

Daisaku Ikeda's Philosophy and Soka Gakkai's Actions Against Nuclear Weapons: Reviving Teachings of Nichiren Buddhism

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ABSTRACT: For over a half century, Soka Gakkai has been modernizing Buddhism as a religion relevant for contemporary human societies through a worldwide action promoting peace, culture, and education. This paper offers a tentative answer to the questions, “Can religions actually mobilize for nuclear disarmament?” and “How does religious activism actually influence nuclear weapon issues?” In political realism, nuclear weapon policies are national governments’ sole or exclusive prerogative. Non-state actors do not have any power or decision-making authority. However, bilateral or multilateral political negotiations on nuclear weapon issues between governments have been historically deadlocked. As an actual example of a non-state actor playing a relevant role, this paper will introduce Daisaku Ikeda (President of Soka Gakkai International)’s private diplomacy with the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and Japan during the Cold War, based on the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism founded in the 13th-century Japan, and Soka Gakkai’s peace activities against nuclear weapons today, which continue Ikeda’s campaigns and refer to the same roots.

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai, Nuclear Weapons, Nuclear Disarmament, Citizen Diplomacy, Daisaku Ikeda.

Introduction

In history, disarmament and diplomacy have been exclusive prerogatives of national governments. In particular, they have been the main, if not the only, players in the field of nuclear weapon issues. However, all the bilateral and multilateral negotiations on nuclear weapon issues have been deadlocked. The NPT (Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty) system, which is the only place where nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states take seats together to work on nuclear disarmament, has been severely weakened. It is also a serious concern that the Ukrainian crisis might encourage other states to consider rearming to

protect their national security. The crisis has generated rapidly mounting tensions towards developing, possessing, and using more lethal weapons.

This paper aims to explore whether non-state actors, especially religious organizations, can be effective players and promote nuclear disarmament. Soka Gakkai is a Buddhist lay association and has members in 192 countries and territories (as of August 2022). It has been a pioneer in promoting worldwide anti-nuclear-weapons activities. The origin of its peace movement and actions was Daisaku Ikeda. Born in 1928, he was the third President (1960–1979) and is from 1979 the Honorary President of Soka Gakkai. He promoted a private diplomacy (or citizen diplomacy) during the Cold War, which was based on the teachings of Nichiren (1222–1282), a monk within the Mahayana Buddhist tradition and the founder of Nichiren Buddhism in Japan. Ikeda's private diplomacy achieved significant results in the relations with the USSR and China. It mitigated tensions and fear of nuclear warfare in Northeast Asia.

This paper will explore some fundamental causes of nuclear weapon issues, Nichiren's teachings, Ikeda's philosophy of peace and disarmament, his citizen diplomacy and its outcomes, and Soka Gakkai's actions against nuclear weapons.

1. The Fundamental Causes of Nuclear Weapon Issues

Basically, what are nuclear weapon issues? They are often defined as issues with political, diplomatic, security, and human rights dimensions. All of them are examined according to different points of view. However, nuclear weapon issues are exclusively political matters between nation-states and their governments. It appears that non-state actors do not have any right to make decision, nor authority, on such highly political matters. However, many diplomatic and political negotiations on nuclear weapon issues, such as the Six Party Talks with North Korea in the early 2000s, have been deadlocked.

The Six Party Talks have been stopped since 2007. During the negotiations, North Korea withdrew from the NPT in 2003, and has continued its nuclear tests. Not only there is no positive progress, the situation is getting worse each year. In fact, the number of nuclear weapon states has been increasing (Hiroshima for Global Peace 2021). It looks like another nuclear arms race is developing today. More countries may be encouraged to rearm, including by acquiring nuclear

weapons, by the lesson of what happened to Ukraine. The role of governments is undoubtedly crucial, but they cannot reach an overall settlement of the issues based only on their political and diplomatic efforts.

What is thus the fundamental cause of the nuclear weapon issues? It is because of confrontations between states. Why do they confront each other? Why do states want to possess nuclear weapons? There are many direct causes, but the root motivation is because of an escalation of fears in the leaders' and people's minds. Fear becomes the fundamental point of view. States tend to develop their nuclear arms in three main cases: (1) under tremendous pressures, (2) feeling isolation, or (3) putting themselves in extremely disadvantageous positions, as it happened to some states in the Second World War and the Cold War. These occasions accelerated the nuclear arms race.

2. Nichiren's Teachings and Views on World Peace in the 13th Century

The origin of the anti-nuclear activities of Daisaku Ikeda and Soka Gakkai can be traced back to Nichiren's teachings and actions in the 13th century.

Because the main concept of his missionary activities was the happiness of the individual person based on Mahayana Buddhism, Nichiren was a rare Japanese figure who focused on the entire world and not on Japan only. Almost all Japanese in the Middle Ages were aware only of Japan. In his writings, Nichiren mentioned the Sanskrit word *jambudvīpa*, in Japanese *enbudai* (閻浮提), which means "the entire world," many times.

It means one of the four continents situated in the four directions around Mount Sumeru. Jambudvīpa is located to the south and is the place where the Buddhas appear. It is often used in the sense of the entire world (see Nichiren 1999, 1238).

It is also a feature of Nichiren Buddhism that, unlike religions that only seek peace of mind, it seeks to practice its principles in contemporary society. At a time when modern concepts of democracy, world peace, and human rights did not exist in the feudal society of Japan, Nichiren admonished the de facto supreme leaders of the military government three times (in 1260, 1271, and 1274). His words were a challenge to create dialogues within the government and with citizens.

Japan faced serious natural disasters and invasion from another country: nationwide poverty, the historical earthquake of Shoka in 1257, and the attacks by Mongolian Empire in 1274 and 1281. In terms of peace building, he suggested that the government should consider a world peace if it sought its peace and security:

If you care anything about your personal security, you should first of all pray for order and tranquillity throughout the four quarters of the land [i.e., the entire world], should you not? (Nichiren 1999, 24).

Also, he admonished the rulers to respect their citizens “A king sees his people as his parents,” he wrote in his 1279 “Offerings in the Snow.” He advised rulers to handle the affairs of the state based on human-centered thoughts. He regarded the citizens as the most important resource of the Japanese land rather than the political leaders. Some may claim that he introduced the principle that sovereignty should reside in the people. However, all his advice was rejected and ignored by the government.

3. Ikeda's Peace Philosophy and Private Diplomacy During the Cold War

Ikeda has consistently stated that cultural exchanges and person-to-person dialogue are the key to mitigating conflicts and supporting inter-state diplomatic relations. He believes it is a direct way to advance the cause of nuclear disarmament in the world. To demonstrate this, we should look at Ikeda's private diplomacy during the Cold War.

In any case, dialogue is the right way, be it at the individual or state levels, to bring peace and stability to our communities. Communities lacking in dialogue eventually result in endless mistrust, suspicion, bitterness and fear, just as a pool of water will stagnate if there are no outlets. We must not forget that feelings will eventually become *idées fixes* and will only increase if let to linger. I believe that the only way to break out from such blind alleys is to be honest and courageous (Ikeda and Kissinger 2008 [1987], 165–66).

In 1960s and 1970s, Ikeda actively conducted his private diplomacy to connect four countries: Japan, China, the USSR, and the United States, trying to mitigate tensions of warfare and the possible use of nuclear weapons. Each government did not have solid communication channels with the others at that time. Japan and the United States did not have official diplomatic channels with China. China had been isolated after their border conflict with the USSR in 1969. Northeast Asia

was a big “powder keg” of the Cold War. Ikeda’s private diplomacy was a form of “low” politics. He visited China and the USSR as a person of religion, culture, and education, following invitations from cultural or educational institutions in those countries. Politicians or people involved in political activities could not be invited because of the political tensions between the countries at that time.

The philosophical base of Ikeda’s actions is the humanism of Nichiren Buddhism. He insisted that mutual distrust creates the political tension that might lead to develop, possess, and eventually use the weapons of mass-destruction.

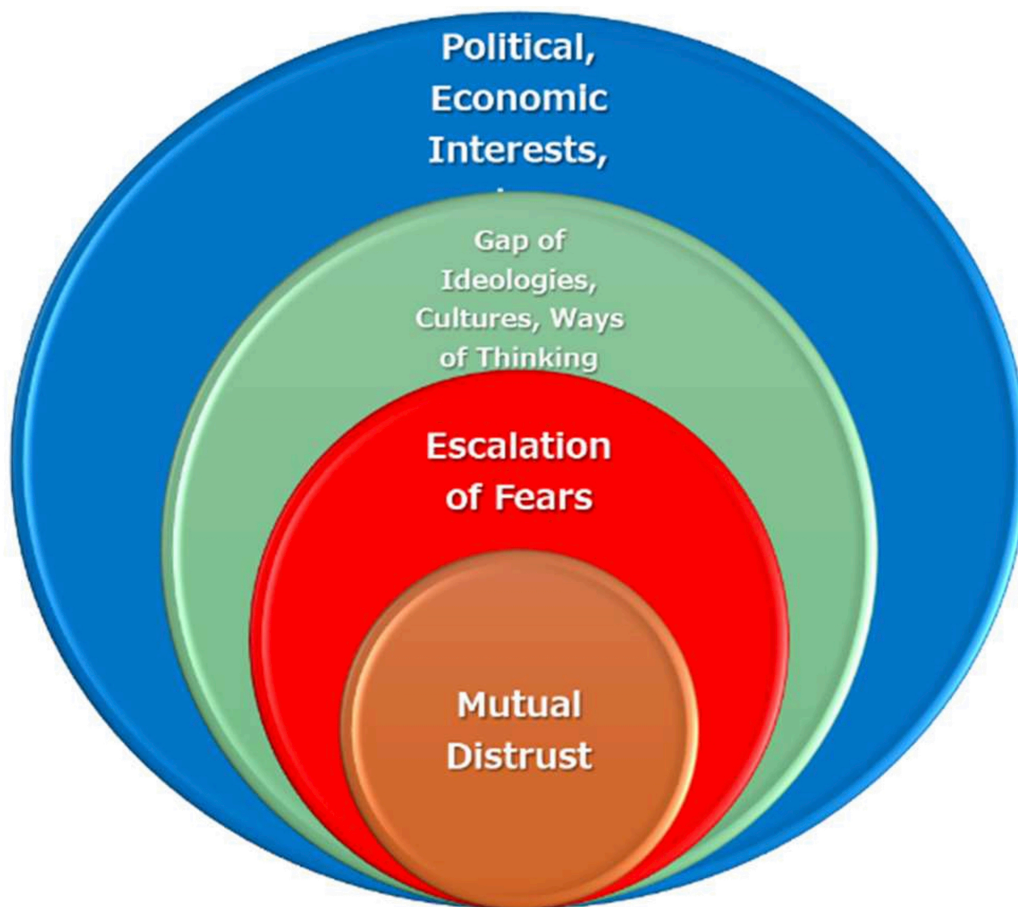


Image 1. Roots of nuclear weapon issues in Ikeda’s thought.

Ikeda advocates overall pluralism, including religious pluralism, and argues in favour of the need to exert efforts to find commonalities among human beings going beyond differences of ethnicity, state, and habits. In terms of religion, his is a clear negation of religious exclusivism. It opposes the ideas that a national religion should dominate a country, that the dominant ethnic group and religion may denounce what is different as heresy. He rejected forms of religion that bind

human freedom and rights by using religious precepts as a tool of seclusion. In fact, the obsession against differences often at work in the religion subconscious is not limited to religion. It can too often also appear in conflicts between ethnic groups and states.

Lecturing at Harvard University in 1993, Ikeda spoke of the Buddhist view that the natural world including humankind exists in interdependent relations.

Buddhism uses the term “dependent origination” (Jpn. *engi* [縁起]) to describe symbiotic relations. Nothing—no one—exists in isolation. Each individual existence functions to bring into being the environment which in turn sustains all other existences. 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 that natural universe.

Speaking through Faust, [Johann Wolfgang von] Goethe [1749–1832] gives voice to a similar vision. “All weaves one fabric; all things give/Power unto all to work and live.” The poet, whose insights now strike us for their remarkable affinity to Buddhism, was criticized by his young friend [Johann Peter] Eckermann [1792–1854] as “lacking confirmation of his presentiments.” The intervening years have offered a steadily swelling chorus of affirmation for the prescience of Goethe’s, and Buddhism’s, deductive vision (Ikeda 1993).

The “Declaration Calling for Abolition of Nuclear Weapons 1957” by Ikeda’s mentor Josei Toda (1900–1958), the second President of Soka Gakkai, was the first declaration demanding the abolition of nuclear weapons in Japan (Toda 1957). Ikeda noted that the use of nuclear weapons itself is a serious challenge to the dignity of life and the right of humanity to its survival.

Also as an outcome of Ikeda’s private diplomacy, Japan and China officially normalized their diplomatic relations in 1972, and the political tension between China and the USSR was relaxed in 1974. Ikeda’s proposal calling for the normalisation of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations (formulated on September 8, 1968, in Japan) was a trigger to persuade both the Chinese and Japanese governments to start discussion for a normalisation of their relationships.

On the other hand, in his meeting with Alexei Kosygin (1904–1980), the USSR Prime Minister, at the Kremlin in 1974, Ikeda obtained Kosygin’s promise not to attack China. He then played a role of messenger to convey the USSR’s position to the US leaders, including Henry Kissinger, and the Chinese government (Saionji 2002, 285). His private diplomacy sharply reduced risks of warfare and nuclear weapon use in Northeast Asia.

Ikeda: China is concerned about the Soviet's approach to it.

Kosygin: The Soviet Union has no intension of either attacking China or isolating it.

Ikeda: Can I pass on to Chinese leaders what you told me?

Kosygin: Certainly (Nakazawa 2004, 61–2).

Ikeda sent to Japanese media his recollections of their dialogue, praising Kosygin's words on nuclear abolition, a subject on which he spent most of the meeting's time.

On the last day of my stay in the Soviet Union, I had an opportunity to have a dialogue with Prime Minister Kosygin. It took about an hour and a half, and I expressed my convictions regarding nuclear issues. Prime Minister [Kosygin] stated clearly that the Soviet Union had no intension of using nuclear weapons and that it was seriously considering their total abandonment through due process. He was not thinking of isolating China. I make it a point to accept things said by people of responsibility. Perhaps, he shared his innermost feelings because I was a civilian and not a politician. I also confirmed in China its strong decision and will towards total abolition of nuclear weapons. It seems to me that all mankind share that wish. I asked myself how could the wishes be bridged. There is no other way than for the top leaders of the world to come together to continue patiently to talk about the matter. At the same time, the key lies in having a civilian exchange on a broad front (Ikeda 1974).

Ikeda compared the relation of politics and economics, and other fields. and cultural, educational, and peaceful exchanges to the relation of a ship and the sea.

Assuming that a ship represents politics and economy, then the sea on which the ship sails is the ties between people. At times, the ship may be wrecked but as long as there is sea, comings and goings will continue. Culture, education and peaceful exchanges are, therefore, the right way that will build eternal friendship (Kobayashi 2012, 60).

His private diplomacy proved that non-state actors, especially people of religion, culture, and education are influential in nuclear disarmament.

4. Japanese Soka Gakkai's Actions Against Nuclear Weapons

The atomic bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 are the common origin and main motivation of the activities of all the Japanese civil society organizations against nuclear weapons, including the Japanese Soka Gakkai. The Japanese Soka Gakkai is Japan's first organization that called for abolishing nuclear weapons in Japan, as demonstrated by the 1957 speech delivered by its Second President Toda.

When all is said and done, Soka Gakkai was the first organization in Japan that came out against nuclear weapons. Its founding chairman was an educator and the organizations heads anti-nuclear-weapons [campaigns] with its numerous publications on testimonies of *higaisha* (survivors) and anti-war [activists] (my interview with Katsuko Kataoka, Secretary General of Japan Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War [JPPNW], Former North Asia Regional Vice-President of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear Weapons [IPPNW], Professor Emeritus of University of Hiroshima, October 31 2012; in Tobisawa 2018, 512).

Soka Gakkai in Japan now includes 8.27 million households, with an estimated about 10 million members. It is one of the most active organizations against nuclear weapons, and continues to conduct various activities promoting this aim throughout the world.

For example, it has been active in recording, publishing, and exhibiting the experience of atomic bomb survivors, the *hibakusha*, over half a century (see Hiroshima Soka 2020a). It was very difficult for the survivors to share their experience, or even to confess that they were survivors in the Japanese society at that time. In fact, they were discriminated, and they and their families had serious disadvantage in getting jobs and even getting married. For example, there was a rumor that survivors will have malformed children because of the radiations. Therefore, many of them preferred not to discuss their experience. The Japanese Soka Gakkai regarded as one of the most important anti-nuclear-weapon activities to pass the firsthand experience, told in the survivors' authentic voice, down to the new generations. It was not only for restoring the survivors' human rights in the society; it was also regarded as significant for the future of Japan and the world. In 2005, the Soka Gakkai Women's Peace Committee produced a movie based on the experience of 180 women survivors (see Soka Gakkai 2015).

Such a large and serious issue may not be resolved in one generation. In fact, today, many anti-nuclear-weapons civil society organizations suffer a serious stagnation in their activities, mainly due to the aging of the survivors, the fading memories of nuclear bombing, as well as a shortage of successors willing to take on the mission. However, Soka Gakkai has succeeded in nurturing a young generation that feels responsible for anti-nuclear activities, by involving members of the Soka Gakkai Youth Peace Committee as well as its Youth Division Members, who plan and manage anti-nuclear exhibitions and signature-collecting campaigns against nuclear weapons.

The starting point can be traced back to Toda bequeathing Ikeda and others his instructions to carry on nuclear abolition activities (Hiroshima Soka 2020b). It is in line with the teaching of Buddhism called “Oneness of Mentor and Disciple” (Soka Gakkai 2010) that disciples will carry on to achieve the wish of their mentor (Soka Gakkai 2021). This is a thought that enables enterprises and activities to perpetuate themselves; at the same time, it is a wisdom that prompts young people to act spontaneously, and is applicable to all organizations and systems. It may be a successful model. It can be enormously effective in prompting activities that require long-term commitment across generations.

Conclusion

The governments around the world have long believed that diplomacy and disarmament are their exclusive responsibilities. Needless to say, there are no other political decision makers. I do not intend to emphasize the limitations of government diplomacy; rather, its narrowness, and suggest that in solving problems it will be more effective from a long-term perspective to seek comprehensive diplomacy in collaboration with non-state actors, especially religious organizations.

Ikeda and Soka Gakkai's anti-nuclear-weapons activities originate in the Nichiren Buddhist philosophy of the 13th century. Based on this religious philosophy, Ikeda conducted private diplomacy based on cultural, educational, and art exchanges with China and the USSR, and other Communist countries, at a time when diplomatic channels were closed, as well as with the United States and many other countries. According to him, all breakdowns of relations between countries that could lead to developing nuclear weapons stem from mutual distrust, from conflict of political interests, and from obsessions with national and religious differences nurtured over time. He believed that overcoming those issues and nurturing mutual understanding would finally lead to the abolition of nuclear arms.

The example of the dialogues Ikeda conducted with leading figures in the world shows that “low” politics consisting of cultural exchanges can at times be more efficient than “high” politics in resolving nuclear issues and inter-state political tensions, as well as the Cold War context. Ikeda's private diplomacy was founded on the extension of his dialogues, and was true to his commitment to

“sustainability.” He received important statements in his person-to-person dialogues with the leaders. This was an example of how a private diplomacy that has a religious background can draw out true intentions not necessarily made public in formal inter-state relations or between politicians.

Ikeda found value in sustaining the dialogue, and in recognizing differences of views rather than necessarily arriving at a conformity of opinions. This is the opposite of inter-state diplomacies, where disagreement would result in a sudden cooling of relations. Ikeda’s private diplomacy proved that non-state actors that refer to a religious philosophy can dramatically contribute to worldwide nuclear disarmament and to preventing states from developing, possessing, and using nuclear weapons.

Today, Soka Gakkai continues to promote a long-term grassroots movement against nuclear weapons, which is based on the teachings, philosophy, and actions of Nichiren and Ikeda, and involves a significant number of younger generation members. In Japan, they have published and spread testimonies of survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Those people have been unfairly discriminated throughout their lives.

As mentioned earlier, the nuclear weapons issue may not be resolved in a generation. Therefore, the Soka Gakkai’s style of activities, based on the Buddhist spirit of “Oneness of Mentor and Disciple,” offers a successful model to work on such a long-term mission. Ikeda and Soka Gakkai embody the teachings of Nichiren, which treasure dignity of life, in their present-day actions against nuclear weapons.

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