

**The Treasure Tower: The Peace Proposal 2020,  
Daisaku Ikeda’s “Last Word” on Climate Action**

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**ABSTRACT:** 2019 saw both a series of catastrophic weather events and the United Nations Climate Action Summit, where one third of United Nations member states announced policies aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050. These themes figure prominently in Daisaku Ikeda’s 2020 Peace Proposal, largely devoted to climate change and the need for effective climate action. Ikeda discussed there his meetings with Kenyan environmental activist Wangari Maathai and the importance of her Green Belt Movement. Both Maathai and British American activist Hazel Henderson and her fight against air pollution were featured in the Soka Gakkai exhibition “Seeds of Hope.” Ikeda also mentioned the UN Youth Climate Summit that took place ahead of the Climate Action Summit and called for a “youth-led climate action.” In analyzing the Peace Proposal 2020, the paper emphasizes that Ikeda’s plans for climate action have a specific Buddhist root. They refer to the *Lotus Sutra*’s principle that Buddha’s *sahā* world—our world of suffering and crises—and the paradisiac Land of Eternally Tranquil Light are not separated. By changing ourselves and accepting the Buddha’s teaching, we can change the *sahā* world into the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light. The *Lotus Sutra* expressed this hope through the image of the Treasure Tower, which with its shining light emerges in the *sahā* world and transforms it into the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light.

**KEYWORDS:** Daisaku Ikeda, Soka Gakkai, Ikeda 2020 Peace Proposal, United Nations Climate Action Summit, Greenhouse Gas Emissions.

The 2020 Peace Proposal (Ikeda 2020) can be considered as Daisaku Ikeda’s (1928–2023) last comprehensive statement on climate action. Although Ikeda also mentioned climate issues in the 2021 and 2022 Peace Proposals, the text of 2020 offers an in-depth analysis, highlighting not only practical issues but also the ultimate Buddhist roots of his concern for climate. In the first part of this paper, I will examine some contemporary climate-related issues and theories discussed in the 2020 Peace Proposal (which, as usual in these documents, also mentioned problems other than climate). In the second part, I will illustrate how Ikeda’s approach to climate was rooted in the religious thought of Buddha Shakyamuni

(according to traditional dates, 566–466 BCE), Nichiren (1222–1282), and his predecessors as Presidents of Soka Gakkai, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–1944) and Jōsei Toda (1900–1958).

### *I. Ikeda and Some Contemporary Climate-Related Issues*

There are six important references I will now examine in the 2020 Peace Proposal: to different theories of disasters and their victims; to Anthony Giddens' idea of "ontological security"; to Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement; to Hazel Henderson's campaigns against air pollution; to the role of the United Nations—and finally to a youth-oriented climate action.

#### 1. Theories of Disasters

The year 2019 saw several weather disasters:

record heatwaves in Europe, India and elsewhere, and super typhoons and torrential rains triggered flooding around the world. The havoc wrought by the massive wildfires in Australia continues (Ikeda 2020, 1).

In Japan,

Typhoons Faxai and Hagibis struck different regions with ferocious wind and rain, causing extensive flooding and leaving broad swathes of the country without power or water, shredding the fabric of daily life (Ikeda 2020, 2).

Ikeda appeared to be familiar with the modern academic scientific discipline of disaster studies, which was dominated for many years by the paradigm of vulnerability. In the words of disaster scholar Anthony Oliver-Smith, the paradigm was initially

welcomed for identifying the root causes of disaster and locating them within society. In addition to foregrounding structural factors, it also extended the spatial and temporal horizons of disaster research (Oliver-Smith 1994, 31).

Echoing vulnerability theories, Ikeda noted that in natural disasters, including those caused by climate change, the most dramatic

impacts tend to be concentrated on and felt by people already afflicted by poverty and those in the more vulnerable sectors of society, such as women, children and the elderly. Such people are more exposed to danger and have greater difficulty rebuilding their lives in the aftermath of a disaster necessitating appropriate and continuous support (Ikeda 2020, 2).

In other words, there is no such a thing as a purely “natural” disaster, as its consequences derive from previous vulnerabilities, whose causes are human-made (Cannon 1994).

However, in 21<sup>st</sup> century disaster studies

Research on vulnerability was increasingly replaced by work on resilience. Resilience was first formulated as the antithesis of, and solution to, vulnerability. This seemed to have the advantage of restoring agency to disaster victims and of opening up thinking about the ways in which disasters impact different people, and how they in turn respond and recover (Matthewman and Uekusa 2021, 966).

While resilience theories are not without problems (Uekusa 2018), they have the advantage of regarding those who suffer disasters not only as victims but as agents whose reactions largely determine the final outcome. Ikeda agreed and mentioned the fact that the Toda Peace Institute, which he founded, was conducting a research project on the effects of climate change on Pacific Island communities (Ikeda 2020, 2). He also mentioned that Soka Gakkai was regularly “engaging in emergency relief activities and recovery activities in times of disaster” (Ikeda 2020, 27).

## 2. Anthony Giddens’s “Ontological Security”

Precisely when discussing the Toda Peace Institute’s report on “Climate Change, Migration and Land in Oceania,” Ikeda quotes the report’s reference to “ontological security.” Although he is not mentioned in the original Japanese text of the 2020 Peace Proposal, the concept was developed by Anthony Giddens, one of the most influential contemporary sociologists, in his 1984 book *The Constitution of Society* (Giddens 1984), and further discussed in his 1991 work *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Giddens 1991). As summarized by Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological security is security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice” (Mitzen 2006, 344). While the world around us changes continuously, we need to believe that, although we also change, in a fundamental way our personal boundaries are stable, and we remain the same persons.

Today, ontological security is threatened in different ways. American sociologist Sherry Turkle, for example, argued as early as 1995 that the Internet puts ontological security at risk because by spending hours in front of a computer we assume multiple identities and may lose the integrity and unity of

the self. Obviously, this is even more true today than when Turkle wrote her classical book *Life on the Screen* some twenty years ago (Turkle 1995).

A note box in the English translation of Ikeda's 2020 Peace Proposal (not present in the original Japanese text) added that today

ontological security is threatened by anthropogenic climate change. On a societal level, migration from environments degraded by climate change breaks the continuity of the bond between people and their land, and compromises the material, social and cultural aspects of security (Ikeda 2020, 2).

Drawing, again, on the research work of the Toda Peace Institute, Ikeda focused on the situation of the inhabitants of small islands in the Pacific Ocean. Because of climate change, rising ocean levels flood their ancestral lands. They are compelled to leave their homes and move to other islands, sometimes even to other countries or continents. International cooperation may be able to give them a new home, but this would not solve the problem of the loss of ontological security. "The loss of the land is equivalent to a fundamental loss of identity," Ikeda argued, causing "irreparable pain" (Ikeda 2020, 2).

### 3. Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement

Coming to possible solutions to problems created by climate change, Ikeda offered a vivid reminiscence of his 2005 meeting with Kenyan environmental activist Wangari Maathai (1940–2011). She had just become in 2004 the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Maathai's main concern was the deforestation and the reduction of the areas preserved both as national parks and city parks in her native Kenya to make room for industrial projects and commercial real estate. She connected these developments with the rise of authoritarian governments and corruption, which led her to be repeatedly arrested and fired from her position as a college professor and put her life at risk.

She encouraged Kenyan women to react in a very simple way, by planting trees. In 1977, she founded the Green Belt Movement, whose activities started with the planting of just seven trees. The movement extended to other African countries and later to all continents. By 2020, 15 billion trees had been planted, and the Green Belt Movement hopes to double this figure by the end of the current decade (Trillion Tree Campaign 2024).

Although raised a Roman Catholic, Maathai argued that both Christianity and African indigenous spirituality should be mobilized to persuade African women

that planting trees might be both an ecologically significant act and a spiritual experience (Maathai 2010; van Klinken 2021). Increasingly interested in non-Christian religions in the last years of her life, she was deeply impressed by her visit to Japan and to Soka University and included Buddhist references and terminology in her later works (Kinefuchi, Mutua, González, and Wolbert 2018, 156–57).

In turn, Ikeda recalled his and Soka University students' meeting with Maathai noting that it occurred just two days after the Kyoto Protocol to reduce greenhouse gas emissions entered into force:

We discussed her work of igniting hope toward the creation of a new world starting in her immediate surroundings. Reflecting upon the Green Belt Movement, which began with the planting of just seven saplings, Dr. Maathai asserted: 'The future does not exist in the future. Rather, it is born only through our actions in the present, and if we want to realize something in the future, we must take action toward it now.' I vividly recall Dr. Maathai's beaming smile and how it swept across her face like a spring breeze as students from Soka University welcomed her with a rousing rendition of the Green Belt Movement song in Kikuyu, her native language: *This is our land. It is our mission to plant trees here.* As I watched her mouth the lyrics and move in rhythm with the song, I couldn't help but feel that I was witnessing the joy that comes from engaging in the challenge of construction. This joy, emanating from her entire being, had served as the driving force that enabled the tree-planting movement to spread throughout Africa from its start in Kenya (Ikeda 2020, 10).

#### 4. Hazel Henderson's Fight Against Air Pollution

In 2020, Soka Gakkai International in cooperation with Earth Charter International, launched a second edition of the exhibition *Seeds of Hope & Action*, which had been first held in 2010. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the second edition was first launched in several countries online. The exhibition, which continues to be physically exhibited and includes twenty-five panels, features among others the work of Wangari Maathai and of British-American "futurist" Hazel Henderson (1933–2022).

While Maathai was an academic, Henderson had only a British high school degree when she moved to New York in 1957. As a young mother, she noted the adverse effect on her daughter of the city's air pollution. She gathered other concerned parents and co-founded Citizens for Clean Air. Eventually, the organization grew to some 20,000 members and was able to have both state and federal pollution control laws passed in the United States. It was also due to Henderson's efforts that air quality data are now included in most weather reports

available on the Internet and on cell phones. Despite not having a college degree herself, she was invited to teach as a lecturer at the University of California in Santa Barbara and Berkeley, sharing her lifelong experience as an anti-pollution activist.

Ikeda noted how Henderson, like Maathai, did not limit herself to complain but took decisive action to improve the quality of the environment. This corresponded to the Buddhist concept of transmuting pain into energy. In the case of Maathai and Henderson, Ikeda wrote

the experience of acute distress made them intensely aware of the things they treasure, things the world cannot afford to lose. But they did not let that pain paralyze them... Henderson began working with like-minded individuals out of her desire to enable children to breathe clean air again. In both cases, they [Maathai and Henderson] transmuted their pain into the energy of construction that would enable them to actualize the world they hoped to see (Ikeda 2020, 11).

## 5. The Role of the United Nations

As I have noted in previous articles on SGI President Ikeda, I was always impressed by his and Soka Gakkai's professionalism in dealing with the complicated machinery of the United Nations (Šorytė 2019, 2021, 2022). While certainly aware of the limitations of the United Nations, and proposing in several of the forty annual Peace Proposals he published between 1983 and 2022 substantial reforms of their regulations, Ikeda directed Soka Gakkai to cooperate with the international organization and its agencies. A main concern of Soka Gakkai has always been the abolition of nuclear weapons, but Ikeda argues that nuclear annihilation and climate change are twin evils threatening the very survival of humanity.

In the 2020 Peace Proposal, he summarized what had been achieved at the United Nations level in the fight against climate change. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was adopted in 1992. The UN Conference on Environment and Development also known as the Earth Summit was held in Rio de Janeiro in the same year 1992. The Kyoto Protocol aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions was adopted in 1997 and entered into force in 2005. By 2020, 120 countries had ratified it, although the list did not include the United States and Canada, having originally ratified the protocol in 2004, withdrew from it in 2012. The Paris Agreement on climate change was adopted in 2015 and signed in 2016. It was ratified by almost all countries of the world.

Among the large emitters of greenhouse gas the only country that did not ratify it was Iran. Under the administration of Donald Trump, the United States withdrew from the agreement, but President Joe Biden re-entered it once elected. Trump has suggested that the U.S. may withdraw again from the Paris Agreement if he is re-elected as President this year. Finally, 2019 saw the United Nations Climate Action Summit, where one third of United Nations member states announced policies aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050.

Soka Gakkai and its associate organizations have been major non-state stakeholders in supporting the United Nations action against climate change and campaigning to persuade countries to ratify the various treaties. They have not always been successful, but certainly their conferences, publications, and exhibitions have raised awareness of the climate change problems in several countries. No world religious leader has been more active and effective than President Ikeda in these campaigns.

## 6. Youth-Oriented Climate Action

When Ikeda published the 2020 Peace Proposal, the United Nations Youth Climate Summit of September 2019 was still fresh in the memory of eco-activists throughout the world. Ikeda made a passing reference to the speech there of young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, then 16 years old, at a time when scholars were debating whether Thunberg was inventing a new language and even a new body language and changing the rules of the ecological game (Olthof 2021). The emphasis on Thunberg has since decreased. While she had impressed the world as a girl able to mobilize the world teenagers in a global ecological movement, she is today a young woman with clear political positions not everybody agrees with. She has also been criticized for some radical proposals including the public “flight shame” directed at those who use airplanes (she doesn’t, and travels to United States by boat) because of their greenhouse gas emissions.

Ikeda, however, did not focus on Thunberg as an individual activist but saw as a positive development the increasing involvement of young people in campaigns against climate change. Soka Gakkai’s Youth Division has been especially active in this field.

## *II. The Buddhist Roots of Ikeda's Climate Action*

Ikeda did not approach the question of climate change as a politician but as a religious leader. He firmly believed that Buddhism offered deep motivations to those willing to fight climate change and ultimately indicated the most effective way to achieve results, by changing ourselves to change the world around us. In the 2020 Peace Proposal, he referred to four Buddhist teachers crucial for himself and his disciples: Buddha Shakyamuni, Nichiren, and the first and second Presidents of Soka Gakkai, Makiguchi and Toda.

### 1. Shakyamuni and King Ajatashatru

Somewhat surprisingly, when referring to Buddha Shakyamuni, the 2020 Peace Proposal presents a reflection on King Ajatashatru of Magadha, who reigned in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE and was an important but controversial figure in the history of India. According to the tradition, as crown prince of Magadha he became a disciple of Devadatta, an early Buddhist monk who promoted a schism and repeatedly tried to assassinate the Buddha. Devadatta persuaded the crown prince to kill his own father and became the new king. In this capacity, he tried to help Devadatta in his unsuccessful assassination attempts against the Buddha.

What interested Ikeda in the history of the evil king is that he eventually fell prey to severe illness and in his last days was abandoned and shunned by his courtiers and friends. At this time, the Buddha himself was about to die. According to the *Nirvana Sutra*, he told his disciples that “I shall, for the sake of Ajatashatru, live.” The Buddha did not allow himself to die until he was able to meet the king and forgive him. The king was cured of his illness, repented of his evil ways, and joined the Buddhist community. Why the Buddha delayed his own death and entrance into Nirvana for the sake of a king who had conspired to assassinate him was, as the Buddha himself told his disciples, “hard for you to understand.” However, he explained that the king had become a universal figure whose significance went beyond his physical existence. He was a representative of “all those who have committed the five deadly sins,” “have not yet aspired to unsurpassed Enlightenment,” and if they do not repent “will assuredly suffer eternal death” (*The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra* 2007, 269). These persons should not be abandoned. All efforts should be made to offer them the Buddha's compassion so that they can repent.



Ikeda wrote that

In Shakyamuni's actions—his refusal to allow anyone to suffer in isolation or to leave anyone alone in their confrontation with severe difficulties—I feel we can discern the original source of the Buddhist spirit of compassion (Ikeda 2020, 6).

Ikeda refers the story of the Buddha and the evil king to the situation of both those who experience ontological insecurity because of the climate change and of those who perpetrate crimes against ecology. Buddha shows that neither the victims nor the victimizers should be abandoned. All can be helped, and all can change.

## 2. Nichiren and the Treasure Tower

The medieval Japanese Buddhist monk Nichiren Daishonin was the founder of the tradition of which Soka Gakkai is part, and his interpretation of the “Treasure Tower” represents the ideal center of Ikeda's 2020 Peace Proposal. “The Treasure Tower” is the eleventh chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*. It starts with a description of the *sahā* world—our world of suffering and the world where the Buddha gathered his disciples to preach. While the Buddha is speaking, an enormous shining tower emerges and transforms the *sahā* world into the paradisiac Land of Eternally Tranquil Light.

Nichiren explained that the meaning of the story is that to reach the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light, “It is not that he [the practitioner of the *Lotus Sutra*] leaves his present place and goes to some other place” (Nichiren 2004, 192). In fact, “the *sahā* world is in itself the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light” (Ikeda 2020, 10).

Nichiren, according to Ikeda, reacted against “escapist ideologies” and “systems of thought portraying human beings as powerless” (Ikeda 2020, 10). We do not need to go “elsewhere” or to wait for a paradise to be reached after our death to change this world, here and now, including by addressing the problems of climate change. The Land of Eternally Tranquil Light,

this ideal land that the people yearn for does not exist in some other place, far from their reach. The heart of the *Lotus Sutra* lies in taking ever greater action to enable the place we are in now to shine as the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light (Ikeda 2020, 10),

Ikeda was persuaded that “within every one of us is the same brilliant and dignified light as that emitted by the Treasure Tower” (Ikeda 2020, 10). For a Christian, these words resonate with Jesus' teaching that “the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21).

### 3. Makiguchi's *The Geography of Human Life*

In the 2020 Peace Proposal, Ikeda discusses an early book by Makiguchi, the founder of Soka Gakkai, published in 1903 with the title *The Geography of Human Life* (see the 8<sup>th</sup> revised edition: Makiguchi 1908). Makiguchi noted, as early as in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, how the world was inter-connected. When his wife was not able to produce milk to breast-feed his son, following the advice of his doctor he purchased powdered milk made in Switzerland and protected the frail baby with Indian cotton clothing. He thought of how shepherds and factory workers in Switzerland and women spinning cotton in India were connected with his child without knowing it.

The book also described negative connections, and how wars and economic competition generated by greed endanger humanity as a whole. While wars are easily visible, devastating economic competition is often invisible, but not less dangerous. Makiguchi, Ikeda explained, was not against competition in general. He criticized competition unrestricted by rules where greed leads to disrespect for the competitors, the rules, and nature itself.

Ikeda believed that the ideas of Makiguchi's 1903 book also apply to the problems of climate change. Those who do not want to fight it are motivated by greed and are not prepared to sacrifice a part of their profits for the sake of the Planet's health. They should be reminded of the Buddhist principle that we cannot protect our own lives without protecting the lives of others, a key theme of Makiguchi's *The Geography of Life*.

### 4. Toda and Value-Creating Pedagogy

In the terrible years following Japan's defeat in World War II, Makiguchi's successor, Jōsei Toda, who had just been released from jail, hired his promising 21-year-old disciple Daisaku Ikeda to work in his publishing company as editor of a children's magazine called *Bōken Shōnen* (Boy's Adventure: Shiohara 2021, 43). Soka Gakkai's second President wanted to help young Ikeda to make ends meet in the dramatic economic situation of the country, and also to offer him an opportunity to be with Toda daily and attend what he affectionately called "Toda University." It was not a formal university but Toda's way of using every opportunity to train his future successor (Shiohara 2021).

At the same time, Ikeda wrote in the 2020 Peace Message that assigning him to work for a children's magazine was not coincidental. He noted that, even before hiring him, Toda made great efforts to publish thirty-five issues of educational magazines for children during the war, between 1940 and 1942.

Nothing could be more important than educating future generations. This is also true for combating climate change. "The flame of education requires constant tending," Ikeda wrote (Ikeda 2020, 30). This is the message he left to Soka Gakkai and to all women and men of good will striving for a sustainable world where climate and ecological problems will be regarded as crucial challenges for the future of all.

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