

## Soka Gakkai's Interpretation of the Principle "Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life" and Ikeda's Climate Action

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**ABSTRACT:** The principle "Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life" (Japanese *Ichinen Sanzen*, Chinese *Yīniàn Sānqiān*) was taught by Chinese Buddhist master Zhiyi in the 6th century CE. The number 3,000 results by multiplying the hundred worlds for the ten *tathātā* ("suchnesses" or factors) and the three realms. The principle affirms that life at each moment contains all phenomena of the universe, thus has limitless potential. By changing how we live the moment, we can change the entire world for better—or for worse. Zhiyi's principle has been interpreted differently by different Buddhist schools. Unlike other schools, Nichiren Buddhism's interpretation is that everybody has the possibility of achieving Buddhahood in this present life, without having to wait for dying and being reborn into a higher state of life. One of the three realms is the environment, and Soka Gakkai emphasizes the principle of *eshō-funi*, the oneness of life and environment. The principle "Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life" is interpreted by Ikeda and Soka Gakkai to the effect that the self and the environment, which falsely appear to be separated, are in fact one in essence. Confronted with the ecological crisis, Ikeda taught that by transforming our inner selves we can at the same time heal the environment and fight climate change.

**KEYWORDS:** Soka Gakkai, Daisaku Ikeda, Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life, Ichinen Sanzen, Yīniàn Sānqiān, Eshō-Funi.

### *Introduction*

The late Italian scholar PierLuigi Zoccatelli (1965–2024) devoted a significant part of his researches into Buddhism in Italy to investigate why Soka Gakkai had been more successful than any other Buddhist group in the country, and why its Italian branch had become the largest in Europe. He answered that Soka Gakkai members are as concerned as the average Italian, or more, about the dangers created by wars, violence, and ecological disasters, potentially threatening the very survival of humanity. However, unlike other Italians, they sincerely believe that these dangers can be averted, a better world can be created, and world peace is not a naïve utopia but something that can be achieved—not primarily by political action

but by transforming ourselves through the practice of Buddhism (Zoccatelli 2024).

Lukas Pokorny came to similar conclusions concerning Soka Gakkai members in Austria. They are persuaded that,

Plagued by ceaseless strife, poverty and suffering, our world is in a tragic state and, as such, is in dire need of a positive transformation. Nichiren Buddhism offers the salvific tools to achieve this formidable task, that is, to nourish one's inner transformation and subsequently to create world peace. According to Nichiren Buddhism, only individual self-cultivation can lead to global harmony... one's self-cultivation affects collective transformation since one's thoughts and actions (microcosm) impact one's environment and the cosmos itself (macrocosm) (Pokorny 2014, 8).

A key Buddhist concept Soka Gakkai members rely on to affirm that changing the world is possible is the principle “Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life” (Japanese *Ichinen Sanzen*, Chinese *Yīniàn Sānqiān*), which finds its origins in the works of the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE Chinese monk Zhiyi (538–597). In this article, I will first explain the origins in the *Lotus Sutra* and the meaning of the principle in the thought of Zhiyi. Second, I will discuss the interpretation of the principle by Nichiren (1222–1282). Third, I will examine how Daisaku Ikeda (1928–2023) made the principle into a central tenet of Soka Gakkai and connected it to ecological action.

### *The Lotus Sutra, Zhiyi, and the Principle of Yīniàn Sānqiān*

Although the dates of the composition of the *Lotus Sutra* are controversial, we can call Zhiyi a late commentator of the text. Zhiyi lived and taught in the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE and the *Lotus Sutra*, at least according to most contemporary scholars, had emerged four or five centuries earlier (Lopez 2016).

The *Lotus Sutra*, like other fundamental religious scriptures of humanity, is not a systematic text. It mostly teaches through stories and parables. Recent scholars have argued that the first community gathered around Buddha Shakyamuni (according to traditional dates, 566–466 BCE) did not have a clear and unanimous apprehension of his role. According to these scholars, some believed that he was just a great human master who was born, achieved enlightenment, taught, and passed into the Nirvana at death. It was only gradually that the Buddhist community came to a different understanding of the Buddha as a divine-like being who had been teaching the Dharma to all sort of living beings through the ages and continues to do so.

Due to the limited capabilities of the humans of his time to understand him, he pretended that he needed to achieve enlightenment and went through the motion of “dying,” while in fact he continues to be present and teach the Dharma to all sentient beings. If these modern scholars are right, this progressive comprehension of the role of the Buddha would parallel how the Christians came to understand the divine figure of Christ and created the branch of Christian theology known as Christology (Hábito 2020).

Be it as it may be, the *Lotus Sutra* clearly expressed this understanding of Buddha, by making him explaining the reasons why he pretended to have died:

For the sake of ordinary, perverse people  
though truly alive, I say I am extinct.  
If people see me all the time,  
They become arrogant and selfish,  
Indulge in the five desires without restraint  
And fall into evil paths (Reeves 2008, 298).

Living beings do need the Buddha, as most of them due to karmic reasons are entrapped in the *samsara*, the cycle of reincarnations. Those caught in the *samsara* were already classified by Hindus into six worlds of sentient beings, a system that Buddhism inherited. They are the hell dwellers, the hungry ghosts, the animals, the humans, the lower deities (*asuras*), and the gods or heavenly creatures (*devas*). Even those in the sixth world, the gods, still achieve only impermanent happiness and remain in a situation of suffering.

While this is a pessimistic description of the situation of living beings, it is not without hope. Through parables and stories, the *Lotus Sutra* tells us that the Buddha continues to operate to rescue those entrapped in *samsara* and suffering. Two typical stories are those of a father who rescues his children who had carelessly remained inside a burning house (Chapter 3), and of another father, who is also an “excellent doctor,” who returns from a trip, finds that his sons have swallowed a poison, and feigns his own death to persuade them to take an antidote (Chapter 16).

The fact is that beyond the six worlds that bind living beings to suffering there are four progressively superior worlds leading to liberation. They bring the total of worlds to ten. They are those of the “hearers of the voice” (*śrāvaka*), who pursue

awakening through study, meditation, and observance of the precepts; of the “solitary enlightened ascetics” (*pratyekabuddha*), who have achieved enlightenment outside of a community and do not teach it to others; of the *bodhisattvas*, who having achieved enlightenment voluntarily remain in the world to help others on the enlightening path; and finally of those fully enlightened and liberated, the Buddhas.

Before discussing how Zhiyi systematized the teaching about the ten worlds, we should introduce another important notion imparted by the *Lotus Sutra* in form of an enumeration: the ten *tathātā*. Translating the term *tathātā* into English is not easy: “suchness” and “thusness” have been proposed, as well as “factor.” These are ten fundamental aspects of all that exists. According to the *Lotus Sutra*

every existing thing has such characteristics, such a nature, such an embodiment, such powers, such actions, such causes, such conditions, such effects, such rewards and retributions, and yet such a complete fundamental coherence (Reeves 2008, 78).

In fact, the traditional enumeration of the ten *tathātā* Zhiyi relied on, listing them as appearance, nature, entity, power, influence, inherent cause, relation, latent effect, manifest effect, and their consistency from beginning to end, does not come from the earliest texts of the *Lotus Sutra* but from the Chinese translation of Kumarajiva (ca. 344–413). The *tathātā* are so important in the *Lotus Sutra* because they represent the non-dual way in which the Buddha sees reality, “not in the way as we [humans] experience it” but as things really are, beyond the apparent contradictions and oppositions: “Nothing is simply real, nothing simply empty, nothing as it seems, nothing the opposite” (Reeves 2008, 291).

The organization of these principles of the *Lotus Sutra* into a coherent system first emerged in the school called in China Tiantai, which flourished in the sixth century CE, and from which later derived the Japanese esoteric Tendai school, formally established in the year 806. According to the school’s tradition, Zhiyi was the fourth patriarch of Tiantai and a disciple of a leading authority on the *Lotus Sutra*, third patriarch Nanyue Huisi (515–577) (Ziporyn 2000, 2016).

One of Zhiyi’s main teachings was that each of the ten worlds (the six worlds of suffering and the four worlds of enlightenment) contains in itself all the others. There are thus one hundred possible combinations (as each world can also be combined simply with itself). In each of these combinations, the ten *tathātā* are all presents, bringing the possibilities to the number of one hundred multiplied by ten, thus one thousand. Zhiyi added that this figure should still be multiplied by three, as in Buddhist cosmologies since Nāgārjuna (ca. 150–250), whom Zhiyi

recognized as the first Tiantai patriarch, there are three realms, of the five components (form, perception, conception, volition, and consciousness), of the living beings, and of the environment. Zhiyi thus concluded that the total number of realms is in fact three thousand.

But why, we can ask, is this important? Zhiyi has been often compared to the great Medieval Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who also liked to proceed through lists and enumerations. For both Aquinas and Zhiyi these numbers, although perhaps not in accordance with modern taste, are not pedantic but aimed at presenting deep conclusions and teachings.

Zhiyi used the enumeration to propose the doctrine of "Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life," which deeply influenced the whole history of Buddhism. What he meant is that in every single moment of the life of a sentient being, all the three thousand realms are simultaneously present as possibilities. The worst is possible, but so is the best. At every given moment we can become a hell dweller, a hungry ghost, or an animal, but also a *bodhisattva* and even a Buddha.

### *Nichiren's Ichinen Sanzen*

Some of Zhiyi's disciples interpreted the principle of *Yimiàn Sānqiān*, perhaps abusively, as only intended for monks, who had the technical knowledge to understand it and put it into practice. As for the others, they should just behave and hope to advance through the path of the reincarnations so that they may achieve enlightenment in a next life. In Japan, some Tendai monks adopted what in Christianity would be called a quietist attitude, preaching that since all was one, Buddhahood can be attained by simply wishing it, without the need of any practice. Obviously, such a position, as it happened with quietism in Christianity, could easily justify moral corruption.

As Ikeda will later put it, Zhiyi's genuine teaching

was distorted by later Tendai scholars. The Tendai school in the Daishonin's [Nichiren's] day had declined even to the point of repudiating the value of Buddhist practice. Their view, simply put, was that since the true entity was at one with all phenomena, then it was fine for things to be just as they were; one was a Buddha even if he or she carried out no practice. They had become completely degenerate; they had killed the spirit of the founder... Simply saying that reality, mired in pollution and suffering, is itself the true

entity cannot possibly lead to any improvement in people's lives or in society. To this day, the tendency to readily view present conditions with rose-colored glasses and neglect action needed to bring about positive change remains deeply ingrained in Japanese people's outlook on religion and on life. Nichiren Daishonin fought against this decadent Tendai school. It could even be said that the priests of the Tendai school used the teaching of the true entity of all phenomena to justify their own decadence (Ikeda 2007b).

Parenthetically, Ikeda compared Tendai's decadence to the attitude of the monks of Nichiren Shoshu and their patriarch Nikken (1922–2019), from which Soka Gakkai had painfully separated, writing that the Tendai priests in Nichiren's time "resemble the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood today." The latter

similar to the Tendai school in the Daishonin's time but incomparably more reprehensible—has trampled upon the spirit of the founder, Nichiren Daishonin. Neglecting practice and whiling away their lives in dissipation, they have thoroughly defiled the spirit of Buddhism (Ikeda 2007b).

In his effort to restore the genuine teachings, Nichiren quoted often Zhiyi but made a consistent effort to explain the principle of "Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life," called in Japanese *Ichinen Sanzen*, in a simple way, which even laypersons would be able to understand and put into practice. He even used physiognomy to make himself understood:

When you look at somebody's face, at times you see joy on it, at times you see anger, at times you see peace, at times that face expresses greed, at other times stupidity, and at other times adulation. Well: anger shows the Realm of Hell; greed shows the realm of Hungry Spirits; stupidity shows the Realm of Beasts; adulation shows the realm of asuras, joy shows the Realm of Devas (Gods); peace shows the Realm of Humans. The expressions you see on people's countenance show the six Realms of birth and rebirth. Concerning the Four Holy Realms, they are hidden and are not expressed in people's faces, but if you investigate (the matter) more clearly, you will find that they are also included (in the Realm of Humans)... it is difficult to see (in us human beings) a manifestation of the Buddha Realm. But since you have finally come to believe that all other nine Realms of existence are included in our human existence, do not refuse your faith concerning the last one... the Realm of Humans includes the Buddha realm (Hábito 2020, 50, referring to "Three Major Writings of Nichiren," an unpublished translation by the Italian Jesuit Pier Paolo del Campana).

According to Filipino scholar (and a former Jesuit priest who has become a Zen *rōshi*) Ruben Hábito,

Nichiren refers specifically to this notion of *ichinen sanzen* in many of his own writings, and amplifies on it in his major treatise dealing with "the one important matter in my life"... For Nichiren, the principle of *ichinen sanzen* is what undergirds the teaching on the buddhahood of all sentient beings. It is the father and mother of all Buddhas, as well as the seed of buddhahood (Hábito 1999, 290).

As part of his “bodily reading” (*shindoku*) of the *Lotus Sutra*, Nichiren taught that among the three thousand possibilities present in every single moment of life, Buddhahood can be achieved by reciting the Japanese title of the *Sutra*, *Myōhō Renge Kyō*. This is, Nichiren believed, the way that in his infinite compassion the Buddha himself devised to come, rescue human beings, and lead them to the glorious path of Buddhahood. As Hábito summarizes,

The recitation of the five-character phrase *Myōhō-rence-kyō* thus becomes the concrete and practical way wherein this principle of *ichinen sanzen* is activated and realized. What easier way is there to the realization of buddhahood than the recitation of this phrase, which contains within itself all the treasures of the universe, all the truths in the teachings of all the Buddhas? (Habito 1999, 291).

### *Ikeda, Ichinen Sanzen, and Climate Action*

*Ichinen Sanzen* is also a key aspect of Ikeda's thought. Ikeda offered an approach relevant for our contemporary world to the three components of Zhiyi's multiplication: the ten factors (*tathātā*), the ten worlds, and the three realms. Concerning the ten factors, he explained that

The three factors of appearance, nature and entity explain the essential composition of all phenomena. The six factors of power, influence, internal cause, relation, latent effect and manifest effect analyze the functions and workings of all phenomena. And consistency from beginning to end indicates the coherency of the nine factors from appearance to manifest effect (Ikeda 2007a).

All beings in the ten worlds possess the ten factors, although “according to the[ir] state of life” (Ikeda 2007a). Indeed, according to Ikeda, since the ten factors correspond to the “true entity of all phenomena,” they are also present among vegetables and even non-sentient “inorganic things”:

Flowers blooming on the roadside, for example, have the appearance, nature and entity of beauty. And they also possess power, influence, internal cause, relation, latent effect and manifest effect, without any omission. And in their totality all of these factors are coherently integrated with the life of the flower.

The same is also true of inorganic things. A pebble, the sky, the moon, stars, the sun, the sea with its salty scent, rugged mountains, skyscrapers overlooking noisy streets, houses and cars and every piece of furniture or utensil—the 10 factors describe the existence of all things (Ikeda 2007 a).

The interaction between the ten worlds and the ten factors carries the all-important practical consequence that “the beings of the ten worlds can all become Buddhas”:

To say that the beings of the ten worlds all possess the ten factors of appearance, nature, entity, power, influence, inherent cause, relation, latent effect, manifest effect and their consistency from beginning to end, is nothing less than an affirmation that, as seen with the eye of the Buddha, there is no difference between the life of the Buddha and the lives of others. The enlightenment of all people, therefore, is a certainty (Ikeda 2007b).

Ikeda emphasized that the *Lotus Sutra* also overcame the objection that women could not obtain Buddhahood through the story of the enlightenment of the Dragon Girl, the daughter of the Dragon King who lived at the bottom of the sea. According to Toshie Kurihara, Ikeda

interprets the enlightenment of the dragon girl from the viewpoint of the three thousand realms in a single moment of life, “everyone, men and women alike, possesses the ‘attainments that were inherent in her nature.’ It is a jewel that exists in the lives of all living beings. This is the meaning of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds and three thousand realms in a single moment of life; this is the Lotus Sutra’s fundamental revelation” (Kurihara 2010, 49–50).

Ikeda wrote that

If it were true that women could not become Buddhas, then the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life would fall apart. To deny three thousand realms in a single moment of life is to deny the possibility of anyone’s attainment of Buddhahood. Therefore, the dragon girl’s enlightenment signifies not only the enlightenment of all women but the enlightenment of all men as well (Ikeda, Saito, Endo, and Suda 2000, 99).

“Enlightenment,” here, means the achievement of the tenth level, Buddhahood, as even the ninth, of the *bodhisattvas*, may still include “deluded aspects,” such as judging those one is helping (Indigo 2007, 22). According to Soka Gakkai, in the thought of Nichiren,

The departure from other schools of Buddhism lies in the understanding that Buddhahood can only exist in the nine worlds, that is, daily life. It cannot manifest as an abstract ideal; it is actually through the transformation of an individual that it is revealed and becomes meaningful. It is an expression of a desire to live purposefully, with hope and with the realisation that our own happiness is connected to others. The nine worlds, which form our daily reality have both enlightened and destructive potentialities (Indigo 2007, 21).

Ikeda also emphasized Nichiren’s teaching that Buddhahood can be achieved directly by chanting *daimoku*. He argued that the path of other Buddhist schools towards Buddhahood



is like climbing a mountain, starting at the foot and heading for the summit. During the ascent, we are given explanations of how wonderful the peak is, but we ourselves cannot appreciate or comprehend it. Nor is there any guarantee we will eventually reach the top. We may get lost or meet with an accident on the way. In contrast, Nichiren Buddhism reveals the way to the direct and immediate attainment of enlightenment, so in an instant we find ourselves standing on the mountain peak (Ikeda 2021).

We do not reach the mountain peak only for our personal satisfaction, however. When we are on the peak of the mountain, “we personally savor the marvelous view with our whole beings and, out of our desire to share that joy with others, we descend and go out into society” (Ikeda 2021). Here, the third element of Zhiyi’s multiplication comes into play, the three realms: of the five components, of the living beings, and of the environment. Summarizing Ikeda’s approach, George David Miller writes that

Whereas the five components pertain to the physical and psychic analysis of living beings, the realm of living worlds pertains to the continuous interrelationship and reciprocal influence among living beings. The realm of living beings not only pertains to the physical environment but to the social environment as well. The realm of environment pertains to the environment that supports the existence of beings. This consists of the mostly non-sentient environment: example, oceans, mountains, and plants (Miller 2002, 33).

For Ikeda, a key point of *Ichinen Sanzen* is that within a non-dualistic Buddhist worldview the three realms cannot be conceived as separated. This has both theoretical and practical consequences:

The Daishonin’s Buddhism teaches not that we should merely observe the true entity of all phenomena within our lives but that we should strive to make the reality of our lives and our environment shine as the true entity of all phenomena. It is a philosophy of change and improvement for causing all phenomena—our lives and society—to shine as the entity of the Mystic Law (Ikeda 2007b).

By changing ourselves, we also change society. Soka Gakkai also emphasizes the doctrine of *eshō-funi*, the non-duality of life and environment:

life and its environment, though two seemingly distinct phenomena, are essentially non-dual; they are two integral phases of a single reality. In the Japanese term *eshō-funi*, *eshō* is a compound of *shōhō*, meaning life or a living being, and *ehō*, its environment. *Funi*, meaning “not two,” indicates oneness or non-duality. It is short for *nini-funi*, which means “two (in phenomena) but not two (in essence)” (Soka Gakkai International 2002).

The three realms “exist in a single moment of life and are inseparable from one another. Therefore, a living being and its environment are non-dual in their ultimate reality” (Soka Gakkai International 2002).

Ikeda's climate action campaigns confronted the problem of climate change at different levels, through lectures, exhibitions, dialogues with politicians, scholars, and activists, and cooperation with the United Nations (Šorytė, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*). However, the principle of *Ichinen Sanzen* was the basis of his persuasion that solving these problems was indeed possible. Nichiren had already written in his *On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime* that

if the minds of living beings are impure, their land is also impure, but if their minds are pure, so is their land. There are not two lands, pure or impure in themselves. The difference lies solely in the good or evil of our minds (Nichiren 1999, 4).

When we understand that the self and the environment, which falsely appear to be separated, are in fact one in essence, we also understand that by transforming our inner selves we can at the same time heal the environment and fight climate change.

Miller's conclusions about the importance of *Ichinen Sanzen* and its role in Ikeda's educational project also apply to his climate action:

*Ichinen sanzen* is perhaps the most accurate depiction of the complexity of human nature and human reality in the history of philosophy. The basic human emotional attitudes (Ten Worlds) are integrated with our cognitive faculties, interactive and reciprocal relationship with other beings, support of the non-sentient environment (taken collectively, the Three Realms) and intersect ontological realities (the Ten Factors). The uniqueness of human existence is dramatically portrayed in the *ichinen sanzen*. To fully understand what it means to be human, the driving question of wisdom-based education, we require a model based on the *ichinen sanzen* that helps us determine our place in the chain of being (Miller 2002, 35).

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