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Faith in Revolution

By [The Editors](#) Winter 2008



Daisaku Ikeda is President of the Soka Gakkai International, the world's largest Buddhist lay group and America's most diverse. In a rare interview, Ikeda speaks to contributing editor **Clark Strand** about his organization's remarkable history, its oft-misunderstood practice, and what its members are really chanting for.

From Hollywood celebrities to renowned jazz musicians to everyday practitioners around the world, Soka Gakkai Buddhists are best known for their familiar chant, *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*. What they are chanting is the Japanese title of the *Lotus Sutra*, which posits that all of us—without exception—can attain enlightenment through faith in its teachings.

The Soka Gakkai (Value Creation Society) was founded in 1930 by Tsunesaburo Makiguchi [1871–1944], a Japanese educator whose theories were strongly influenced by the teachings of Nichiren, a 13th-century Buddhist priest who sought to reform Japanese society by bringing its leadership in line with the

Lotus Sutra's teachings. Makiguchi was arrested under the Peace Preservation Act in 1943 by the Japanese government for refusing to consolidate with other Buddhist sects under the banner of State Shinto, effectively challenging the authority of the military government. He died in prison a year later. After the war his disciple Josei Toda [1900–1958] turned the Soka Gakkai into a national phenomenon, increasing its membership dramatically and establishing it as a grassroots social movement that championed peace and the rights of ordinary people. At Toda's death in 1958, the task of spreading the Soka Gakkai's Nichiren Buddhist teachings to the international community fell to Toda's disciple Daisaku Ikeda [b. 1928], who founded the Soka Gakkai International (SGI) on the island of Guam in 1975.

With 12 million members in 192 countries, SGI is the world's largest Buddhist lay group and the largest, most ethnically diverse Buddhist school in America, where its members gather in 2,600 neighborhood discussion groups and nearly 100 community centers nationwide.

Among Western convert Buddhists, there has always been a sharp division between members of SGI and meditation-oriented students of traditions like Zen, Vipassana, and Vajrayana. Students of the meditation approaches tend to know little, if anything, of SGI. So what is the practice of SGI? What are its teachings, and how do they account for its rapid spread to so many different cultures around the world?

This interview with SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, the first granted to any American magazine, was conducted this summer via email by *Tricycle* contributing editor Clark Strand and translated by Andrew Gebert. It is the culmination of a two-year-long conversation with SGI's top leadership on the future of Buddhism as it relates to interreligious dialogue and issues of pressing global concern.

Most Americans know little about Nichiren Buddhism, except that its followers chant *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*, the title of the *Lotus Sutra*. Could you help our readers to understand the role of this core practice in Nichiren Buddhism? Nichiren used the following analogy to explain the *daimoku*, or "Great Title," and how it works: "When a caged bird sings, birds who are flying in the sky are thereby summoned and gather around, and when the birds flying in the sky gather around, the bird in the cage strives to get out. When with our mouths we chant the Mystic Law, our Buddha-nature, being summoned, will invariably emerge."

To chant *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* is to call out the name of the Buddha-nature within us and in all living beings. It is an act of faith in this universal Buddhature, an act of breaking through the fundamental darkness of life—our ina-

bility to acknowledge our true enlightened nature. It is this fundamental darkness, or ignorance, that causes us to experience the cycles of birth and death as suffering. When we call forth and base ourselves on the magnificent enlightened life that exists within each of us without exception, however, even the most fundamental, inescapable sufferings of life and death need not be experienced as pain. Rather, they can be transformed into a life embodying the virtues of eternity, joy, true self, and purity.

On its surface, this seems just like the other single-practice teachings that came out of Kamakura Japan— like Dogen’s practice of just sitting or Honen’s chanting of the *nembutsu*. As you note, there are apparent similarities between these practices and Nichiren’s practice of chanting the title of the *Lotus Sutra*. These can, I believe, be attributed to a shared response, conscious or unconscious, to the particular conditions and challenges of the Kamakura era, a conflict-torn age when Japan was transitioning to a samurai-centered political system.

The Zen practice of just sitting is representative of the kind of *jiriki*, or “self-power,” practice that makes no appeal to any kind of absolute truth or being beyond oneself. On the other hand, the chanting of *nembutsu*, relying on and seeking salvation in Amida Buddha, is representative of the *tariki*, or “other-power,” approach. Drawing upon the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra*, Nichiren declared that it was wiser to avoid leaning too much on either the self-power or the other-power approach. Nichiren’s practice of chanting *Nam-myoho-enge-kyo* leads us to discover a power and wisdom that exists within us and at the same time transcends us. It embraces aspects of both the self- and other-power practices.

In a sense, then, you seem to suggest that it represents the best of both worlds. Yes, and because Nichiren’s approach is both so accessible and so practical, it enables ordinary people to cultivate the vast sources of energy and wisdom they already possess within. It empowers us to live courageously and victoriously amidst the terrible realities of this era of conflict and strife. As such I am confident that it can play a vital role in illuminating the path forward for humanity.

Nichiren Buddhists chant the daimoku to get what they want—a successful career, better health, a good marriage, even world peace. Nevertheless, from a purely traditional point of view, it would seem a violation of basic Buddhist doctrine to chant for the satisfaction of earthly desires rather than striving to overcome them. Isn’t this a contradiction? If you think that the purpose of religion is happiness, there really is no contradiction. The ideal of Mahayana Buddhism is the realization of happiness for oneself and for others. Nowhere is this more completely set out than in the *Lotus Sutra*, which recognizes the Buddha-nature in all people—women and men, those with formal education

and those without. It declares that all people, without regard to their class, origin, personal, cultural, or social background, can attain enlightenment. Our recitation of the title of the *Lotus Sutra* is a way of renewing our vow to live in accord with this ideal.

Even so, the Buddhist tradition—even the Mahayana tradition—has tended to focus on a monastic approach to enlightenment. Do you see in the Lotus Sutra the suggestion of some kind of populist reform? The *Lotus Sutra* does not deny the validity of monastic practice, of people dedicating themselves to their practice in a setting conducive to overcoming deluded impulses and attaining a peaceful state of mind. The problem arises when the practice comes to be seen as an end in itself, rather than a means of entering into the path of wisdom. Nichiren was the first to make the attainment of wisdom through faith a possibility for all people. By following his teachings, it becomes possible to use every occurrence in life—pleasant or painful—as an opportunity for the further development of our innate wisdom. When Nichiren declares that earthly desires lead to enlightenment, he is describing a process by which even ordinary people living in the midst of deluded impulses and earthly desires can manifest their highest wisdom.

I still think a lot of non-Nichiren Buddhists will have a hard time understanding how chanting for earthly desires leads to enlightenment. Well, to begin with, I think it is important for all Buddhists—even members of the SGI—to understand that Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is not some kind of magic formula to be recited to fulfill desires. It is a practice that expresses our faith in the truth and brings our lives into rhythm with that truth. It is a path for overcoming the so-called lesser self that is attached to desires and tormented by deluded impulses. It is a process of training and transforming our lives to be able to manifest our greater self, to bring forth our Buddha-wisdom and the compassionate capacity to realize happiness for ourselves and other people.

In its early days, the Soka Gakkai was despised and laughed at in Japanese society as a gathering of the sick and poor. Josei Toda, my life mentor, took this as a point of pride, however, and declared with confidence: “The true mission of religion is to bring relief to the sick and the poor. That is the purpose of Buddhism. The Soka Gakkai is the ally and friend of the common people, a friend to the unhappy. However much we may be looked down on, we will continue to fight for the sake of such people.” Faced with the devastation of postwar Japan, Toda was convinced that, in the eyes of the Buddha, this was the most noble action.

Moreover, the *Lotus Sutra* doesn’t deny the value of worldly benefit. By allowing people to start to practice in expectation of such benefit, the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra* establish a way of life based on faith, and through this faith—developed step by step, starting from wherever we happen to find ourselves

in life when we come to the Buddhist path, and with whatever natural human worries or concerns happen to have us in their grip at the time—we enter the path of wisdom. By believing in this sutra that teaches universal enlightenment and by purifying our mind, we are then able to bring our daily actions into harmony with the core spirit of Buddhism. In the *Lotus Sutra* and the teachings of Nichiren, there is no essential dichotomy between enlightenment and the lives of ordinary beings.

Western scholars have observed that Nichiren was the first Buddhist leader to speak with a truly prophetic voice, insisting that Japanese leaders embrace the dharma and make it a social reality. What inspired Nichiren to take such a bold step, risking his life to assert a Buddhist vision of society in a country where religion had traditionally been expected to support the existing power structure rather than hold it to account? You're right that in Japan religion has traditionally been expected to support authority. Nichiren's very different response to power holds a key to understanding his character. Nichiren felt compassion for the sufferings of the common people and a sense of responsibility for doing something about this. And this empathy and earnest commitment to social transformation are at the very core of all Nichiren's actions.

Thirteenth-century Kamakura Japan was a terrible time to live. Life was constantly threatened by earthquakes, droughts, and other natural disasters, as well as famine, pestilence, and armed conflict. But neither the political nor the religious authorities of the day were able to see beyond their attachment to their own power and position to take effective action. The result was a pervasive sense of powerlessness and despair among the populace. Nichiren was by nature incapable of turning a blind eye to other people's pain. So he spoke out, launching a battle of ideas that challenged the existing order.



Daisaku Ikeda and his wife, Kaneko [second from left], visiting members of the Soka Gakkai International in Tokyo in 1979. © Seikyō Shimbun

That sounds very risky. It was. But Nichiren understood the risks. In 1260, he presented his treatise, *Rissho Ankoku Ron (On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land)*, to the highest de facto authority of Japan, the retired regent Hojo Tokiyori. He did this because he was convinced that in a feudal society, changing the awareness of those at the top of the pyramid of power was essential. In the years that followed, in spite of persecution and the constant threat of assassination or execution, Nichiren fiercely maintained his independence, insisting on holding those in power to account. He gained many adherents among the common people at this time by teaching them that happiness in this world was indeed possible. But his influence among the down-trodden sectors of society was naturally perceived as a threat by those in power.

Nichiren had clearly foreseen all of this, and his writings record with great frankness the doubts and questions that assailed him early in his career as he pondered whether or not he should speak out. At one point he confessed to a disciple: "I, Nichiren, am the only person in all Japan who understands this. But if I utter so much as a word concerning it, then parents, brothers, and teachers will surely censure me, and the ruler of the nation will take steps against me. On the other hand, I am fully aware that if I do not speak out I will be lacking in compassion." After a process of intense self-questioning, Nichiren recalled the words of the *Lotus Sutra* urging that this teaching be spread after the Buddha's passing, and he made a great vow to transform society and enable all people to live in happiness.

How did the Soka Gakkai take Nichiren's legacy forward? The Soka Gakkai's first leaders, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda, were both innovative educators dedicated to the reform of educational practices in Japan. Mr. Makiguchi converted to Nichiren Buddhism in 1928, two years before he founded the Soka Gakkai, and Mr. Toda followed him in embracing faith in Buddhism soon after. Like Nichiren, they dedicated themselves to the happiness of ordinary people struggling to live their lives.

During World War II, however, they found themselves facing persecutions when they resisted the currents of Japanese militarist fascism and criticized the state's use of Shinto to spiritually unite the Japanese people behind the war effort. They were arrested and imprisoned as a result. In 1944, Mr. Makiguchi died in prison from extreme malnutrition. He was 73 at the time of his death. Mr. Toda emerged from prison to rebuild the organization amid the devastation of defeat.

But it wasn't just the military government that opposed the Soka Gakkai's message of peace and radical inclusion, correct? That's right. During the almost seven centuries since his death, Nichiren's Buddhism had become desensitized to the interests and concerns of the common people. At times it had

even been interpreted as a highly nationalistic teaching. Mr. Makiguchi rediscovered Nichiren Buddhism as a religion dedicated to the happiness of ordinary people. He sought to promote such happiness, starting at the foundations of society, by reforming educational practices in Japan. With time, his goals expanded to include sharing the practice with people from all walks of life as a means of transforming the lives of ordinary people and thus society itself.

Didn't Nichiren Buddhism also unite behind the war effort, as required by the government, like virtually all other schools of Japanese Buddhism? During Japan's years of militarist madness, the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood, with which Makiguchi was associated, gave in to pressure from the political authorities. For example, they agreed to modify or delete passages from the writings of Nichiren that were considered problematic by the authorities. In contrast, Mr. Makiguchi upheld the original intent of Nichiren Buddhism—a humanistic dedication to the happiness of ordinary people—and died in prison as a result.



Josei Toda [left], the second president of the Soka Gakkai, and Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, the founding president, ca. 1930. © Seikyō Shimbun

Would you say that the modernist, global-reaching humanism of the postwar Soka Gakkai was born of Makiguchi's resistance to the war? Yes. Though “inspired by” might be a better way of putting it, because President Makiguchi's struggle to preserve humanistic values stands as an enduring example for us.

It was his disciple Josei Toda who, having survived the prison experience, really defined what can be recognized as “modern Buddhism.” In prison, Mr. Toda read the difficult-to-grasp words of the *Lotus Sutra* with his very being, gaining the groundbreaking insight that the Buddha is nothing other than life itself. I am personally convinced that this is an insight of profound significance within the larger history of Buddhism. Through his awakening in prison, Mr. Toda developed a universal means of expressing the core message of the *Lotus Sutra* in a way that made it accessible to contemporary humanity, reviving it as something potentially meaningful to daily life in the modern world, regardless of race, religion, or cultural background.

Toda was convinced that the Soka Gakkai was heir to the mission to widely propagate Nichiren Buddhism for realizing a peaceful society, and he made this pledge central to the identity of the organization. Although he himself never traveled outside of Japan, he was deeply concerned about the peace of the world.

In September 1957, just six months before his death, he issued a historic call for the banning of nuclear weapons, which he denounced as an absolute evil threatening humanity’s right to exist. In this way he sought to communicate the *Lotus Sutra’s* commitment to the sanctity of life and peace to the entire world. I am convinced that Mr. Toda’s efforts greatly contributed to the work of universalizing Nichiren Buddhism.

But it wasn’t Toda who took the Soka Gakkai global. That has been your mission in the founding of the Soka Gakkai International, correct? As the organization’s third president, I have been deeply inspired by my predecessors. I have felt a powerful responsibility to universalize and ensure the long-term flourishing of the teachings. Just weeks before he died in April 1958, Mr. Toda called me to his side and told me that he had dreamed of going to Mexico, that there were people there waiting to learn about Buddhism. In terms of the teachings, I have tried to separate out those elements in the traditional interpretation of Nichiren Buddhism that are more reflective of Japanese cultural and historical contingencies than they are of the underlying message. To this end I have continued to engage in dialogue with a wide range of people around the world in order to refine and universalize the expression of my ideas. Because I am convinced that all cultures and religions are expressions of deep human truths, I have regularly referenced philosophical traditions other than Buddhism, bringing in the ideas and insights of literature, art, science, and medicine, and sharing the inspiring words and insights of thinkers from a wide range of cultural and religious backgrounds with people, including the membership of the Soka Gakkai.

I remember that in his book on the Soka Gakkai, the American scholar Richard Seager noted with surprise that there were no traditional Buddhist images or icons visible on the grounds of Soka University's Japanese or American campuses, though he found statues of Victor Hugo and Walt Whitman. The British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) wrote about religion: “Its principles may be eternal, but the expression of those principles requires continual development.” To me, this is especially true for Buddhism, which is a dynamic life philosophy that responds to people’s unchanging desire for peace and happiness across different historical and cultural settings. This is why dialogue between cultures is so crucial for the development of Buddhism in the next millennium. While staying true to its essence, Buddhism needs to encounter, learn, and evolve. In this sense, I am convinced that the work of rediscovery, purification, and universalization—taken on by the SGI as its core mission— is the very essence of Buddhism.

You have recast the teachings of the Lotus Sutra in terms of a process you call “human revolution.” The first part of that term gives expression to your philosophy of Buddhist humanism. But there’s also revolution. What are some of the more *revolutionary* aspects of Buddhism as taught by the SGI, and how does religious humanism spark that kind of revolution? Buddhism is inherently revolutionary. I can’t think of anything more radical than enlightenment. It is both a return to our most natural state and a dramatic change. To quote Nichiren, “There is definitely something extraordinary in the ebb and flow of the tide, the rising and setting of the moon, and the way in which summer, autumn, winter, and spring give way to each other. Something uncommon also occurs when an ordinary person attains Buddhahood.”

The expression “human revolution” was made famous by President Toda. It is a way of expressing the idea of enlightenment in contemporary language. In Nichiren Buddhism, enlightenment always impacts society. Through an inner, spiritual transformation individuals can awaken to a genuine sense of the sanctity of life. This counters the disregard and mistrust for life that is at the root of what is wrong in contemporary society. This inner change is thus the basis for realizing both individual happiness and a peaceful society. Again, in Nichiren Buddhism the two are never separate.

In terms of the individual, Mr. Toda explained it this way: “Human revolution isn’t something special or out of the ordinary. It could be as simple as someone who had been lazy and uninspired becoming enthused and committed. Or someone who hadn’t been interested in learning putting themselves into their studies. Or a person who has struggled with poverty becoming more stable and comfortable in their life. Human revolution is a change in a person’s basic orientation in life. And it is the transformation in awareness caused by Buddhist practice that makes that possible.”

Yes. But that's a very different conception of Buddhahood than most of us are used to. By using the language of “human revolution,” Mr. Toda transformed the idea of Buddhahood, which in Japan and other parts of Asia had come to be understood as pertaining principally to the afterlife, into the clear and profound goal of developing and bringing to fruition our own unique capacity and character while we are alive. I earnestly believe that when people who are making such efforts unite and realize grassroots solidarity on a world scale, we will see the path opened to the realization of a nonviolent global revolution.

At the very end of the *Lotus Sutra*, Shakyamuni Buddha declares, “If you see a person who accepts and upholds this sutra, you should rise and greet him from afar, showing him the same respect you would a Buddha.” How do you interpret Shakyamuni’s words? I believe that these words offer a clear guide for Buddhists living in a religiously plural world.

Nichiren states that the eight Chinese characters that translate as “you should rise and greet him from afar, showing him the same respect you would a Buddha” express his first and highest transmission—the human qualities Shakyamuni hoped most to see in those who practiced the *Lotus Sutra* in the future after his passing. In other words, the most fundamental thing is our action and behavior as human beings, our ability to care for and treasure a single individual.

There is a chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* dedicated to Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, who reverentially saluted each person he encountered with the words: “I have profound reverence for you, I would never dare treat you with disparaging and arrogance. Why? Because you are all practicing the bodhisattva way and are certain to attain Buddhahood.” This provides us with a concrete model for our interactions with others as modern Buddhists living in an age of international interconnection and global issues and concerns.

According to the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, the period of time we are living in is called the Latter Day of the Law, an era of conflict and strife when all things tend toward conflict. The only way of resisting and countering the violent tides of such an age is with strong faith in the Buddha-nature of oneself and of others. And the way that this is put into practice is through the respect we can offer others.

We don't see much of that today in international relations, although there is always hope for the future. Indeed there is, and Buddhism can offer ways to cultivate just that kind of hope. To believe in both oneself and others, and to treat others as one would a Buddha—this is the practice that awakens and calls forth the Buddha-nature that resides within us all. It is here that the practice of straightforward propagation advocated by Nichiren has its true significance.

It is precisely because we are able to muster faith in the Buddha-nature of the *other* person that we can bring forth compassion from within ourselves and, desiring happiness for all, continue an earnest and respect-filled process of dialogue. This is the real spirit of propagation—of spreading Buddhism from one person to another. It first and foremost involves building trust and friendship through respectful, ongoing dialogue.

All people are equally endowed with the inherent capacity to respect others, and this capacity is a source of inexhaustible hope because it embodies a universal truth that transcends the specifics of religious creeds. The respect offered by Buddhists to other people is offered in virtue of their humanity, without regard to their religious belief or creed. Nichiren described this with a poetic metaphor, saying that when we bow to a mirror, the figure in the mirror bows back reverentially at us. This is the true spirit of Buddhism, and yes, it is reason for great hope.



This article is part of an online special section about Nichiren Buddhism. We hope that by gathering these articles in one place and making them freely available, our Buddhist conversation will be broadened and that we can, all of us, more fully know ourselves in knowing one another.