

Ecoselves as Part of Ecosystems: What Can Daisaku Ikeda's Philosophy and Practice Contribute to a Cultural Transformation Regarding Attitudes and Behaviors Towards Climate Change?

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ABSTRACT: Mahayana Buddhism has for thousands of years posited that all life is interdependent and deeply interconnected, and that human beings are embedded in nature and their environment. Drawing on ideas from Deep Ecology and social change, this article investigates Daisaku Ikeda and Soka Gakkai's contribution to social transformation based on the conviction that change in the intention, purpose, and consciousness of an individual can influence the whole ecosystem. Daisaku Ikeda has developed the concept of Buddhist humanism calling for awakened change agents who can generate a sense of solidarity with our fellow inhabitants of this planet and inspire collective action for the sake of future generations. Using examples from Ikeda's writings and the application of his philosophy and socially engaged Buddhist practice as a starting point, this article begins to explore how the inner, spiritual transformation of individuals and communities might be able to impact wider social and cultural transformation.

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai, Soka Gakkai International, Social Change, Social Transformation, Spiritual Transformation, Daisaku Ikeda, Deep Ecology, Change Agents.

Introduction

We are living in a time of biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate crisis, and many people working in the environmental space are suggesting that, as well as scientific data, we need “a spiritual and cultural transformation” (Speth 2016) to effectively deal with the problems facing us. Together with many others, I suggest that making superficial, “outer” changes to the systems we live in is not enough and that an inner spiritual revolution is necessary. My question is: what can help us create this spiritual transformation, and how might it deal with the root causes of our collective problems?

This research is inspired by my own inner journey as a practicing Buddhist of over thirty years with the lay organisation Soka Gakkai International (SGI), of which Daisaku Ikeda (1928–2023) was the third president responsible for making it a world-wide religious movement. The Soka Gakkai and Daisaku Ikeda’s philosophy are based on the 13th Century priest Nichiren’s (1222–1282) understanding that the *Lotus Sutra* contains Shakyamuni’s (according to traditional dates, 566–466 BCE) ultimate teachings—that everyone can attain Buddhahood or enlightenment in this life-time just as we are—and that we can do it by chanting *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō*, the title of the *Lotus Sutra*.

This article is also inspired by my search for how to best respond to the climate and ecological crises, and to find a way I can personally help myself and others navigate the often seemingly overwhelming interconnected challenges facing us. This quote by environmental lawyer James Gustave Speth has provided a starting point for my thinking:

I used to think that the top global environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address these problems, but I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy, and to deal with these we need a spiritual and cultural transformation (Speth 2016).

Speth points to the fact that we need collective inner spiritual transformation to create a collective cultural transformation, which leads me to the question—how might we be able to create this social and cultural transformation, and in what way can our inner spiritual transformation contribute to it?

Here I will explore some of Daisaku Ikeda’s unique contributions to the subject matter. I will first give a brief explanation of some useful Mahayana Nichiren Buddhist concepts with examples of Ikeda’s interpretation, then I will briefly elucidate the idea of Deep Ecology, and lastly I will investigate the process of social transformation and the relationship between inner transformation, or what Daisaku Ikeda and his mentor Jōsei Toda (1900–1958) call “human revolution,” and outer change or engaged Buddhist practice.

Some Mahayana/ Nichiren Buddhist Concepts

Engi (Japanese) is possibly more familiar in the West as *pratitya-samutpada* (Sanskrit) or *paticca samuppada* (Pali). It is difficult to translate but some of its meanings are “dependent origination,” “interdependent co-arising,”

“interconnection,” or what Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thích Nhất Hạnh (1926–2022) termed “Interbeing.” It can best be described by the metaphor of Indra’s Net. In Hindu mythology, the god Indra has a beautiful net that spans the entire universe and at each intersection of this net there is a precious jewel. When any strand of the net is moved, it activates all the jewels in the universe, which in turn reflect each other. This is a visceral depiction of how each of our actions can potentially have a huge impact—both positively and negatively.

Ikeda posits that an awareness of our deep interconnection with all life can help our actions be more impactful. We can become aware that we are the universe experiencing itself. Ikeda explains,

Buddhism uses the term “dependent origination” (Jpn. *engi*) to describe symbiotic relations. Nothing—no one—exists in isolation. Each individual existence functions to bring into being the conditions that in turn sustain all other existences. Reality is understood more in terms of relationality and interdependence than in terms of discrete individualities. All things, mutually supportive and related, form a living cosmos, what modern philosophy might term a semantic whole. This is the conceptual framework through which Mahayana Buddhism views the natural universe (Ikeda 1993).

Another useful Buddhist concept is the “three poisons” or “evils,” which are inherent in all human beings. These are greed, anger, and delusion. Collectively they lead to the systemic problems we find ourselves entangled in:

–*greed*: always wanting more and never being satisfied—leads to consumerism and social injustice;

–*anger* on a collective level is expressed as militarism and warfare;

–*delusion* or blindness to the fact that all life inherently possesses Buddha nature (life’s highest potential) leads to collective spiritual crisis and alienation expressed as separation from the self, from “others,” and the Earth. This sense of human alienation or separation has led to the creation of the climate and ecological crises.

In Buddhist doctrine the antidotes to these three poisons are the three qualities of the Buddha: compassion, courage, and wisdom. Ikeda writes,

Buddhism teaches that earthly desires—the three poisons of greed, anger, and foolishness inherent in human life—are the fundamental cause of unhappiness and suffering. Buddhahood is the underlying power of the universe that can vanquish these poisons. It is the highest and noblest state of life. Buddhism teaches that all people possess this life state within them.

The life state of Buddhahood, in short, is the function of supreme compassion and wisdom and the source of all life activity. Bringing forth our Buddhahood gives us the power to transcend the self that is controlled or swayed by desire and suffering, and establish our original, true self (Ikeda 2011b, 84).

Here Ikeda expresses the importance of us human beings transcending our self-centered “small” self and transforming our earthly desires by bringing forth our inherent Buddhahood, which SGI members do through the process of chanting *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō* and reaching out to others. He sees this as the basis for socially engaged Buddhist practice.

Engaged Buddhism

The idea of “Engaged Buddhism,” also known as “modern socially engaged Buddhism” emerged in Asia in the mid-20th century as a term coined by Thích Nhất Hạnh (Hạnh 1967). It encompasses many different ways of applying Buddhist *dharma* to contemporary social, political, economic, and environmental crises and suffering, and it manifests as Buddhist social activism through non-violent means.

Although not always explicitly linked to the movement, I argue that Daisaku Ikeda is a prominent proponent of “Engaged Buddhism” and that the practices of the SGI movement aim to embody it. In SGI there is a strong emphasis on reaching out to others and engaging in society. Although historically this has not always been applied in terms of action regarding the climate and ecological crises, in 2020–21 in the run up to COP26 in Glasgow SGI-UK, together with the Centre for Applied Buddhism, took huge steps to educate and inspire its membership.

Regarding ecological and climate action, David Loy who together with Joanna Macy is an influential figure in the Engaged Buddhist movement in the West, has an effective explanation of the “dual path” of Buddhist practice (Loy 2018). He asserts that inner transformation through Buddhist practice and outer climate or ecological action should by necessity be mutual and interactive. SGI practice operates in a similar way, and Ikeda explains it as the two kinds of *Daimoku* (chanting): the *Daimoku* of faith, which is the inner, spiritual work we do to fight our delusions, and the *Daimoku* of practice, which consists of chanting for ourselves and others, and taking action (Ikeda 2011a).

David Loy also coined the phrase *Ecosattva*, a contemporary incarnation of the Buddhist *bodhisattva* who eliminates suffering and brings joy (Loy 2018). *Ecosattvas* work and practice on behalf of all life (people, nature, and ecology),

look at the root causes of our problems, and transform the three poisons, in themselves as well as systemically in society. Those who choose to act as *Ecosattvas* realign their motivation and use their Buddhist practice for the good of the deeply interconnected web of life.

Deep Ecology

“Deep Ecology” is a term coined by Norwegian philosopher and activist Arne Næss (1912–2009) in 1973 and has often been seen as the spiritual aspect of the ecology movement. It consists of a holistic worldview in contrast to a “shallow” anthropocentric approach to ecology, which has often focused on short-term technological solutions to our crises. In contrast, Deep Ecology aims to look at the deeper causes. It posits that,

–The flourishing of all human and nonhuman life on earth has inherent value independent to their usefulness to human purposes;

–An ideological change is necessary—from continual growth economies to appreciating quality of life;

–Diverse philosophies of nature are embraced—including the Gaia principle and seeing Planet Earth as living, creative, and evolving, and nature as continually creating itself based on a principle of compassion (Næss 2008).

Deep Ecology also aims to act as a political platform by unifying a diversity of activists with the intention of affecting policy change. It adopts the methodology of deeply questioning the underlying causes of our crises and acts as a movement, which embraces spiritual and religious approaches.

Næss was influenced by a variety of religions and philosophies including Buddhism, the thought of Gandhi (1869–1948), and Christianity. Deep Ecology shares a similar worldview and methodology with Ikeda's Buddhism: the understanding of the interconnection of all life and the inherent dignity and worth of all life as well as a spiritual approach to creating change. It shares a similar methodology or approach to social change with the belief that a deep transformation can only take place collectively and that it requires collaboration. However, Deep Ecology does not fully explore how this change might happen,

whereas Ikeda and the SGI have a clear approach to spiritual and social transformation.

At this point, I will investigate some aspects of “transformative capacity” and “social transformation” as defined in the social sciences.

Transformative Capacity and Social Transformation

According to Christine Wamsler and her colleagues, a well-developed sense of one’s own agency is one of the main transformative qualities needed in an evolution of change and consciousness (Wamsler et al. 2021). In SGI and Ikeda’s philosophy and practice, this sense of agency is constantly being developed through the world-wide discussion meeting movement where practitioners and guests meet on a monthly basis, locally in small groups, to dialogue, discuss, and encourage each other in their inner transformation, as well as in taking outer action.

Furthermore, according to Gina Ziervogel, Anna Cowen, and John Ziniades, agency includes an enhanced ability for cooperation and co-creation as well as “creativity,” which is developed through a “strong social cohesion” based on a sense of belonging within community (Ziervogel, Cowen, and Ziniades 2016, 8–9). These qualities are also nurtured through the SGI discussion meeting movement where close collaboration between a very diverse membership is constantly required. Ikeda often stated that this process of steady inner change and the development of agency through heart-to-heart interaction and dialogue is what leads to collective social and cultural transformation.

Mark G. Edwards identifies social transformation as a “discontinuous... qualitative shift towards a more adaptive form of organising,” which “involves the whole system at all levels, including both visible, objective aspects and invisible, subjective elements of individuals, groups and structures” (Edwards 2010, 30).

He points to the fact that in change processes there is a “fundamental realignment of personal attitudes, consciousness, motivation, beliefs and spirituality” (Edwards 2010, 31), pointing to the importance of focusing on the transformation of people’s inner qualities such as values and beliefs, purpose and meaning, both individually and collectively.

In my recent research with young people from South-East Asia, data showed that an enhanced engagement with climate and ecology, as well as increased action was based on an interactive process of both individual and collective transformation processes. Participants’ changed values and behaviors became

more embedded and sustained when they were involved in regular collective reflection and exchange with like-minded others, which also contributed to a sense of belonging.

I suggest that in this respect SGI, together with other religions and ecology movements, can in many ways act as learning communities. They can support collaboration and collective transformation in an iterative interaction with constant personal self-reformation.

With her term “change agent,” Judith Chapman expresses how in “transformational change” every person can be identified as a “change agent” in so far as they have been involved in contributing to the change (Chapman 2002). Ikeda picked up this term as a contemporary way of expressing the idea of a Buddha or an “awakened one”—someone in the process of “human revolution,” or inner spiritual change involved in taking outer action. He describes the process of iterative inner and social transformation in the face of the climate crisis,

Buddhism describes this transformation in the depths of consciousness as follows: “We burn the firewood of earthly desires and behold the fire of enlightened wisdom before our eyes.” Rather than allowing the anger or grief we feel about our present circumstances to find outlet in acts that harm or degrade others, we must expand and elevate those feelings to become the motivation for action to counter the social ills and threats that bring suffering to ourselves and others. Buddhism teaches that such transformation enables us to live lives that illuminate society with the qualities of courage and hope (Ikeda 2012).

He also writes that,

A great human revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation and, further, can even enable a change in the destiny of all humankind (Ikeda 1995, viii).

Conclusion

Ikeda and the SGI have laid a huge emphasis on education, in addition to taking other forms of social and environmental action. One of Ikeda and SGI's main purposes is to inspire people with hope, courage, creativity, and joy, as well as the understanding that if we take even just one small action, we can contribute creatively to the interconnected web of life. The *Sowing Seeds of Hope and Action* exhibition, created by Soka Gakkai International and the Earth Charter International, shows through many examples how this can be done. In 2021,

SGI-UK and the Centre for Applied Buddhism showed this exhibition at COP26 in Glasgow as well as organizing accompanying events around the exhibition. These included intra- and interfaith panel discussions, events which gave young activists from the global south a platform, and cultural celebrations based on the exhibition's principles of "Inspire, Learn, Reflect, Empower, Act."

Although there is still much to be done in terms of the SGI membership gaining a deeper understanding of both the natural and human-made systems and being involved more deeply in climate and ecological action, SGI offers a strong dual practice of inner and outer transformation. This iterative process helps develop a strong sense of individual and collective agency leading towards creative collaboration and the steady development of "change agents."

In a message sent on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition in Glasgow Ikeda wrote,

The purpose of this exhibition is not simply to sound the alarm and raise concern among the viewers. Many of the panels showcase the visible joy of those who are courageously working to realize change in different places around the world. The exhibition aims to generate a sense of solidarity with our fellow inhabitants of this planet and to inspire collective action for the sake of future generations.

The role of the world's forests as carbon sinks that can mitigate climate change has gained increasing attention in recent years. I believe it is equally important to foster people who, as awakened change agents, will grow and spread like a protective canopy for our world, generating the much-needed momentum for building a sustainable society. The objective of this exhibition is thus to sow the seeds of hope and action in each individual (Ikeda 2021).

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