

Senzatomica: Transforming the Human Spirit for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons

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ABSTRACT: Senzatomica is a campaign for total nuclear disarmament promoted by the Italian Buddhist Institute Soka Gakkai, an organization affiliated with Soka Gakkai International. The article is divided into two parts. The first part provides some information on the campaign, and on the exhibitions that constitutes its main—but not only—tool for raising awareness on nuclear weapons. The second part examines the Buddhist approach that is characteristic of the Senzatomica campaign, and which makes it different from many other initiatives for nuclear disarmament that also exist in Italy

KEYWORDS: Senzatomica, Nuclear Disarmament, Inner Disarmament, Soka Gakkai, Daisaku Ikeda, Soka Gakkai in Italy, Buddhism in Italy, Buddhism and Nonviolence.

The Senzatomica Campaign

Senzatomica (“Without Atomic”) is a campaign for total nuclear disarmament promoted by the Italian Buddhist Institute Soka Gakkai. The campaign is part of a broader international anti-nuclear movement that has reframed the debate on nuclear weapons by abandoning the geopolitical perspective of national security, and embracing the perspective of what it calls human security. In this perspective, the catastrophic effects of nuclear weapons on our health, societies, and the environment must be at the center of all discussions about nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

Outlawing and eliminating nuclear weapons is essential for a genuine human-centered security founded on respect for basic rights, including rights to education, health care, decent work, and a clean environment.

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), a movement of non-governmental organizations in 60 countries, believes that discussions about nuclear weapons must focus not on narrow concepts of national security, but on the effects of these weapons on human beings—on our health, our societies, and the environment on which we all depend.

The processes that led to treaties banning landmines in 1997 and cluster munitions in 2008 demonstrated the importance of adopting a humanitarian-based discourse. New political coalitions were formed, longstanding deadlocks were broken, and two whole classes of weapons were outlawed. ICAN adopted a similar approach for nuclear weapons (ICAN 2022). Senzatomica—an official partner of ICAN—shares this approach.

One of the most important tools used during the Senzatomica campaign has been the itinerant multimedia exhibition “Senzatomica: Transforming the Human Spirit for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons” (Senzatomica 2022).

By means of evocative images, allegorical installations, and explanatory texts on panels, the exhibition aims to stimulate the reflection on nuclear disarmament. The exhibition is also an opportunity to reflect on wide-ranging issues, such as the social responsibility of science; responsibility towards future generations; the environmental impact of nuclear testing; and arms’ costs.

The exhibition Senzatomica had its official opening in Florence on 26 March 2011. Since then, it has been requested by another 80 Italian cities large and small. It has been visited by more than 365,000 people, more than 40% of whom were primary, middle, and high school students (information obtained from interviews with Senzatomica activists; I also rely on my own experience as a member of the Scientific Committee of Senzatomica).

The Senzatomica campaign is made up of ordinary people: citizens of all ages, professions, cultures, and economic status. They are members of the Italian Buddhist Institute Soka Gakkai, who put the peace commitment of the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin (1222–1282) into concrete actions: in this case, actions for nuclear disarmament.

Young people are leading the campaign. More than 15,000 volunteers have been actively involved in the exhibitions in the 80 cities, in roles such as receptionists, guides, contact persons with the media, institutions, and schools; production of didactic materials; concerts, performances, and other activities in

support of the exhibition. But in general all members of the Italian Soka Gakkai know about the campaign and promote it, at least by talking to other people.

Senzatomica is involved in many advocacy activities with parliamentarians and local representatives, and dialogues and collaborates with many other organizations that are committed to nuclear disarmament. They include organizations of scientists, such as USPID-Scientists for Disarmament, and the Pugwash Conferences, but also the Red Cross and the Italian Peace and Disarmament Network. In general, Senzatomica is willing to dialogue with all but has a policy of sharing joint initiatives only with organizations with a high level of reputation and seriousness, scientific rigor, and nonviolent approach.

Origins and Goals of Senzatomica

At the origin of Senzatomica is the teaching of Daisaku Ikeda. He has been defined as a peacebuilder, a Buddhist philosopher, an educator, and a poet. He was president of the Soka Gakkai lay Buddhist organization in Japan from 1960 to 1979, and is the founding president of Soka Gakkai International (SGI). SGI is one of the world's largest and most diverse community-based Buddhist associations. It promotes a philosophy of empowerment and social engagement for peace. Ikeda is also the founder of the Soka Schools System and several international institutions promoting peace, culture, and education (“Soka Schools” 2021).

Every year, Ikeda publishes a “Peace Proposal,” which explores the interrelation between core Buddhist concepts and the diverse challenges global society faces in its effort to realize peace and human security.

Nuclear disarmament is a recurring theme in all Ikeda's peace proposals, in the footsteps of his mentor Josei Toda (1900–1958), but in 2009 he dedicated an entire proposal, entitled “Building Global Solidarity Toward Nuclear Abolition,” to the necessity and urgency of abolishing nuclear weapons (Ikeda 2009). Senzatomica is the Italian response to this call for global solidarity.

Daisaku Ikeda's proposal on “Building Global Solidarity Toward Nuclear Abolition” contains suggestions for a five-part plan to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons. It is addressed to the states that have nuclear weapons, to the United Nations, to all states (both nuclear and non-nuclear), but above all it is

addressed to the citizens of the world, calling them to clearly manifest their will for the outlawing of nuclear weapons.

The aim of the Senzatomica campaign is for Italian citizens to become aware of the nuclear threat, to become protagonists of a parallel diplomacy, to reject the paradox of security based on nuclear weapons, and—together with the citizens of all countries—to claim the right to a world free of nuclear weapons.

An increasing awareness of nuclear weapons is fundamental. Although there has been a lot of talk in recent months about the nuclear threat because of the war in Ukraine, this subject has basically been ignored by the media for decades.

Informing about the existence of nuclear weapons and the threat they pose to humankind is essential, especially because there is a false narrative about them, a sly and ambiguous reversal of perspective whereby they are portrayed as peacekeeping tools. This is the paradox of deterrence, a peace based on the terror of mutually assured destruction: a lie, which has made the world less secure.

The aim of informing about nuclear weapons is not to frighten, but to raise the level of awareness and critical capacity of choice. Informed citizens will claim their own right to survive and to protect the next generations. In addition, they can become actors in effective actions of parallel diplomacy, i.e., that form of diplomacy characterized by informal and unofficial contacts and activities between private citizens or groups of individuals. It does not replace official diplomacy, but explores possible solutions outside the sphere of formal talks.

These objectives are intermediate steps, and converge in a common direction, which is the final goal of the campaign: the approval of a treaty banning nuclear weapons. This goal was achieved in 2017, when the United Nations General Assembly approved the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), but the campaign has certainly not concluded its mission. Now, the goal is for Italy to ratify the TPNW. The ultimate aim is the total elimination of nuclear weapons.

As the preamble of the TPNW states, a sense of urgency to ensure the security of all humanity lies at the foundation of this treaty. Its primary purpose is protecting the right to live of all the people with whom we share this planet, and ensuring the survival of generations to come.

Roots and Inspiration of Senzatomica

The Senzatomica campaign has a Buddhist approach. In general, peace building by peaceful means is at the core of the activities of SGI, following the path of Nichiren Daishonin's teaching, especially in his most important treatise.

On July 16, 1260, Nichiren presented the treatise titled *Rissho Ankoku Ron*, literally "On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land," to the political ruler of the day. This was a passionate cry for a return to the original purpose of Buddhism, securing the peace and happiness of the people. For Nichiren, this was an objective that could only be achieved through a philosophy that rigorously upholds the infinite dignity and potential of each individual.

If we wish first of all to bring security to the nation and to pray for our present and future lives, then we must hasten to examine and consider the situation and take measures as soon as possible to remedy it (Nichiren 1999, 24).

Nichiren's impassioned remonstrance to the authorities was motivated by his deep wish for peace and happiness for the people. Specifically, he was speaking out to prevent the outbreak of war in the form of internal strife and foreign invasion.

The Buddhist approach of Senzatomica is evident in the two pillars outlined in the above mentioned Daisaku Ikeda's Peace Proposal of 9 September 2009, entitled "Building Global Solidarity Toward Nuclear Abolition." These pillars are: respect for the dignity of life in all its manifestations; and strong belief that an individual transformation will lead to positive changes in both local and international communities.

With regard to the first pillar—respect for the dignity of life in all its manifestations—, Ikeda often quotes a fundamental Buddhist teaching:

Life is the most precious of all treasures. One day of life is more valuable than all the treasures of the major world system (Nichiren 1999, 955).

In this perspective, all the treasures in the universe cannot replace a single life. The life of each individual is a priceless treasure full of infinite possibilities and nothing is more precious or has a higher value than life.

The destruction of any nation or state is unacceptable, even if it were to be justified as essential to the maintenance of world peace. Likewise, the sacrifice of ordinary citizens cannot be justified in the name of achieving security for the state (Ikeda 2009, 5).

The second pillar—the strong belief that an individual transformation will lead to positive changes in local/international communities—is the most original aspect of Ikeda’s thought on nuclear disarmament.

In Ikeda’s vision, nuclear disarmament can only be the result of a profound transformative path in relationships, both between states and between people. In fact, Ikeda believes that the real significance of achieving a world free of nuclear weapons is by no means limited to their physical elimination. Rather, it involves transforming the very nature of states and interstate relations.

If we are to put the era of nuclear terror behind us, we must struggle against the real “enemy.” That enemy is not nuclear weapons per se, nor is it the states that possess or develop them. The real enemy that we must confront is the ways of thinking that justify nuclear weapons; the readiness to annihilate others when they are seen as a threat or as a hindrance to the realization of our objectives (Ikeda 2009, 12).

This way of thinking—and this destructive option—operates at all levels of relationships: between states (with various forms of “destruction” of the enemy, of which nuclear weapons are the highest manifestation); between communities; between groups; between individuals.

The concept of transformation is essential. It begins with the transformation of the way of thinking, especially of the way of thinking that considers the option “total destruction of the other” as a viable way to resolve a conflict. Consequently, disarmament must first of all be “inner disarmament.”

“Inner disarmament” is a non-violent approach to conflicts of whatever nature for their transformation. It is transformation guided by dialogue, animated by creativity in the search for solutions based first and foremost on the recognition of the dignity of the other.

Pope Francis, who is very committed to nuclear disarmament, also draws attention to the need for a moral disarmament, which he calls “integral disarmament.” Worthy of note, in this perspective, is the address to participants in the International Symposium “Prospects for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons and for Integral Disarmament,” of November 10, 2017 (Francis 2017).

In that message, the Pope quoted the words of his predecessor John XXIII (1881–1963) in the 1963 encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris*:

Unless this process of disarmament be deep and complete, and reach men's very souls, it is impossible to stop the arms race, or to reduce armaments, or—and this is the main thing—to abolish them entirely (John XXIII 1963, no. 113).

Ikeda often strongly emphasizes the power of dialogue:

The power to move people at the deepest level is not found in formulaic assertions or dogma, but in words that issue from a person's experience and carry the weight of that lived reality. Exchanges conducted in such language can mine the rich veins of our common humanity, bringing back to the surface glistening spiritual riches that will illuminate human society. This is the conviction that has supported me over the years as I have conducted dialogue with people of different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds. It is indeed in the encounter between people whose paths in life have differed that our eyes are opened to vistas that would not otherwise have been visible. It is in the resonance of people encountering each other in the fullness of their humanity that the melodies of a new creative energy unfold. This is the true significance of dialogue: It can serve as a treasure house of possibilities, a dynamo for the creation of history (Ikeda 2016, 10).

But dialogue is not simple. Ikeda outlines the spiritual effort of a transformative dialogue:

Peace is always a competition between resignation and hope. Dialogue is the arduous and continuous effort to remove all obstacles that obscure our common humanity. Authentic dialogue is a deep and uninterrupted spiritual effort that seeks to bring about fundamental human transformation both in ourselves and in others (Ikeda 2007).

In the *Lotus Sutra*, there are figures who embody the capacity for dialogue: for example, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, who seek wisdom with perseverance and diligence, or the Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, who bows respectfully before anyone, with absolute conviction of the existence of the Buddha nature in himself and others, and with unshakable faith in the infinite possibilities of change.

From this point of view, the teachings of Daisaku Ikeda and the nonviolent tradition of Buddhism converge in the general paradigm of nonviolence. The ways of dialogue, soft power, inner disarmament, are not naïveté, nor do they make people vulnerable. The dialogue master is not a loser, a weak person, but a person of exceptional self-control, with an extraordinary capacity to embrace the other, and a tenacious attitude to protect life.

Everybody may become a dialogue master. There is consistency with Buddhist teachings in the behavior of Senzatomica campaigners. The volunteers are not experts per se but common people who studied the issue, passing from “not

knowing” to “knowing and willing to get other people to know.” They are ordinary citizens, who feel in their lives “the competition between resignation and hope” and ask themselves the crucial question: what can I do? What can I do for peace in my daily life? At what point is my inner disarmament?

All campaigners participate in a training on the Senzatomica campaign’s topics of nuclear disarmament and on its Buddhist inspiration, and deepen the link between exterior disarmament and inner disarmament. They study, and put what they study into practice. They challenge themselves in their daily lives to practice disarmament in their family, social, and work relationships. By making the decision to take daily action to reduce conflict with others, to speak with the persons in front of them, to share their humanity on its deepest level, they are fighting against their own sense of powerlessness, which on its greatest scale manifests itself as passive acceptance of the existence of nuclear weapons.

The practice of dialogue is a very visible characteristic of the campaigners. It emerges in their dealing with visitors to Senzatomica’s exhibition, with institutions at all levels, and with other organizations.

I find this aspect especially remarkable. Determined to inherit the spirit of the *hibakusha*, those who survived the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, Senzatomica’s campaigners continue to move forward in building a world liberated from the nuclear deterrence theory, and in which all world citizens are encouraged to dialogue with each other, creating a culture of peace and trust.

On a potentially controversial issue such as nuclear weapons, there is a constant search for common ground with the interlocutor, the construction of an area of mutual sharing and recognition, an effort to carefully listen to the reasons of the other. Ultimately, rather than an attempt to convince, Senzatomica is about a firm determination to create value in relationships.

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