkai means "Society for the Creation of Values." The term *soka* as the name of the new society, Ikeda recalls, came out of a dialogue between the

founder of Soka Gakkai, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–1944), and his disciple and successor Josei Toda (1900–1958) in 1930 (Ikeda 2021, 29). “Creating values” means that, while pursuing happiness for ourselves, we can also create a society where others may find easier to create happiness for themselves.

Makiguchi likened the creation of values to the image of “the lotus flower in muddy water,” which is found in the *Lotus Sutra*, the Buddhist scripture that is at the center of the experience of Soka Gakkai (Ikeda 2021, 29). The image shows the lotus flower that blossoms and is not sullied by the muddy water; instead, it takes sustenance from it. According to Ikeda, the lotus in the muddy water means that

however deep the chaos and confusion of the times, we can refuse to let this overwhelm us, staying always true to ourselves. The limitless power of value creation, which is intrinsic to life, enables each of us to transform our circumstances into an arena where we can live out our unique mission, imparting hope and a sense of security to all those around us (Ikeda 2021, 29).

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