

The Active Dynamic of Resilience in Soka Philosophy

Vinicio Busacchi
University of Cagliari
busacchi@unica.it

ABSTRACT: This contribution aims to comprehensively examine the phenomenon of resilience from the point of view of the Soka humanistic philosophy of action. This is a general line of interest that intertwines theoretical and practical aspects, and requires examination at different levels of discourse. The paper will be particularly focused on analyzing philosophical and sociological aspects connected to resilience. On the philosophical level, the discourse takes a broader reflective direction, intertwining with the themes of lifestyle, values, human dignity, civic commitment, and humanism. In this regard, contemporary Buddhist literature offers a vast range of examples of ethical-practical and speculative analysis, and reflections on resilience. On the sociological level, it will examine some key aspects related to Soka Gakkai's activities, and the commitment of its members within the community and social sphere. The empowerment of the members contributes to the flowering of the community life of Soka Gakkai and of society as a whole; and, vice versa, the support of the community of practitioners and society allows and fosters the strengthening of the resilience capacities of individuals.

KEYWORDS: Resilience, Personal Emancipation, Social Commitment, Soka Gakkai, Daisaku Ikeda.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mr. Mitsuaki Asano—Director for the Department of International Relations at Soka Gakkai Office of International affairs—, for his support in distributing the questionnaire and for his help in interpreting Soka Gakkai's resilient approach. All information and evaluation related to Japan's experience on COVID-19 emergency are based on these questionnaires. I thank Suzanne Pritchard—SGI (Soka Gakkai International) European Women's Leader—for her willingness to survey the situation in Europe, and for having provided the information reported in this article. I also thank Robert Harrap—

SGI-UK General Director—for having kindly provided the answers and information about SGI UK, and Roberto Minganti—Director of the Department for External Relationships, IBISG (Istituto Buddista Italiano Soka Gakkai)—for his precious support and help. Finally, I address sincere thanks to Jessica Squier—editor of *Art of Living* (SG-UK)—for pointing out to me key experiences of resilience.

Introduction

With reference to individuals, resilience can qualify both as an aspect of a person's personality and character, as well as their behavior and response/reaction to specific circumstances (health, psychological, environmental or social stress, etc.). In recent times, this prevalent psychological/psychologicistic perspective has tended to dominate the uses and intentions of the concept of resilience. However, a careful examination of complex experiential realities—such as life as a practicing believer, and active belonging to a religious community—reveals that the question of resilience goes beyond the level of analysis and psychological knowledge.

Essentially, this contribution aims to examine the phenomenon of resilience within Soka Gakkai from the point of view of its philosophical foundation, expressed in Daisaku Ikeda's philosophy of human revolution. It is a philosophy that, as is well known, has its foundations in Nichiren's (1222–1282) Buddhist doctrine, which is linked to the historic teaching of the *Lotus Sutra*. It is a doctrine that is accepted not only as a philosophy of life and worldview: Ikeda and Soka Gakkai members embrace and practice it as a *religion*. From this premise, it follows that it is necessary to examine different levels of discourse to understand the phenomenon of resilience within Soka Gakkai.

I. Resilience and Religious Experience

Religious practice places at its center the search for faith and personal emancipation within a perspective that looks at [1] both the inner search (awakening of Buddhahood, i.e., the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice and the highest spiritual level of realization that all human beings can achieve), and [2] the practice of compassion (i.e., the Bodhisattva way, the active practice and

experience of compassion toward others and all living beings) and its transcendent dimension (the future beyond the present moment; life beyond death). The first point focuses on the issue of the power of faith and the practice that aims to awaken and then further develop that faith. Personal emancipation is a fundamental point, and is understood as: the ability to endure (the world we live in is called “world of endurance,” according to the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit term *sahāloka* or *sahālokadhātu*, that is “world of suffering”); the ability to cope, the exercise of courage (which is considered one of the fundamental virtues); the ability to win, the practice of determination (which is considered the decisive attitude to transform and overcome the tests of destiny).

The second point concerns what we could define as “religious commitment,” or the commitment to awakening others and spreading the teaching of empowerment. It is the practice of compassion, the fight against injustice and the destructive tendency, the commitment to improving social life.

The third point focuses more closely on the religious vision of life. In this regard, some statements of Nichiren are emblematic, and seem better than others in summing up all these points:

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-enge-kyo, no matter what happens. How could this be anything other than the boundless joy of the Law? (WND 1999, 681).

This passage is taken from a short letter addressed to one of his most important disciples (Shijo Kingo, 1230–1300), who, at the time faced innumerable difficulties, related to his adherence to Nichiren’s teaching. Nichiren was persistently persecuted by the political and religious authorities of the time.

A second paradigmatic statement can be found in the letter “A Ship to Cross the Sea of Suffering,” dated 1261, addressed to the disciple Shiji Shiro (dates unknown) shortly before his first exile in the Izu peninsula.

In the Latter Day of the Law, the votary of the *Lotus Sutra* will appear without fail. The greater the hardships befalling him, the greater the delight he feels, because of his strong faith. Doesn’t a fire burn more briskly when logs are added? All rivers flow into the sea, but does the sea turn back their waters? The currents of hardship pour into the sea of the *Lotus Sutra* and rush against its votary. The river is not rejected by the ocean; nor does the votary reject suffering. Were it not for the flowing rivers, there would be no sea. Likewise, without tribulation there would be no votary of the *Lotus Sutra* (WND 1999, 33).

Finally, another significant statement is found in the important treaty *The Opening of the Eyes (Kaimoku sho)*, written in 1272, during Nichiren's second, very challenging exile on the island of Sado (1271–1274). Nichiren himself describes the incredible conditions in a 1276 letter, “The Actions of the Votary of the *Lotus Sutra*,” sent to the lay nun Konichi (dates unknown).

On the first day of the eleventh month, I was taken to a small hut that stood in a field called Tsukahara behind Homma Rokuro Saemon's [dates unknown] residence in Sado. One room with four posts, it stood on some land where corpses were abandoned [...]. Not a single statue of the Buddha was enshrined there; the boards of the roof did not meet, and the walls were full of holes. The snow fell and piled up, never melting away. I spent my days there, sitting in a straw coat or lying on a fur skin. At night it hailed and snowed, and there were continual flashes of lightning. Even in the daytime the sun hardly shone. It was a wretched place to live (WND 1999, 769).

As anticipated, it is this third point of the reference to the transcendent that leads to the intertwining of levels between religious and doctrinal discourse. This is an intertwining that is not entirely divisible even in Ikeda's philosophy of human revolution, which is anchored to Nichiren's Buddhism. It is an extremely significant point because it demonstrates how the phenomenon of resilience in Soka Gakkai cannot be known and explained in its entirety within the terms of psychology, sociology, and philosophy alone.

II. Resilience and the Doctrinal-Theoretical Plane

In Nichiren Buddhism the key to happiness lies not only in the spiritual and moral strength, and therefore in an active practice of faith, but it resides in the awakening of the awareness that each individual possesses the “Buddha nature” (jap. *bussshō*), which is understood as the great, the true Self. Here, resilience is one with the practice to reveal this Buddha nature (in modern terms, this is the “human revolution”), that is, the practice to open the treasure chest of innate wisdom. The following are other doctrinal aspects that we find involved here:

(1) perseverance;

(2) the spiritual struggle to face, transform, and overcome obstacles, the doctrine of the causal law of life and the transformation of karma (in Nichiren Buddhism, all negative karma can be overcome and transformed through the practice of the Mystic Law—see the following point—and through the Bodhisattva way);

(3) the faith in the Mystic Law (it defines both the ultimate truth or law of the universe and the essential spiritual-religious law and principle summarized and expressed through Nam-myoho-renge-kyo—a prayer that Nichiren extracted from the *Lotus Sutra*), and in the power of the object of devotion (the Gohonzon, i.e., a calligraphic scroll, which, essentially, represents the sublime reality of the Mystic Law and Human Enlightenment; it guides practitioners during their meditation and prayer, and is the fundamental religious object of devotion for achieving enlightenment);

(4) the faith in the eternity of life, and the search for awakening to the eternity of life, a search that is one with the attainment of the true self, with the purification of oneself, with the realization of happiness. Reference, here, is to the four virtues (*jō-raku-ga-jō*)—purity, happiness, eternity, and true self—that are achieved by the Buddha.

III. Resilience and the Philosophical Plane

On this level, the discourse takes a broader reflective direction, intertwining with the themes of lifestyle, values, human dignity, civic commitment, and humanism. In this regard, Ikeda's writings offer a vast range of examples of ethical-practical and philosophical considerations around resilience. In illustrating this point, some key passages from Ikeda's vast work can be considered, where we find a close comparison with some thinkers of the Western philosophical tradition, from Socrates (ca. 470–399 BCE: e.g., see Ikeda 1988, 4) to Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855: e.g., see Ikeda 2008, 3–10), from Seneca (ca. 4–65 AD: e.g., see Ikeda 1999, 10–4) to the French philosopher Alain (Émile Chartier, 1868–1951: e.g., see Ikeda 2011, 10–25).

At present, there is no systematic and detailed study of the relationship between Western philosophy and resilience, and even less can we speak of the emergence of a philosophy of resilience. However, in the historical-philosophical field (better than in others) certain thinkers and schools can more easily be viewed, albeit retrospectively, as having the attributes of a reflective vision or a thematization of resilience as a significant and vital way for human existence.

The first tradition that comes to think of is Stoicism, not by chance much cited by Ikeda. Among ancient philosophies, Stoicism is undoubtedly the best comparable (albeit in a different way) to religions such as Christianity and

Buddhism. But this possible parallel does not mean close correspondence. The foundation of the Stoic ethics is the maxim of living according to nature, following the divine “logos” that pervades all things. Stoicism promotes virtue against hedonism, but at the same time, living according to nature means (under certain given conditions) accepting your own destiny. At the basis of Stoicism there is, in fact, an ethic of rational duty. On the one hand, it promotes the strengthening of oneself and the constant exercise of control over the passions, of inner strength and wisdom, as in Seneca and Marcus Aurelius (121–180), but on the other hand, it encourages distancing and detachment from the world, “apathy” (from *a-pathos*).

Ikeda’s perspective of human revolution speaks of the “transformation of desires into enlightenment”: facing sufferings and trials of life to overcome them and strengthen oneself. This is the practice of emancipation as an intra-mundane spiritual transformation, in accordance with the correct interpretation given by Max Weber (1864–1920). This philosophy does not promote detachment but commitment: the more one is committed to others and to great ideals (world peace, emancipation, and the happiness of humanity), the more he/she is able to transcend self-centeredness and attachments to worldly things (see Ikeda 2001; Busacchi 2018).

Other philosophical traditions strongly linked to the theme of resilience, and closer to us—and very much present in Ikeda’s reflections—are the spiritualist tradition and the existentialist tradition of religious inspiration.

Among the authors of reference, we could mention Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973). For the first, the discourse of resilience is linked to an idealistic-transcendental approach, which sees the spiritual significance of every event and suffering, and identifies in the human will and in the determination to progress the path for a meaningful and full realization of life. In the second, the discourse of resilience develops between the two key terms of “fidelity” (to God, to the values, to the promises and commitments undertaken) and “love” (as a human and religious sentiment, and as a metaphysical seal of the condition, the task, and the *parcours* of the human being). In both perspectives, there is the theme of the religious acts functioning as a supporting axis, and many similar elements are found in Ikeda’s perspective. But Ikeda’s philosophy of human revolution does not envisage a philosophy of resilience based solely on the level of experience and religious research. This is

demonstrated, for example, by his great attention to “extraordinary” life experiences, even of non-religious people, or to stories of lives at the crossroads, particularly hard and painful, in which people have responded by drawing on inner, motivational, and psychological resources (i.e., not religious resources only).

IV. Resilience and the Psychological Plane

The philosophy of human revolution aims at strengthening and changing the character. Happiness is a matter of personal maturation in an emancipatory sense—that is, as the development of life force—, openness and depth of life—that is, the experience of awareness, compassion and wisdom.

In dealing with this point, we can examine some of Ikeda’s key texts where psychological analysis is placed at the center, particularly:

- (1) in connection to the relationship between inner strength and happiness;
- (2) in connection to the relationship between creative effort and affectivity; and
- (3) in connection to the relationship between the experience of suffering and the search for meaning.

V. Resilience and the Pedagogical Plane

The philosophy of the human revolution also promotes emancipation in the sense of cultural growth and education (education in civic and moral values, education on human rights, education on multiculturalism and global citizenship). Ikeda, who was inspired by Tsunesaburo Makiguchi’s (1871–1944) philosophy of value creation, largely underlines the relationship between education and spiritual and moral strengthening. Therefore, education is a key to the promotion of resilience. We will illustrate this point by examining some key texts.

VI. Resilience and the Sociological Plane

The philosophy of human revolution is exercised and practiced both within Soka Gakkai’s activities and within the community and social sphere. On this

point, a virtuous circular dialectic between personal emancipatory effort and altruistic commitment (for the happiness of others and for peace) is revealed. On the one hand, the empowerment of the members contributes to the flowering of the community life of Soka Gakkai and of society as a whole; and, vice versa, the support of the community of practitioners and of society allows and fosters the strengthening of the resilience capacities of individuals, both of the people who actively receive support and of the people who actively exercise it.

We asked the question of what form the practice and experience of resilience has taken in the Soka Gakkai following the health emergency linked to COVID-19 pandemic. It seems useful to us to see in practice how this vision and teaching takes concrete form, guides and supports choices, actions, and behaviors, and allows us to face problems and difficulties, challenges and sufferings.

How did we operate? Mainly, (1) by analyzing some of the most important Italian publications of the Soka Gakkai, using, for example, the publications of the fortnightly *Nuovo Rinascimento* (www.ilnuovorinascimento.org) and the bimonthly of in-depth study and culture *Buddismo e Società* (www.buddismoesocieta.org) of the IBISG; and (2) through the method of direct interviews with representatives of Soka Gakkai, specifically for Japan and Europe (particularly United Kingdom and Italy). The interviews were based on an open-ended questionnaire.

The idea of resilience within Buddhist magazines: the examples of Nuovo Rinascimento and Buddismo e Società

We can take as paradigmatic the example of the uses of the concept of resilience in *Nuovo Rinascimento* and *Buddismo e Società*. We have already mentioned the polysemy of this concept from the perspective of Nichiren Buddhism. Let's take a closer look at the uses on the concrete front of the publications of these magazines, both read annually by about 26,000 members of the IBISG.

Let's see, first of all, the data relating to the use of this concept. Both, the *Nuovo Rinascimento*'s website and the *Buddismo e Società*'s website allow a basic and advanced search for terms and themes in reference to the contents of the publications of the last 20 years (*Nuovo Rinascimento* has been online since

2003, and *Buddismo e Società* since 2001). Launching a research on the recurrences of the concept of “resilience” (and “resilient”) in the first publication, it appears mentioned/used starting from 2014 (mainly as “resilience”), but sporadically up to 2017. We detected the occurrences summarized in Table 1.

**‘RESILIENCE’ / ‘RESILIENT’ WITHIN
NR (FORTNIGHTLY MAGAZINE) AND BS (BIMONTHLY MAGAZINE)**

Nuovo Rinascimento (from 2003 on)

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Recurrences	≈ 0/1	3	1	2	14	22	16	11 (up to June)

Buddismo e Società (from 2001 on)

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Recurrences	-	≈ 0/3	3	3	2	15	8	3 (up to June)

Table 1

In light of this picture, we can identify 2018 as the turning point in the generalized use of the concept of “resilience.” How do we explain this? Undoubtedly, we must consider the widespread use of the term in the communicative sphere both in everyday life and journalism and, in general, in the media. We are speaking, in fact, of a term that has only become widespread in recent years.

In seeking an internal explanation for the semantic inflection of Buddhist publications, we believe we must keep in mind the centrality of the discourses, essays, editorials, messages, and texts that Ikeda has spread and disseminated in a broad and regular way (at least in recent years). Now, looking at the contributions from Ikeda after 2017, we see a water-shed moment in the use of this term with the publication of the text “An Appeal for Resilience and Hope” (Ikeda and Esquivel 2018) of June 5, 2018. Human rights activist and Nobel laureate for peace Adolfo Pérez Esquivel co-signed the text and was also the co-author, with Ikeda, of the book *The Power of Hope* (Ikeda and Esquivel 2021). It is in this appeal that the new polysemy of the concept of resilience finds in some way a better expression, capable of subsuming and conveying more clearly the ideas of courage, fortitude, attitude, tenacity, flexibility, determination, faith, etc. The

concept becomes able to subsume all those ideas, which are so important in Ikeda and Soka Gakkai's humanistic and religious teachings. For example, we find in the Appeal the following passage:

The future of humankind depends on the present, on young people who have the courage to confront reality, never submitting before adversity. [...] We are confident that young people will take up the search for solutions, acting in solidarity from within their respective places of belonging across all differences of spiritual and cultural identity to generate waves of dynamic, shared action. We call on youth to take on the responsibility of walking together with the people, embracing the confidence that each of their actions will produce results in future (Ikeda and Esquivel 2018).

Starting from this Appeal, the use of the term itself is proof of the greater incisiveness and intertwining of the idea of resilience in a Buddhist discourse *stricto sensu*, in the two magazines we are examining. And, once again, we find the clear influence of Ikeda (see e.g., Ikeda 2019; Ikeda 2020). The point remains firm, that in the publications the reference to resilience in the sense of (1) psychological resilience—of individuals and communities to crises, catastrophes and life trials—; and (2) civic-social resilience—through the structural organization, political choice, solidarity between citizens—; dominates. This point remains firm, we said, but with Ikeda at the forefront, the concept has fully entered to structure and nourish the same religious message and discourse. The evidence of this comes to us from the experience of the practitioners themselves, in the countless stories collected in Soka Gakkai's publications. We will see it better shortly, analyzing its use in relation to the experiences of resilience related to the dramatic COVID-19 pandemic that recently hit the world.

Concerning this emergency, can we truthfully say that Soka Gakkai has shown the behavior of a resilient religion?

The COVID-19 Pandemic Emergency: How Soka Gakkai Has Reacted

As anticipated, in studying the behavior of Soka Gakkai in the face of the COVID-19 health emergency, the survey method used was that of the open interview (with the request for responses as precise and detailed as possible), on a block of four questions, essentially identical in all countries. Let's see, comparatively, the information and results that have emerged.

I. In which country (or countries) have you been active in recent years? How many people were doing regular activities before the COVID-19 pandemic?

As for Japan, we wanted to interview some representatives of Men, Women, Young Men, Young Women groups (or “divisions”). The intent was not to have general statistical data but to closely test the status of the activities and holdings in terms of concrete experience. The data we received are not general, therefore, but certainly representative of a situation that shows an ambivalent, multiform tendency, that is, of distancing and at the same time of resisting, of an active and creative response. From the answers to the first question (Table 2), we learn that the participation figures were ambivalent even before the COVID-19 emergency.

JAPAN

(via “representative,” non-statistical data)—For Men, Women, Young Men, Young Women leaders: the participation figure is ambivalent even before the COVID-19 emergency.

Men division leader ⇒ before the “COVID-19 emergency,” 60% members tended to carry on their Buddhist activities on a daily basis.

Chapter women’s leader ⇒ before the “COVID-19 emergency,” Women division most active compared to all others (“Young Men division was less active and present”).

Young men area division leader ⇒ before the “COVID-19 emergency,” only about 20% YM were active; adding to it a 10% active in the groups.

Young women leader ⇒ before the “COVID-19 emergency,” only about 10-15% YW were active.

Table 2

We cannot absolutize these data, because it would be necessary to carry on a detailed measurement and statistical survey, but we can hypothesize that, roughly, before the health emergency, 50-60% of women and men were regularly and actively engaged in Soka Gakkai’s daily activities, while no more than 30% of young men and young women were engaged on a daily basis.

As regards Great Britain, this first question was answered underlining that the general data available concern the discussion meetings. Out of a total of about 15,500 practitioners, a third regularly attended the meetings. The UK statistical framework shows the trend of participation in recent years. Under the pandemic, the organization of meetings on a digital platform has favored participation, and

even an increase in participation. As the General Director stated, “The total number of newcomers and of guests has increased through the last 14 months.”

In the specific case of Italy, this question has shown that the IBISG—which is not yet in possession of comparative statistical data on members’ participation before and after the pandemic—has substantially aligned itself with national provisions, according to the “Protocols for religious entities under an official agreement [with the State]”:

THE UK

“The total number of newcomers and of guests has increased through the last 14 months.”

(Source: Robert Harrap, SGI-UK General Director)

ITALY

“With the reopening in the summer 2020 it was possible to meet two, maximum three, people outdoors with masks, always paying close attention to the fundamental point: respect for the absolute sacredness of life. The intention of the [Buddhist] Institute has always been not to allow any member to become infected through participation in a religious ceremony or activity. [...] In July 2021, with almost all of Italy in the white zone, the Institute is discussing possible partial reopening with contingent meeting in the centers and small meetings of a few people in open spaces or in the gardens of private homes.”

(Source: Roberto Minganti, Director of the Department for External Relationships, IBISG)

Table 3

In general, at the European level, we find similar situations (Table 4):

EUROPE

- A similar evaluative trend regarding the response of local organizations and practitioners.
- Although in several cases people took own decisions to continue to meet and gather in homes, most chose the path of indirect and distance exchanges (emails, phone calls, meetings on various platforms).
- There is a strongly ambivalent tendency toward the use of digital platforms in Buddhist activities:

on the one hand, the opportunity offered by the system of platform meetings is recognized (it gives greater opportunities for participation);

on the other hand, the importance and irreplaceable nature of face-to-face personal relationships is emphasized.

(Source: Suzanne Pritchard, SGI European Women’s Leader)

Table 4

II. What happened during the pandemic? What efforts have people made to keep in touch and support each other? Have you noticed significant differences between the four divisions?

As far as this question is concerned, the character of an “unprecedented challenge” represented by the pandemic emerges also from the interviewees in Japan. It is a challenge accepted, but differently if we compare men, women and young people responses (Table 5).

JAPAN

- M leader** ⇒ It is a challenge accepted by actively operating to keep the network of links alive and constant through emails, social platforms, letters.
- W leader** ⇒ In her area of activity, no meetings during the first months of the pandemic. For many adult members, a general difficult to familiarize themselves with online platforms.
The first commitment was to keep the network of ties alive first of all through individual contacts.
- YM leader** ⇒ February 2020-May 2020: no young people were engaged in activities. The substitute use of activities in presence with platforms was not immediate.
The ease of learning by young people and, indeed, a new form of activity, much appreciated.
The only criticality is the difficulty in reconciling daily commitments.
- YW leader** ⇒ The possibility of online participation is recognized as positive: in fact, it can favor greater participation as it allows connection from wherever you are.

Table 5

In the UK, face-to-face meetings were stopped immediately, in March 2020, two weeks before the lockdown announced by the government. Activities moved to online platforms (mainly via Zoom), and immediately produced an increase in attendance compared to face-to-face meetings. The increase in the participation of “guests” (that is, of people taking part in a Buddhist activity for the first time) is also repeatedly mentioned in the interviews. In the next phase, although the government had decided to relax the restrictions, Soka Gakkai has chosen to keep the activities in remote mode. Referring to the situation in July 2021, the General Director offered the comments summarized in Table 6 below.

THE UK

“We are again at the point where the government intends to relax all restrictions on 19th July, but the numbers of those infected by the Delta variant are increasing (doubling every 9 days) so again there is little appetite for face-to-face meetings, despite the numbers of the population who are fully vaccinated—currently 52.4%.”

- There is great concern about the spread of the Delta variant.
- The organization intends to keep this line: it has renewed the Zoom licenses to be able to use them more widely.
- There is a (minority, but not insignificant) part of practitioners who reject the idea of platform activities.

(Source: Robert Harrap, SGI-UK General Director)

Table 6

As for Italy, this question was answered by highlighting the “diversification” of the practitioners’ response (see Table 7 below).

ITALY

“Most of the members saw in the various platforms the only way to keep the *sangha* (community) united, hence there was enthusiastic adherence. At the same time, a good number of practitioners were reluctant to engage with this type of digital relationships and lived in nostalgia for face-to-face meetings and above all for Buddhist practice carried out in groups.”

- (However): The effort of the leaders was to maintain contact with these members “through the telephone, during total closure, and in small open-air meetings when it was possible.”

- “The sensitivity of many people and the news gathered on the internet against vaccines have created a strong unease that the Institute deals with, leaving, obviously, everyone free to decide on their own health, but continuing to move with caution towards a restoration of face-to-face activities.”

(Source: Roberto Minganti, Department for External Relationships, IBISG)

Table 7

At the European level, there is a trend similar to that seen in Japan and Italy. As Suzanne Pritchard confirmed, there is a mixture of recognition and intolerance for these new forms of activity that exclude personal encounters and exchanges.

III. Are activities in this country (or these countries) restarting? How many people are doing regular activities now?

As regards Japan, Table 8 shows again differences among divisions.

JAPAN

- M leader** ⇒ The objective of the activities and this commitment has not changed, and perhaps has even strengthened, since it essentially aims at not leaving anyone behind experiencing loneliness.
(However) more than 50% decline in participation by members of his division.
- W leader** ⇒ An increase in participants; for women btw 30 and 40 years of age technologies are contributing positively to favoring their participation in evening meetings;
Buddhist activity has taken on a more flexible format, even individual encounters are now understood as “activities” of equal value to “meetings.”
- YM leader** ⇒ 90% of the activities are now still carried out on the platform, while the remaining 10% are in presence, for activities such as individual meetings;
(in his opinion) the future will be a “hybrid” future, with face-to-face and online activities.
- YW leader** ⇒ Positive value of new technologies: they considerably facilitate participation, even greater participation;
(however), nothing can replace the quality and importance of face-to-face meetings.

Table 8

In the case of the UK and Italy, the interviewees answered as detailed in table 9 below.

THE UK

“At the moment” (July 2021) all activities remain online. The only exception is the important ceremony in August for the conferral of the Gohonzon: individual bestowals will be made by the leaders “at the doorstep of the practitioners.” As for the rest, SGI UK agrees to personal encounters or meetups, following the rules (of hygiene, distancing, and non-aggregation) indicated by the government. Recently there has been a positive response from UK practitioners, regarding the possibility of meeting in person: and this is equivalent to carrying out the planned activities monthly.
(Source: Robert Harrap, SGI-UK General Director)

ITALY

“Currently, discussions are underway on an open-air opening, also considering gardens and terraces of private homes. At the same time, experiments were carried out in the cultural center of Florence of meeting in presence, with masks and with a limited number, by government protocols. There is no statistical data because everything is in the planning and testing phase. We are proceeding carefully, with attention, given the spread of the Delta variant.”
(Source: Roberto Minganti, Department for External Relationships, IBISG)

Table 9

Table 10 explains the policy for Europe.

EUROPE

“The policy for Europe has been that to protect the health of not just members but their non-practicing family members who may be vulnerable—all meetings should take place on-line. The only exception to this have been the small number of Cohonzon conferral ceremonies, which have taken place under strict protocols. If small meetings have taken place it is because members decided this of their own accord. However, a new trend has also been recorded at a European level: in recent months the determination to study safer solutions to return to carrying out activities with face-to-face meetings has strengthened.”

(Source: Suzanne Pritchard, SGI European Women’s Leader)

Table 10

IV. In your opinion, what is the biggest difficulty or change that SG now has to face (during and after this pandemic)?

With reference to the fourth question, again we see significant differences (Table 11).

JAPAN

M leader ⇒ the encouragement addressed to each person represents the crucial point;

W leader ⇒ the challenge is to be able to involve those people who have moved away in the activities: the only way is through personal meetings;

YM leader ⇒ “taking care of every single person” can also be pursued through new technologies;

YW leader ⇒ the challenge is to find a way that integrates the new online ways of doing activities.

THE UK

The greatest criticality recorded concerns the methods and possibilities of reopening the activities and centers in the country, above all due to the variety and conflict of positions (Harrap).

ITALY

At present, employ the necessary wisdom to reopen religious activities with the utmost caution (Minganti).

EUROPE

To keep alive and revitalize an activity, which is capable of creating and sustaining a network (Pritchard).

Table 11

Resilience in the Practitioners' Own Words

The idea (or ideas) of “resilience” also enters the story of faith experiences of practitioners, as we previously said; and both in a direct and in an indirect sense. The first uses of the word still show the connection with the paradigmatic change introduced with the Ikeda-Esquivel Appeal and with the word’s use by Ikeda himself in his various proposals and speeches on the environment, on communities, on the role of young people, on the themes of conflicts and the fight against the proliferation of armaments, and on the climate crisis. Two practitioners stated:

Now I am determined to make my contribution to achieving the goals of Daisaku Ikeda and Adolfo Pérez Esquivel’s “Appeal for Resilience and Hope” (Gallesi 2018).

All started on March 16, 2015, the *kosen-rufu* day. Almost fate wants to make fun of me while I am celebrating the tenth year of having the Gohonzon: during an augmentation ultrasound before birth, the doctor diagnoses a serious lateral cervical lymphatic malformation in Giona, the child I have in my womb. [...] I can’t break down because my strength is the strength of Giona, and my serenity is the serenity of Olivia, my first child waiting for her little brother. [...] This is a story of resilience. From March 16, a four-year struggle began, the first four months of which were spent in intensive care. Giona was taken to the operating room an unbearable number of times, and underwent a tracheostomy to allow him to breathe safely, because the lymphangioma proved to be extremely spreading. At the beginning of this journey, my faith faltered several times (Villa 2019).

For some years—we think from 2018—the concept of resilience has been fully subsumed in the Buddhist vocabulary, to express that kind of experience, attitude, idea, etc., which springs from the “search for the way,” from faith, from religious experience. In this regard, the meaning conveyed in Brunella Villa’s experience is eloquent.

In the experiences of Buddhist practitioners, the major key aspects discussed in the opening paragraph find clear reverberation. In many of them the reason for resilience is fully reflected. Compare the group of experiences from Great Britain—some of which were sent to us by the editor Jessica Squier (*Art of Living* / SG-UK), in response to our request to collect experiences on resilience (but in almost none of them the term appears):

I carried on chanting, trusting my daimoku. It was then that Nichiren Daishonin came to mind. I began to think of the time he spent on Sado island and when he was almost executed by the Japanese ruling government at Tatsunokuchi Beach. It occurred to me that he must have had

similar thoughts about his own mortality, yet he had been able to reveal the incredibly powerful life-state of a Buddha and realize the eternal nature of his life. It was his desire to communicate this to others that led him to write some of his most important treatises, including *The Opening of the Eyes*, which includes this extraordinary statement: “This I will state. Let the gods forsake me. Let all persecutions assail me. Still I will give my life for the sake of the Law” (WND 1999, 280). I realized that this was the vow that my prayer needed. My determination became not necessarily surviving the pandemic, but giving my life for the sake of the Law, no matter what (Hardinges 2020, 25).

I learnt to win in the moment. I made determinations for things I would do if I survived and, even better, become healthy again; and even: Through this experience, I have learned to love myself (*most* of the time) and I have experienced the dignity of my life, which helps me connect to the dignity of other people’s lives too (Kearney 2020, 10).

Then I remembered that I and my fellow leaders in South East England Area had made a determination at the beginning of the year to go out and visit each member in their home. As we were now unable to go to other people’s homes, I began to ring women’s division members on the phone. I realized that because I couldn’t go outwards, this was a time to go deeper in my Buddhist practice. This situation was training me to be more compassionate and wiser than ever before (Usmar 2021, 9).

In the experience of Adrian Hardinges—a nurse at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19, and against the anxiety of dying from it due to an infection in his ward—, we find the idea of resilience through the search for faith. The experience of deepening the resilience capacity of another practitioner, Annie Kearney, goes through the long and difficult fight against cancer, and becomes one with the discovery of the love for life, for its incalculable value. Belinda Usmar’s experience—struggling with financial problems, lack of work, and poverty—is a significant example of resilience developed through religious faith, and through the practice of compassion towards others, through the concrete commitment to dedicate time and energy to each individual practitioner, even during the lockdown period. The experience of Janine Crowe, a joyful and sociable woman, but struggling with a profound trauma, a source of insecurity capable of damaging her marriage and even destroying herself, is touching. The marriage crisis and the experience of the lockdown due to the pandemic lead her to “hit bottom,” and to discover within herself a completely new capacity for resilience, and transformation through despair. See Crowe’s account, and one by another practitioner:

I sat, raw, in front of my Gohonzon. Cried. Got angry. Cried again. It was the only place I could deal with what was happening around me. During this time, I had many realizations. I realized my life was precious. I realized obstacles will never go away and

that I need to be strong to approach and overcome them. I realized this was about me! My environment was only a reflection of how I was feeling inside. The catalyst for change was within me. I chanted the most heart-felt and deep daimoku that I have ever chanted in the whole ten years of my Buddhist practice. [...] I can honestly say I found myself during this pandemic. That will be my thought when this is talked about in years to come! (Crowe 2021, 29).

My therapist gave me the framework, but my Buddhist practice and study alongside my process of self-reflection helped in the actual transformation. I finally understood that there is no “perfect” me, which is free of fear or anxiety. My journey of transformation was to make sure that I didn’t suffer from it. Of course, I fully expect anxiety to surface again. It is a part of me. Equally I now expect to be able to achieve happiness and continue to fulfil my vow regardless of this (Mutharaju 2021, 35).

Julia Silva’s experience reveals a different nuance of the meaning and paths of resilience. In her long and tiring years as an emigrant, resilience is the daily effort to find one’s way of subsistence away from loved ones, to fulfil oneself as being human, to deepen human ties, and discover that it is in this way that one can find oneself at home even in a foreign land (see Silva 2021, 23–5). The experience reported by Mridula Mutharaju is also extraordinary. Her long fight against a pathological anxiety problem shows an idea of resilience that is deeper than simple courage and simple determination. It is not something linked to a resolution/determination or a change of perspective in faith. Rather, it is something very similar to deepening in the days, months, and years both one’s faith and one’s life experience, both the way to manage, cure and overcome anxiety and the way to transform it into an opportunity for psychological, existential, and spiritual emancipation.

Resilience as perseverance: this is another very widespread idea, and very close to the Buddhist teaching of “faith equals daily life” and “faith as flowing water, not as burning fire”: we find it in countless experiences such as that of Milton Lopes (“Perseverance is the key”: see Lopes 2021, 8–10).

To Conclude

Thanks to the fact that the term “resilience” has become widely used today, and has a dense and varied polysemy, it is now a concept on which—as we have seen—ideas and key principles of Buddhist doctrine and its religious approach to life convey.

In extreme and very general synthesis, we can say that in the perspective of Nichiren Buddhism, “resilience” indicates a psychological *and* spiritual capacity, attitude, and disposition that matures through religious practice and can affect each aspect of life. It is also a *conditio sine qua non* (so to speak) even when spiritual evidence is sought that goes beyond conventional logic.

To illustrate this aspect, we choose to recall an experience of faith documented by the magazine *Nuovo Rinascimento* where the deep intertwining of psychological, emotional, motivational and spiritual aspects at the basis of a religious experience demonstrates a power that goes beyond the limits of what one would normally consider possible. We deliberately choose not to report an experience directly or indirectly linked to the pandemic, because the discourse of resilience transcends current circumstances. It is the axis of the Buddhist practice and the Buddhist approach to life.

The story is reported by Francesco Faggi, who at the time of this experience had been a practitioner for nine years. A “very insecure,” “aggressive,” “distressed,” and “introvert” person, Faggi reports his great disdain, his bad relationship with himself, and the absence of any relationship with the other sex. The lack of a partner, with the attending emotional emptiness, turns out to be a profound reason for suffering in his life. The efforts to open up and improve oneself lead over time, finally, to friendships, and also a certain degree of serenity and inner stability; but little or nothing emerges in terms of emotional engagement. It is a serious accident that comes to “upset all the balance of Francesco.” It was December 1996, and Francesco was poking a fire in the fireplace at home to have a barbecue.

I was spraying ethyl alcohol with a can when a backfire set fire to the can itself which, exploding, turned into a Molotov cocktail. The flames clung to me violently, devouring me in a terrible pyre. Fortunately, the can of alcohol exploded and fell from my hands, so that the strong flame started from below and I had a chance to try to extinguish it myself. The feeling you get when it burns is crazy. I saw death in the face that day! For an interminable and atrocious moment, I saw the salient parts of my life, as in an accelerated slow motion, and I could clearly see how empty and inconclusive my existence had been up to that moment, without having created any value. But the next moment I had a certainty: I could still do it, put out the flames and live. The three Daimoku I had chanted that evening on the street before entering the house had not been useless. I rushed to the bathroom and threw myself in the shower. The flames went out, but I was charred over a huge part of my body. I went out in that state on the street and arrived at my uncles’ house. They rescued me and called an ambulance. My condition immediately appeared

very, very serious, almost desperate. I was a smoking ember, I was losing large amounts of blood and was in excruciating pain and having convulsions (Faggi 1988, 25–6).

Francesco continues his story by describing the sad and painful experience in the hospital, and his determination to live (no matter what); and also the profound, incredible interpretation of the meaning of the terrible accident suffered: “I believe that the fire and the terrible suffering were the means by which I was able to clean up and transform my life.”

In fact, his life really underwent a transformation, and precisely in the very ward of the hospital, where his desperate spiritual struggle, which could end in non-healing and death, bore the fruit of an extraordinary experience of love. He met Franca, a Buddhist nurse who worked at that hospital.

Francesco goes on to tell the different phases of his hospitalization, and of having undergone a general skin transplant. He focuses, in particular, on a very critical moment of his experience, potentially harbinger of tragic outcomes. This is where, perhaps even better, that synthesis of the psychological and the spiritual in the Buddhist experience of resilience finds expression.

The doctors were already talking about another surgery, and other various extreme attempts to make since the skin did not regrow and the burns (250 cm²) did not heal with any traditional medical therapy. I decided to chant Daimoku with all my heart and to listen only to the sound of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, covering my ears while I was chanting with cotton balls, to concentrate better. It was my final battle, the decisive one; if I lost there was no appeal. I recited to bring out the Buddha inside me! Strong faith transformed the impossible into possible: to the amazement of the doctors who took off the bandages it was clear that in just three days the skin had incredibly started to regenerate out of all proportion, and already many sores were closing despite the pathogenic bacteria. No intervention was needed anymore; I recovered spontaneously, and it was a process deemed irreversible and, according to the doctors, very rare (Faggi 1988, 27).

This experience reveals the presence of a particular Buddhist perspective on resilience strongly rooted in its doctrine and philosophy of human revolution. It is not reduced only to the strictly religious sphere, to the sole discourse of the research for faith or spiritual strength: rather, it shows the profound intertwining of existential reasons (the research for happiness, the research for fulfilment in everyday life, in this case in love), motivational and psychological aspects, attitudes, and life choices. Consequently, we can understand resilience in the perspective of the philosophy of human revolution. It is a psychological,

existential, and spiritual attitude that flourishes by actively pursuing the path of personal emancipation, acting to improve and strengthen oneself, to promote personal and social improvement, to cultivate the value and the positive and creative force of life.

References

- Busacchi, Vinicio. 2018. *Philosophy and Human Revolution: Essays in Celebration of Daisaku Ikeda's 90th Birthday*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Crowe, Janine. 2021. "Boundless Joy." *Art of Living* 7 (July):29.
- Faggi, Francesco. 1988. "Fiamme d'amore." *Il Nuovo Rinascimento* 72:25–6.
- Galesi, Matteo. 2018. "Abbattere ogni barriera attraverso la musica." *Il Nuovo Rinascimento* 636:36–7.
- Hardinges, Adrian. 2020. "Still, I Will Give My Life." *Art of Living* 8 (August):25.
- Ikeda, Daisaku. 1988. "La nostra missione è credere nell'uomo." *Il Nuovo Rinascimento* 72:4.
- Ikeda, Daisaku. 1999. "Così come siamo." *Il Nuovo Rinascimento* 210:10–4.
- Ikeda, Daisaku. 2001. *For the Sake of Peace: Seven Paths to Global Harmony*. Santa Monica, CA: Middleway Press.
- Ikeda, Daisaku. 2008. "Un'oasi per la gente." *Il Nuovo Rinascimento* 408:3–10.
- Ikeda, Daisaku. 2011. "Que brille pour l'éternité le château de l'espoir!" *Valeurs humaines. Mensuel des associations Soka du Bouddhisme de Nichiren* Hors-série (May 1):10–25.
- Ikeda, Daisaku. 2019. "Invincibili (la forza della resilienza)." *Buddismo e Società* 193:4–11.
- Ikeda, Daisaku. 2020. "Il Buddismo è vincere o perdere." *Il Nuovo Rinascimento* 673:13.
- Ikeda, Daisaku, and Adolfo Pérez Esquivel. 2018. "To the Youth of the World: An Appeal for Resilience and Hope." June 5. Accessed September 18, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3lucZuP>.
- Ikeda, Daisaku, and Adolfo Pérez Esquivel. 2021. *The Power of Hope: Thoughts on Peace and Human Rights*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Kearney, Annie. 2020. "Discovering My True Mettle." *Art of Living* 10 (October):10.

- Lopes, Milton. 2021. "Perseverance is the key." *Art of Living* 7 (July):8–10.
- Mutharaju, Mridula. 2021. "A Journey of Transformation." *Art of Living* 7 (July):35.
- Silva, Julia. 2021. "My Journey as a Global Citizen." *Art of Living* 8 (August):23–5.
- Usmar, Belinda. 2021. "Dancing on the Edge." *Art of Living* 5 (May):9.
- Villa, Brunella. 2019. "Riversando la mia vita nella preghiera al Gohonzon." *Il Nuovo Rinascimento* 658:12–3.
- WND. 1999. *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, Vol. I*. Tokyo: Soka Gakkai.