Buddhism in Action: A Snapshot of the SGI
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The SGI Quarterly aims to highlight initiatives and perspectives on peace, education and culture and to provide information about the Soka Gakkai International’s activities around the world. The views expressed in the SGI Quarterly are not necessarily those of the SGI. The editorial team (see above) welcomes ideas and comments from readers. For permission to reprint material from this magazine, please contact info@sgiquarterly.org.
A great human revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation and, further, will enable a change in the destiny of all humankind.

This statement from SGI President Daisaku Ikeda encapsulates the core philosophy of the SGI: That each of us has unfathomable potential, and in striving to bring this forth—spurred by trying circumstances or the desire to live more fully and responsibly—we undergo a process of positive internal change that affects our family, our workplace, society and ultimately the entire web of life.

It was second Soka Gakkai President Josei Toda (1900–58) who formulated the concept of human revolution. In doing so, he gave contemporary expression to the generally abstract idea of enlightenment. He identified Buddhahood as the unfathomable potential of our lives.

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Like his mentor, first Soka Gakkai President Tunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–1944), Toda was not so much a religious enthusiast as a person deeply engaged with the problems of society who was seeking a sound philosophical basis from which to address them. It was on the basis of this concern that they both found value in Nichiren Buddhism, with its stress on positive human potential and compassionate action. This led them to found the Soka Gakkai in 1930. Their efforts, together with a group of like-minded individuals, to apply this philosophy to the problems of daily life and discuss their findings were the origins of the SGI. From these beginnings grew a global people’s movement that now, eight decades later, has taken root in 192 countries and territories—perhaps the world’s largest and most diverse lay Buddhist movement.

Today, there are more than 12 million SGI members around the world who continue this exploration of the transformative potential of Buddhism and the effects of individual change on the larger web of human society.

Commemorating the opening of the new Soka Gakkai Headquarters building in Tokyo, Japan, as well as the 75th edition of the SGI Quarterly, this issue offers a current snapshot of the SGI movement.
The Soka Gakkai was founded in 1930 by Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and his protégé Josei Toda. Both were educators, and Makiguchi, already in his late 50s when he met Nichiren Buddhism, had devoted much of his life to educational reform. He developed a pedagogy that was based on his belief that children’s happiness was the purpose of education. In Nichiren Buddhism he found a philosophy that resonated strongly with his own ideas. He was particularly inspired by Nichiren’s concern with social reform.

During World War II, the Japanese militarist government imprisoned Makiguchi and Toda as “thought criminals” for their opposition to its policies. Makiguchi, then in his 70s, succumbed to malnutrition and died in prison.

On his release from prison in 1945, Toda reestablished the Soka Gakkai, building it into an organization of almost one million members by the time of his death in 1958.

Toda’s disciple, Daisaku Ikeda, was instrumental in this postwar development of the Soka Gakkai. In 1960, at the age of 32, he succeeded Toda as president of the organization. Under his leadership, the Soka Gakkai saw further dramatic development, taking root outside of Japan. In 1975, Ikeda established the Soka Gakkai International.

Through the various peace, education, cultural and academic institutions he has established and the numerous dialogues he has conducted with thinkers around the world, Ikeda continues to explore the application of Buddhist philosophy and principles to the challenges of global society.

Today, as a nongovernmental organization, the SGI often works in partnership with other groups, including United Nations agencies. The key areas of engagement are awareness-raising and education toward realization of sustainable development, human rights and peace, especially nuclear disarmament.

At a Buddhist study meeting

A Tradition of Engagement

The SGI

The Buddhist practice of SGI members has its origins in 13th-century Japan, when the core practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo was established by Nichiren (1222–82), a reformist Buddhist monk. Nichiren identified the Lotus Sutra as the core of the teachings of Shakayamuni Buddha.

However, it was not until the emergence of the Soka Gakkai as a lay Buddhist movement in postwar Japan that this practice became widely accessible to ordinary people.

Today, the Soka Gakkai International has some 12 million members in 192 countries and territories. From Korea, to Brazil, the USA, Italy and Ghana to India and Nepal, the birthplace of Buddhism, there are now SGI members who embrace this philosophy of individual empowerment and see the impact of their Buddhist practice within the reality of their own lives.

A key concept in the SGI is “human revolution”—the idea that the inner transformation of an individual will cause a positive change in one’s circumstances and ultimately in society as a whole.

Such transformation comes about through tackling the challenges of daily life with Buddhist practice, seeking to develop one’s potential and taking responsibility for one’s life and destiny. Change on a global scale comes about through a positive change in individuals.

SGI members believe that each individual has the power to develop a life of great value and creativity and to positively influence their community, society and the world.

Nichiren Buddhism stresses that the greatest fulfillment in life is found ultimately in working for the happiness of others.
Confronting Suffering

Buddhism developed as a response to human suffering. The founder of Buddhism, Gautama, also known as Shakymuni, born on the Indian subcontinent around 400 BCE, perceived that suffering is an inevitable part of life and was motivated to find a way to free people from it. Shakymuni’s teachings were passed down through the oral tradition before eventually being recorded in writing in various collections, called sutras.

As these teachings spread through Asia in the following centuries, numerous schools of Buddhism developed, each with their own particular practices and traditions of scholarship.

In the 13th century in Japan, the Buddhist monk Nichiren, troubled by the suffering in his own society, sought to discover and clarify the essence of Shakymuni’s teaching. He identified this essence as being contained in the Lotus Sutra.

Whereas many Buddhist schools sought a means to escape or detach from suffering, the Buddhist practice that Nichiren developed was based on the conviction that each person, regardless of circumstance or background, has the innate ability to overcome and transform the causes of suffering in his or her life. They can do so by squarely confronting challenges while tapping the Buddha nature that is inherent in their lives. This is a practice that is accessible and egalitarian. Just as a pure lotus blossoms in the muddy swamp, our enlightened nature is brought forth by our courageous engagement with the harsh realities of life.

The Practice of SGI Members

The core Buddhist practice of SGI members is chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and reciting portions of the Lotus Sutra (referred to as gongyo), and sharing the teachings of Buddhism with others in order to help them overcome their problems.

Practice is supported by faith and study. SGI members study the teachings of Nichiren in order to deepen their understanding of the principles of Buddhism and the processes of inner transformation. Study strengthens faith and conviction, which finds expression in practice.

Faith, in Nichiren Buddhism, is grounded in the experience of applying Buddhism and seeing improvements in the quality of one’s life.

Faith could be described as the ongoing effort to orient one’s heart toward the ideal of Buddhahood—the continual unfolding of one’s inherent potential for good, the ability to transform any negative circumstance into a source of growth and benefit, and a life dedicated toward helping others do the same.

As a tool to help practitioners in this challenging process, Nichiren created a mandala known as the Gohonzon (object of devotion)—a scroll inscribed with Chinese and Sanskrit characters which SGI members enshrine in their homes and focus on when chanting. The Gohonzon is a physical embodiment or representation of the ideal of Buddhahood. The characters on the Gohonzon depict the “Ceremony in the Air” as described in the Lotus Sutra. At this ceremony, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth vow to lead people to happiness during the most tumultuous of times. Gongyo is an act of renewing this determination.

The Meaning of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo

Nam derives from the Sanskrit word namu, meaning “to devote oneself.” Myoho literally means the Mystic Law—the eternal truth or principle that permeates all phenomena. Renge means lotus flower and symbolizes the law of cause and effect. Kyo literally means sutra, the voice or teaching of a Buddha.

Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is the essence of Nichiren’s teachings, expressing the ultimate Law or truth of the universe. Through chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we are able to muster internal reserves of courage, wisdom, compassion and energy that are the manifestations of our inherent Buddha nature.
The Kamakura period in Japan (1185–1333), during which Nichiren—whose teachings form the basis of the practice of SGI members—lived, has similarities to the European Renaissance era of the 15th and 16th centuries. At that time in Europe, intellectual pursuits that had previously been restricted to the nobility became increasingly available to the general populace. In the same way, the artistic and cultural achievements that had flourished in the Imperial court during the Heian period in Japan spread more widely through society during the Kamakura period.

The concept of individual salvation also became prevalent at this time. In response to a more questioning attitude toward the afterlife, new religious ideas emerged, and the character of Japanese religion underwent a significant change. Whereas the previously dominant Buddhist schools, such as the Tendai and Shingon schools, primarily catered to the nobility, new teachings and practices accessible to ordinary people, including samurai, merchants and farmers, now began to emerge.

Nichiren, in my view, is a unique and notable figure among religious leaders. In translating his writings into Spanish, I was deeply moved by his humane qualities and behavior. Japanese society at that time was feudalistic and strongly conformist, and it was common for the religious schools and their leaders to ingratiate themselves with those wielding power and authority. Nichiren, however, went directly against this tendency.
Much like the Christian reformer Martin Luther in 16th-century Europe, Nichiren showed tremendous courage in critiquing the established Buddhist schools. In Europe, where great emphasis is placed on individual will, such a revolutionary character is not particularly unusual. In Japan, however, where conformity with the group and obedience to institutions are considered prime virtues—especially in the cultural climate of the Kamakura period—Nichiren’s actions are quite remarkable.

More than simply transcending the powerful cultural ethos of his time that held individuals back from speaking out against the norms of society, Nichiren was willing to continually risk his life to voice the truth as he saw it. If I were to attempt to encapsulate Nichiren’s character in a single phrase, I would characterize it as “the spirit of challenge.” As a result of this, Nichiren lived a difficult life, existing with self-righteousness or fundamentalism. It is unfortunate that Nichiren was subjected to continuous persecution by the authorities. There is a common perception that religious persecution is not a feature in the history of Buddhism, but this is incorrect. Nichiren responded to such persecution by speaking out ever more boldly. I can find no previous example in Japan of an individual speaking out and taking action on the basis of his beliefs in this way, and his character and actions have left a deep impression on me.

Many of the religious leaders of Nichiren’s time were members of the social elite. Nichiren, by contrast, was proud of being from a class occupying the bottom rung of society. It was astonishing to me to learn that Nichiren had no financial or social backing when he chose to confront the authorities.

**Buddhist Universality**

I believe that a unique feature of Buddhism is the universality of its message. Nichiren’s attitude toward women is an example of this. His writings reveal a great respect for women and a firm belief in the equality of the genders; this at a time when women were regarded as socially inferior to men. He writes frequently about the enlightenment of women specifically, often citing the story from the Lotus Sutra of the attainment of enlightenment by the dragon king’s daughter. Nichiren’s insistence on respect for women in the context of 13th-century feudal Japan is almost shocking. Nichiren, in this sense, was truly a spiritual pioneer; not merely an ideologist, but a person whose words were borne out in action.

There are numerous letters written by Nichiren to his female followers. Many of these are penned in an easy-to-read writing style, using syllabic Japanese kana script rather than Chinese characters. As well as reflecting the trend toward popularization of Buddhism in 13th-century Japan, this is arguably also a reflection of Nichiren’s universalist disposition.

Nichiren lived a difficult life, existing as he did in a society characterized by the cultural tenet that “the nail that sticks up will be hammered down.” His willingness to stand out in the way he did was tantamount to sacrificing his life to his ideals.

“In Europe, during the Middle Ages, debate of this kind was not uncommon. However, in the context of the feudal era in Japan, it is remarkable that someone was willing to challenge major religious sects and political authorities to debate.

Transcending religious dogma, Nichiren stands out among historical figures of Japan for his sincerity, his intellect and the human warmth that comes across in many of his writings.”

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Belief in male superiority over women was of course not something unique to Japan; it was also deeply engrained in European society. Nichiren’s foresight and spiritual maturity are thus significant not only within the Japanese context but on a global scale. It is my belief that Nichiren Buddhism can make a great contribution to the dialogue among religions. Even in the 21st century, there are few religions that clarify gender equality in their doctrines. This is all the more reason why the contributions of this 13th-century religious leader deserve to be more widely known.

It is unfortunate that Nichiren Buddhism is criticized for what is seen as its exclusivity. In any age, those who adopt a revolutionary stance and hold to their beliefs are often labeled as exclusivist or intransigent. Nichiren, however, was not intrinsically an exclusivist. Proof of this is the fact that he promoted debate—there is documentary evidence of Nichiren engaging in debates with other Buddhist leaders. The willingness to determine what is right and wrong through debate is not compatible with self-righteousness or fundamentalism.

This basic social ethos of conformity has, it can be argued, remained relatively unchanged in modern-day Japan. And it is in this light that we can view the contributions of SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, an individual whom I regard as a remarkable leader who has given rise to a movement for individual empowerment; one rooted in the belief in each person’s unlimited potential. I believe also that his peacebuilding efforts and heart-to-heart dialogues with a great variety of leaders are representative of Nichiren’s character and behavior.

First Soka Gakkai President Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and second President Josei Toda suffered persecution as a result of standing up against the militarist government of Japan during World War II. Daisaku Ikeda has also experienced persecution from the authorities. To me, this is a powerful demonstration that the three presidents of the Soka Gakkai have inherited the spirit of challenge that epitomizes Nichiren, the determination to secure genuine freedom and human rights for all people.
I can’t say how often over the past decade I’ve mentioned the SGI to a friend from some other Buddhist sect only to be told, “It’s not really Buddhist, is it?” I hardly know what to say when I hear this. Once or twice I’ve tried to laugh it off with a joke: “Well, the people of Jerusalem complained that Jesus wasn’t Jewish enough.” But that strategy doesn’t work much better for me than it did for Jesus. It’s better to go straight to the fundamentals of Buddhism and explain what the Soka Gakkai says about them. That actually does work. You can’t always correct people’s prejudices, but you can teach them a little respect.

If Buddhism has a first principle, a foundational idea that lies at the bottom of everything Buddhism is and everything it does, then it has to be this: That life is suffering. In the original Pali, the First Noble Truth actually says something closer to “Suffering is the truth” or “Suffering is a fact of life.” One might add that, where Buddhism is concerned, suffering is THE fact of life—the foundation of the whole Buddhist thought system. Everything rests upon it.

The Buddha claimed that the origin of suffering lay in desire (the Second Noble Truth), that suffering could be overcome by extinguishing desire (the Third Truth), and that the way to accomplish this was by following the Eightfold Path (the Fourth). That path involved establishing Right Speech, Right Action, Right Effort, Right Livelihood and so forth, but it was primarily for monks and nuns. It was understood that if you were serious about solving the problem of suffering, you would renounce the world and join the monastic fellowship where you could devote yourself full-time to mastering the intricacies of that path. Lay people were honored for the food, clothing and shelter they contributed to that fellowship, and Shakyamuni never passed up an opportunity to guide those who supported his movement. But the fact of the matter remained: Buddhism was a religion for celibate monks and nuns.

The problem with all this is not hard to spot.
Buddhism had the least to offer to the people who needed it the most—those with no option but to go on living and struggling in the world.

According to those earliest Buddhist schools, Shakyamuni Buddha achieved enlightenment under the bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya, taught for the remainder of his life in northern India, then died at Kushinagar, entering the “blown out” state of nirvana. His disciples, following the deprivations and destruction of World War II, “Those of you who have questions are often defensive ones. But I’ve learned not to push too hard. The Lotus Sutra is the biggest boat in Buddhism, with room for all kinds of people, even those who question the rights of the other passengers to ride in it. I’m satisfied if the skeptic comes away from the encounter with the realization that Buddhism is broader and more inclusive than he thought. But if he’s willing to listen to one thing more, I’ll say this: the Buddha isn’t finished teaching yet, as you can see plainly at any SGI discussion meeting. The Lotus Sutra has never ended.”

A Living Sutra

The Lotus Sutra, compiled some five centuries later, followed the storyline offered by early Buddhism, except for one important respect. In Chapter 16 of that sutra, Shakyamuni reveals that he only “appeared” to enter nirvana. It is not the nature of a Buddha, says the Lotus, to abandon the suffering beings who live and struggle in this world. “At all times I think to myself,” says Shakyamuni, “How can I cause living beings to gain entry into the unsurpassed way and quickly acquire the body of a Buddha?” The whole sutra is Shakyamuni’s answer to that question, and that answer is a living, dynamic one. It keeps changing with the times, adapting to new people and new circumstances, with the result that it is always on the cutting edge. The Lotus is always new.

Nowadays, I like to reframe the First Noble Truth slightly so that it reads “Life is a struggle” or “Struggling is a fact of life.” That way of expressing the truth of suffering recognizes the active side of Buddhist life. A passive, meditative approach to suffering is fine for monks whose needs are provided for by other people. For the ordinary person to try to practice Buddhism in this way, however, often leads to a pessimistic, defeatist relationship with life’s problems. If life is suffering, there’s nothing you can do but bear it stoically as a lay person. If life is a struggle, you engage with it fully, drawing forth reserves of energy and wisdom.
For over 20 years I have been working in the world of Special Educational Needs (known as SEN). This refers to children who have learning difficulties arising from some kind of barrier or disability that impedes their capacity to learn in the normal way.

Surprisingly, perhaps, there is much conflict over the education of children with SEN, arising in large part from parental frustration with the confusing complexity of the system and the tensions of having to distribute finite resources fairly amongst an increasingly complex and needy child population. A parent’s instinct is to fight for their child if they feel they are not getting sufficient help in school, particularly when that child is perceived to be disadvantaged in some way.

I began work in SEN in 1990 with a local authority and soon became aware of the tensions and potential for conflict between parents, schools and the local authority. These tensions intensified, and I began to suffer from heightened stress and anxiety, dreading to pick up the phone or go to the next meeting in a school. In 1992, I was off work for around a month with exhaustion and stress. At the time, I was also a single parent looking after four young children. Once I felt well enough, I returned to work on a part-time basis in schools, and only returned to full-time work when all my children were in school.

During my period out of SEN, the system had grown more confrontational and legalistic. After three years, my previous experiences repeated themselves, and I again had to take three weeks off work with nervous exhaustion.

Fortunately, I had been introduced to Buddhism in the weeks immediately preceding my illness and was able to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo during my rest period. On January 1, 2000, I attended my first SGI meeting. I was especially struck by the sense of peace and unity amongst people of every conceivable background.

I went back to work and determined to end my workplace suffering by transforming my approach to conflict. Through chanting, I had begun to see the destructive impact of my own fear and anger on those around me. I realized I had to become stronger and more compassionate, both toward myself and toward parents and schools. I began to chant wholeheartedly for the happiness of everyone involved—the child, parents, teachers, doctors...
Through chanting, I had begun to see the destructive impact of my own fear and anger on those around me. I realized I had to become stronger and more compassionate.

peaceful working relationships with the group of schools that had been allocated to me. I advocated a culture of sincere, open, compassionate and timely dialogue.

This was a period of great conflict between some parents and the council. There were numerous appeals to the SEN Tribunal, and some legal advocates routinely told parents not to speak to council officers. Some of my colleagues in the SEN team were suffering dreadfully. Remarkably, I faced only three parental appeals in three years in my area, with none of the parents feeling the need to involve lawyers.

Speaking Out

In 2004, a fellow SGI-UK member encouraged me to consider how I could use my experience to influence the national debate around SEN. Since then, I have increasingly dedicated my efforts to this challenge. In November 2005, I was appointed as manager of the SEN Assessment Team in a disadvantaged, multiracial urban authority outside London. I was determined to foster a spirit of partnership between schools, parents and the local authority based on fair decision-making.

I took every opportunity to explain the reasons for the council’s decisions sincerely and openly to head teachers, special needs coordinators, doctors, other professionals and, of course, parents. I continued my practice of chanting for the happiness of every child, parent and teacher, especially when the council had rejected their request for extra help. By all pulling together, often we found another way of getting the child extra help in school. The number of tribunals dropped to their lowest-ever level, and complaints to councilors and MPs virtually stopped altogether.

After reading SGI President Daisaku Ikeda’s guidance on the power of the written word, I decided to pick up my pen and had three articles published in national education and legal journals. These articles led directly to an invitation to attend the National Conference of the Education Law Association in London as a guest speaker. The conference was attended by many of the leading lawyers and barristers in the country specializing in SEN. I challenged the audience to think of the financial and human cost of legal advocacy on parents, schools and local authorities. I pointed out that schools and local authorities work under huge pressures, and that an objective look at the bigger picture would reveal the simple truth that taxpayers’ money has to be shared between all children with special needs.

I highlighted how the expensive private education that lawyers secured from the tribunal for a few led to reduced resources for more disadvantaged schools and families. After a series of mostly hostile questions from the floor, I sat down to a stony silence! To my surprise, several of the legal advocates searched me out at lunchtime to express their empathy for my viewpoint.

One young lawyer said she no longer wished to specialize in this area of law as she felt the implementation of the legal framework was unjust.

I have subsequently spoken to a wide range of groups, including parents, schools and local authorities, on the urgent need to establish a fairer and more compassionate approach to meeting the needs of children with SEN and disabilities.

In September 2011, my local authority provided funding for me to train as an Accredited Interpersonal Mediator. To me, securing this qualification means formal recognition of my role as a peacemaker within the world of SEN and the completion of a personal journey I began over 20 years ago.

I am indebted to my Buddhist practice, which has helped me develop compassion. I have taken to heart President Ikeda’s guidance that partnership in the genuine sense of the word requires a commitment to sincere dialogue based on respectful compassion for the other party’s difficulties and a spirit of fairness. For example, he writes:

“Dialogue must be pivotal in our endeavors, reaching out to all people everywhere as we seek to forge a new global civilization . . . Genuine dialogue results in the transformation of opposing viewpoints, changing them from wedges that drive people apart into bridges that link them together.”

On more than one occasion I have witnessed parents, and even hard-bitten head teachers or local authority officers, moved to tears by a simple expression of compassion or gratitude from the other party acknowledging the difficulties of their role. I try positively to instill such a spirit at every meeting I attend.

Through sincere Buddhist practice, I have fundamentally transformed my feelings of inadequacy and weakness. I have learned something profound about my potential to create value in my own life and in the lives of others, based on the interconnectedness of life. I have proved to myself that when I change, so does my environment. In short, I feel I have become part of the solution to society’s problems, instead of part of the problem.
Theater of Hope
Joana Craveiro, Portugal

I have loved theater since I was a child, and when I was 13 years old, I did my first theater course. Four years after graduating from drama school, I founded my own theater company, Teatro do Vestido, as I wanted to direct and write plays. Knowing the challenges of a career in the arts, I nonetheless threw myself into it with my friends, and the feeling of having my first play performed is something I can never forget.

However, by halfway through the following year, 2002, I was sliding into depression as a result of the difficulties of finding funding. I realized now that I had made my work the center of my life and had no deeper aims or goals in life. The lack of a solid life philosophy made it very hard to make choices about the different paths life presents. It was with this somewhat miserable state that I applied for a Master’s Degree in Theatre Directing in Scotland. I got one of the three places on the course in 2003.

There, I had the opportunity to work with a teacher who really inspired me. His attentiveness to everyone, his ability to create trust with his students and his obvious effort to always give the best of himself to us made a deep impression on me. Also, he was suffering from a severe chronic disease, but never let this defeat him. I found out that he was a practicing Nichiren Buddhist, and it was he who took me to my first SGI discussion meeting in Glasgow.

Hearing a room full of people talking about life with such depth and intensity, I felt I had somehow come “home.” It was truly a humanistic forum and it touched my life deeply. I could feel a void within beginning to fill. Practicing Buddhism completely changed my approach to life, work and family. I began to see more clearly what caused me to suffer in my relationships with others—a big issue, as my work is all about dealing with people. I also was able to greatly improve my relationships with other people, shifting from the insecurity-based relationships that I previously had, to ones where I can treasure and be treasured. I was able to discover a deeper dimension to my life and to realize my ability to have a positive impact on the lives of those with whom I come into contact. I believe now that this life-to-life interaction is the absolute basis of peace in the world.

Nichiren Daishonin explains that to know oneself is to know all things in the universe. I was amazed that beautiful landscapes could indeed exist within my life that I had treasured so little up to that point. I realized that in order for one to produce change in one’s life and surroundings one has to start by changing one’s own negative vision of oneself.

My practice also helped me succeed at school. I was awarded a scholarship, and after completing my degree I was invited to return to teach.

I returned to Portugal in 2004 and taught at the drama school I had previously studied at. Inspired by SGI President Daisaku Ikeda’s writings about education, I was able to create an approach to theater teaching that empowered the students, enabling everyone to have an active part in class and in the plays that were staged.

In 2006, I left the drama school and began running a theater course through my theater company. This was the result of having the courage to search my heart honestly through my Buddhist practice and discover what my true professional aims are and what kind of school I would like to create. The project has been very successful. I also worked with amateur university
groups, and together with them created plays where, again, each person was the protagonist and was empowered to discover his or her great potential.

During this period, I had almost no money, but I felt great joy and optimism at the sense of growth in my life. I was invited to teach yet another theater course in the city of Caldas da Rainha, where I am still teaching today.

In 2008, I was able to secure regular two-year funding for my theater company from the Ministry of Culture in Portugal. This was a great vindication of our struggle we had waged since 2001, through regularly producing plays, even when we had no money, and running our theater course. Even now, in the midst of the dire economic crisis in our country, we have been able to renew our funding until the end of 2014.

In 2011, I was accepted into a PhD program in London on a scholarship from the Portuguese government. This is another dream come true for me. The focus of my research is on the transmission of the memory of the dictatorship and revolution in Portugal.

I truly believe the humanistic philosophy that I uphold allows me to develop my work in such a way that it resonates with and touches people. Most of all, my wish is to impart hope through my performances, while enabling people to reflect on their lives, circumstances and history. I believe that, in order to be able to create a change in our lives and surroundings, we need to also be aware of our history and politics.

Looking back on these 10 years of Buddhist practice, I can honestly say my life has expanded to an extent I could never have imagined. I have discovered dreams I didn’t know I had and gone on to fulfill them. I deeply realized that our personal happiness is connected to the happiness of all those around us, and that our small actions can in fact make a change. I am truly grateful and I want to continue developing my life, always continuing to cultivate inner hope.

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some of which ended up drawing entire nations into war, originated in the minds of individual human beings.

Similarly, while the history of the 20th century appears to be a history of mighty superpowers exerting their domination, from another perspective the 20th century could be characterized as a time when individuals successfully stood up against powerful, entrenched ideologies such as racism and colonialism, risking their lives to protect human dignity. People like Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. demonstrated that while a superpower, with its great military and financial might, may seem vastly more powerful than an individual, a single person rooted in compassion and humanity is able to withstand the force of oppression by even the state. They unleash a power that transcends themselves, the effects of which know no limits.

It was the ideas of a single person, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, that gave birth to the Soka Gakkai. Makiguchi, a school principal, and his protégé Josei Toda founded the Soka Gakkai—then called Soka Kyoiku Gakkai—on November 18, 1930. This was precisely the time when Japanese militarist nationalism was on the ascent, beginning to assert its hold on all aspects of Japanese society.

Makiguchi had devoted his life to developing a pedagogy that took as its basis the happiness and lifelong development of each child. He encountered Nichiren Buddhism relatively late in life, at the age of 57, and found in it a philosophy of human happiness and development that mirrored his own. The organization that he and his fellow educator, Toda, founded was focused on exploring the practical application of these philosophies, initially with specific reference to education. Makiguchi’s concerns grew out of a dissatisfaction with the state’s education system, which he saw as stifling the individual character and creativity of children in an effort to mold them into useful citizens.

As Japan’s militarization increased, the state’s domination of individual agency grew more severe and included a drastic curtailment of religious freedom. Makiguchi and Toda opposed this and, in July 1943, were arrested and imprisoned on charges of violating the Peace Preservation Law and committing acts of blasphemy against the emperor. Makiguchi died in prison the following year, an unknown figure in the landscape of Japanese history.

In July 1945, Toda was freed and, motivated by the desire to prove the justice of his mentor, began to rebuild the Soka Gakkai. Within the space of little more than a decade, he rebuilt the Soka Gakkai practically singlehandedly, rescuing it from obscurity and developing it into a
significant popular force in Japan.

Daisaku Ikeda joined the Soka Gakkai in 1947 and became Toda’s disciple. The spiritual ideal and struggle of one individual therefore outlasted the nationalistic ideology that it opposed, carried forward from Makiguchi to Toda and then to Ikeda.

Ikeda absorbed Toda’s grand ideas and vision for the people’s movement completely. “Toda University,” as Ikeda later characterized Toda’s mentorship during his youth, was a serious training ground of one-on-one study—everything from arts and literature to science. For Toda, no field of human activity was separate from Buddhism. Endless ideas poured from him in his interactions with Ikeda of how to actualize the humanistic ideals of Buddhism: “Let’s build a university”; “You must travel the world”; “Engage in dialogue with great scholars.” The abolition of nuclear weapons and global citizenship were important themes. This interaction between Toda and Ikeda, a transmission of knowledge, ideas and inspiration from mentor to disciple, lasted 10 years, until Toda passed away in 1958.

Following Toda’s death, as third president of the Soka Gakkai, Ikeda actualized these ideals one after another. He founded a university and various affiliated educational institutions. He founded peace institutes and promoted peace activities in affiliation with the United Nations. He also engaged in dialogue with a diverse range of thinkers around the world. From 1960, he began to lay the foundations for the Soka Gakkai’s overseas development. The SGI has now spread to 192 countries and territories. During the postwar period, perhaps no religious organization anywhere in the world has expanded on such a global scale as the Soka Gakkai.

In the early period of its development, the organization was ridiculed as a gathering of poor and sickly people and criticized for its strong proselytizing practices. Members of the Soka Gakkai, however, understood the aim of religion as giving hope to those who are suffering, and so were undeterred by these taunts.

**A Tradition of Dialogue**

The development of the Soka Gakkai cannot be explained without talking about the importance of discussion meetings. Ikeda describes these as a type of family gathering. I have had the opportunity to attend discussion meetings in Boston, Mass., as well as in Japan. The friendly atmosphere of the meetings, with such a great diversity of people engaged in dialogue with one another, left a deep impression on me. In the US as in Japan, SGI members studied Ikeda’s guidance and discussed life.

When I visited the UK, I met an SGI member who had moved to London from Israel. This woman had grown up in a religious household but had rebelled against her upbringing and left home. She described to me how, after becoming an SGI member and developing her own faith within the SGI movement, she developed a newfound understanding of and appreciation for her family’s Jewish faith.

Everywhere in the world, the focus of SGI discussion meetings is dialogue; they are about listening to others. Ikeda describes these as a type of family gathering. I have had the opportunity to attend discussion meetings in Boston, Mass., as well as in Japan. The friendly atmosphere of the meetings, with such a great diversity of people engaged in dialogue with one another, left a deep impression on me. In the US as in Japan, SGI members studied Ikeda’s guidance and discussed life.

I have heard of meetings in some countries where SGI members of Israeli and Palestinian origin have prayed together for peace. This woman had grown up in a religious household but had rebelled against her upbringing and left home. She described to me how, after becoming an SGI member and developing her own faith within the SGI movement, she developed a newfound understanding of and appreciation for her family’s Jewish faith.

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In ancient India, Buddhism arose in response to the universal question of how to confront the realities of human suffering and engage with people ensnared in that suffering. The founder of Buddhism, Gautama Buddha or Shakyamuni, was of royal birth, which guaranteed him a life of earthly comforts. Tradition has it that his determination as a young man to abandon those comforts and seek truth through monastic practice was inspired by the “four encounters” with people afflicted by the pains of aging, illness and death.

But his purpose was never simply to reflect passively on life’s evanescence and the inevitability of suffering. Shakyamuni’s concern was always with the inner arrogance that allows us to objectify and isolate people confronting such sufferings as aging and illness. He was thus incapable of turning a blind eye to people suffering alone from illness or the aged cut off from the world.

The philosophical foundation of the SGI is the teachings of Nichiren (1222–82), who emphasized the supremacy of the Lotus Sutra which, he stated, marks the epitome of Shakyamuni’s enlightenment. In the Lotus Sutra, a massive jeweled tower arises from within the earth to symbolize the dignity and value of life. Nichiren compared the four sides of the treasure tower to the “four aspects” of birth, aging, sickness and death, asserting that we can confront the stark realities of aging, illness and even death in such a way that we remain undefeated by the suffering that accompanies them. We can make these experiences—normally only seen in a negative light—the impetus for a more richly dignified and valuable way of living.

Protecting Life’s Dignity

The dignity of life is not something separate from the inevitable trials of human existence, and we must engage actively with others, sharing their suffering and exerting ourselves to the last measure of our strength, if we are to open a path toward authentic happiness for both ourselves and others. Inspired by these teachings, SGI members—often derided in our early years in Japan as “a gathering...
of the sick and poor”—have advanced with pride in our tradition of mutual support and encouragement among people afflicted by various forms of suffering.

Today, this spirit is particularly relevant as so many people around the world are being impacted by the experience of sudden deprivation, exemplified by the devastation wrought by natural disasters and economic crises. These can rob people of all that they treasure in just moments, saddling them with an unbearable burden of pain. This makes it particularly important that they not be left isolated and forgotten.

The struggles of individuals to rebuild their lives and regain some sense of inner wholeness are difficult and ongoing. This is why it is so important that we not forget these suffering people, and that society as a whole support reconstruction, fostering the kinds of overlapping connections and bonds that enable people to live with hope.

The determination to continue to encourage people until smiles return to their faces—never abandoning them and sharing every trial and joy—empowers us to meet and overcome life’s successive challenges and guides us through the seemingly capricious obstacles life throws at us.

It is through persistent efforts to defend that which is irreplaceable and to bring forth our own and others’ dignity that the inequalities of society can be rectified and the unshakable basis of social inclusion be established.

**Interwoven Lives**

The Buddhist teaching of “dependent origination” emphasizes our interdependence, the fact that all things exist within a fabric of mutual influence. The moment-by-moment flux of overlapping causes and effects propagates through this web of interdependence, influencing others and our surroundings. Thus our actions in this moment have the power not only to transform ourselves but that has been sewn into the hem of his robe by a friend.

These parables are told by the Buddha’s disciples to express the overflowing joy and determination they feel on encountering the core of Shakyamuni’s teachings, which is that all people equally possess the Buddha nature and are thus capable of manifesting the profound and boundless wisdom of the Buddha.

Buddhism thus stresses that humanity can advance one step at a time through our ceaseless efforts to inspire each other and to understand that, just as Shakyamuni’s awakening sparked an awakening in his disciples, what is possible for one is possible for all.

Few people have expressed this idea of the warmth of hope more aptly than the American philosopher Milton Mayeroff (1925–79). Mayeroff was the proponent of the theory of caring, which is based on a focused attentiveness to others.

“There is hope that the other will grow through my caring . . . [I]t is akin, in some ways, to the hope that accompanies the coming of spring . . . Such hope is not an expression of the insufficiency of the present in comparison with the sufficiency of a hoped-for future; it is rather an expression of the plenitude of the present, a present alive with a sense of the possible.”

What is important here is that hope is not relegated to the status of a kind of promissory note for the future. Rather, we find hope within the sense of plenitude and sufficiency of life in this moment.

What matters is not how our lives have been to this point: the instant that we awaken to our original worth and determine to change present realities, we start to shine with the light of hope.

Throughout his life, Nichiren took pride in the fact that he was “born poor and lowly to a chandala family,” and always stood with people who were victimized by various social evils. He described the dynamic and transformative functioning of life as analogous to “fire being produced by a stone taken from the bottom of a river, or a lantern lighting up a place that has been dark for a hundred, a thousand, or ten thousand years.”

Visions that can only be realized in the far-distant future—however grand and lofty—will not propel the kind of ceaseless spiritual struggle that is required to nurture possibilities and bring them to fruition. Nor do they provide concrete opportunities for people to change their surroundings through the transformation they achieve in their own lives. Only when hope is experienced on an immediate day-to-day level as “the coming of spring” can we succeed in patiently cultivating with joy and with pride the seeds of possibility.

Only then can we have a positive impact on those around us through our own inner transformation and work in a sustained way for the betterment of society. 

-The full text of this proposal can be read at www.sgi.org/sgi-president/proposals.html
From age seven, I was beaten and verbally abused by my mom who, at the time, was addicted to drugs. When I was 13, my mom planned to kill herself, but first, she went to get her hair done. It was from her hairstylist that she learned about Nichiren Buddhism. Instead of ending her life, my mom started chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo that day. I started chanting, too, to prove it didn’t work. That was 39 years ago. My mom overcame her addiction, the physical abuse ended and our family situation improved.

During the next three decades, I earned my Master’s, began teaching, married my wonderful husband, had two beautiful daughters and was very active in SGI-USA. I thought I had a strong Buddhist practice but, in hindsight, I see that I slowly fell into a comfort zone where I never pushed myself too hard.

Then, about six years ago, my life crumbled. Financial problems threatened our home. I was diagnosed with severe ulcerative colitis, an incurable illness that often left me doubled over in pain. At work, I was reprimanded for taking personal calls, sometimes several a day. Those calls concerned my most unbearable problem—a darkness that consumed my home and heart as one of my daughters spiraled into hell.

The next time my daughter yelled at me in anger and disgust, I smiled and said: ‘I love you anyway. Have a great day.’ She was stunned.

At age 12, my daughter started wearing all black and sneaking out at night. She cut herself and used heavy drugs. She had 60 detentions within two months and was failing every class. She was violent at home and spoke of wanting to end her life. As she continued to harm herself over the next year, I felt utterly hopeless and unable to help someone I loved more than my life.

Five years ago, I attended an SGI-USA women’s conference. A senior in faith spoke of “getting out of our comfort zone” and talked about a woman who set a daily goal to chant abundantly, share Buddhism with one person and study SGI President Ikeda’s guidance. I filed that away in my mind.

The next day, as I sat chanting, I realized I did not believe my prayer could impact another life that was so deeply in hell. A senior in faith encouraged me to take full responsibility for my daughter to overcome her fundamental darkness. In that process, she said, I would overcome my own fundamental darkness, which was connected to all my other problems.

I recall thinking: I don’t have fundamental darkness; I’m so optimistic. What I would later come to understand is that fundamental darkness takes many forms, but boils down to one thing: lack of conviction in our Buddha nature.

At first, things got worse—my daughter became more violent and self-destructive. I remembered the goals I had heard at the women’s conference and began a 365-day campaign to chant abundantly, share Buddhism with one person and study President Ikeda’s lectures.

The next time my daughter yelled at me in anger and disgust, I smiled and said: ‘I love you anyway. Have a great day.’ She was stunned.
One passage I read repeatedly: “Prayer is the courage to persevere. It is the struggle to overcome our own weakness and lack of confidence in ourselves. It is the act of impressing in the very depths of our being the conviction that we can change the situation without fail. Prayer is the way to destroy all fear. It is the way to banish sorrow, the way to light a torch of hope. It is the revolution that rewrites the scenario of our destiny.”

The next time my daughter yelled at me in anger and disgust, I smiled and said: “I love you anyway. Have a great day.” She was stunned. Soon after, my daughter told me: “Mom, you should just give up on me. I’m worthless.” I responded: “I will never give up on you. My mother physically hurt me, and I promised that would never happen to my children. Now, you’re hurting yourself. My mom wanted to commit suicide, and you talk of this, too. I will take full responsibility for your suffering to change.” She looked shocked and relieved: “Really? You?” That’s when I knew it was up to me.

I realized then that I had been blaming my daughter. I stopped judging her and stopped complaining about my problems. I chanted like never before. I pushed myself every day to share Buddhism with someone. This really yanked me out of my comfort zone. Gradually, I stopped being swayed by my daughter’s anger, violence and self-destructiveness. And she noticed.

Within a month, as I was chanting, my daughter pulled up a chair behind me and chanted for more than an hour.

Within a month, as I was chanting, my daughter pulled up a chair behind me and chanted for more than an hour. I was stunned. My prayer, not my words, had touched her heart. She chanted with me every day—one, two hours, sometimes more. She told me about her suffering, her feeling that she did not fit in.

That year, she stopped cutting herself, stopped using drugs, stopped smoking and started wearing colors, including bright red hair. She also started smiling, even laughing. We found an alternative school she loved and where she excelled. She chants often and shares Buddhism with her friends. She is constantly striving to improve herself and our world. She volunteers for two social justice peace organizations and leads their activities.

My daughter has taught me faith. Every other problem is also transforming. My colitis is 80-percent healed, and I am no longer in pain.

I understand with my life why President Ikeda says we must entrust everything to the youth. They are our precious future. I thank my daughters for teaching me what prayer really means, I thank my mom for bringing Nichiren Buddhism into my life, and I thank President Ikeda for his guidance that inspires me daily.

Discovering My Abilities

Blandina Happiness Sembu, Tanzania

I was very fortunate to meet Nichiren Buddhism in 1996 in Malindi, a town in Kenya on the coast of the Indian Ocean. I had many questions about the practice at first, but even so I felt something in the depths of my life that made me start practicing.

Although my name is Happiness, there was no happiness in my heart. Ten years before that time, I had lost my right arm in an accident. I was a single mother with a young daughter, my own parents had separated, I had no job, no money, and I suffered from serious asthma attacks.

Taking part in SGI activities, chanting and studying, was like medicine for the misery in my heart. I developed confidence and the courage to tackle obstacles with all my energy. My regular practice became the basis of my life, and within a few months I had achieved most of my determinations—and the rest were under way.

Then in 1998, my father asked me to come and live with him and, together with my baby, I moved to the town of Musoma near Lake Victoria in Tanzania. I had no money of my own and was

Within a month, as I was chanting, my daughter pulled up a chair behind me and chanted for more than an hour.
completely dependent on my father. My mother was angry that I had chosen to go with him. I was now chanting alone in a new environment. I lived in my father's house together with other members of our extended family who did not understand my Buddhist practice. Because of this I chanted in secret, although I shared Buddhist materials with my father. Soon, I was able to start computer classes, and because I could translate from Swahili to English, I began to work part-time with a local Catholic sister.

I still had to chant when the other members of my family were out. Finally, I had earned enough money to be able to add a separate room onto my father's house for myself, where I could chant comfortably.

In 2000, my mother back in Kenya suffered a stroke while she was visiting Nairobi. My elderly grandmother traveled to Nairobi to help her but also fell sick. In my circumstances and with a young child, it was a big challenge for me to be able to make the long journey to Nairobi, but somehow I was able to do it and take my mother and grandmother back to Malindi. I felt that it was my Buddhist practice that gave me the strength to do this. Ever since arriving in Tanzania, I had been looking for other SGI members and now I was finally able to find some. I was very happy to chant with others again and made a determination to get my own place to live. I slowly bought household goods and worked to make enough money to rent a room where I could carry out my Buddhist practice normally. I added to my income by doing translations from Swahili to English. In 2005, in my 10th year of practice, I received my Gohonzon (the mandala inscribed by Nichiren, which is the object of devotion in the SGI) in Malindi, where I had started to practice.

Looking back now after almost 20 years of practice, I feel that my whole life has transformed. I have received boundless benefits from my practice, including good health and good results for all my hard work and efforts, and I have been able to change negative tendencies in myself. SGI President Daisaku Ikeda says, “Even places that have been shrouded in darkness for billions of years can be illuminated. Even a stone from the bottom of a river can be used to produce fire. Our present sufferings, no matter how dark, have certainly not continued for billions of years, nor will they linger forever. The sun will definitely rise. In fact, its ascent has already begun.”

I was like a stone from the bottom of a river, but now my life is full of brightness thanks to this practice. Many SGI members in Africa face financial difficulties, but through strong faith, practice and study, and with strong determination, we can eventually become stones that will produce fire.
One afternoon I found myself walking down the street feeling dejected and thinking about my problems, when a strange sound from a house I passed caught my attention. I was intrigued and walked by the house several times until a few people came out. I asked one of the women what the sound was. She explained that they were Buddhists and had been chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. She told me that through this practice one could transform one’s life and overcome any suffering.

I wrote this phrase down and hung it on the wall of the place where I lived—a little cubicle inside a roadside tire repair shop that was just large enough for me to fit inside. It was there that I started chanting and began to feel hope kindling in my heart.

I had grown up in a poor family. My parents fought incessantly and eventually separated. My two brothers and I stayed with our father, who remarried. Our stepmother was terribly abusive toward us, and my father did nothing to protect us. At the age of 11, I was kicked out of the house. An uncle took me in, and I worked on his farm. I could not attend school until five years later, when I was 16.

At the age of 18, I completed elementary school. I found work but could not hold onto it. I got married, found another job and was fired again. I had no money, my relationship with my wife grew strained, and we separated. I found the job at the tire store but fell into a deep depression. That was the state of my life when I found myself standing outside that house one afternoon, almost 30 years ago now, listening to the strange sound coming from within.

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I was encouraged by SGI leaders to have grand dreams, and I began to dream of one day owning a house that would be big enough for me to host SGI meetings. To expand my life, I threw myself into visiting and encouraging fellow members, chanting with them to support them in overcoming their problems. I was eventually able to move into a much larger house which I have turned into a small business center including a sports gym.

My life today, steadily constructed on the basis of the wisdom that I have gained through my Buddhist practice, is beyond anything I could have imagined. More than material gain, however, I feel my greatest benefit is the inner strength I’ve acquired.

At the age of 47, I took up the challenge of completing the fifth to eighth grades of school. It was more difficult than I expected, and there were days when I thought I wouldn’t succeed. I spurred myself on and, at the age of 51, finally accomplished my goal.

I feel deep gratitude for what I have gained through Buddhism, and whenever I meet someone who is struggling, I share this philosophy with them.

I believe that with effort and the courage that one gains through Buddhist practice, anyone can overcome the challenges they face. I feel immense gratitude to my mentor SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, from whom I have learned this spirit, which has enabled me to transform my life.

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Victory Over Violence
By Nicolás Aragón, SGI-USA

Victory Over Violence (VOV) is a campaign that exists not merely as an opposition to violence, but to educate young people about how to recognize and counteract the root causes of violence in their lives. The campaign was launched by the youth of SGI-USA in 1999, sparked by the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colorado, that year. It is a response to the unacceptable and growing rate of violence involving youth in the United States. Linked to the United Nations “Culture of Peace” initiative, VOV exists for anyone across the globe with even the smallest desire to extinguish the flames of violence in society, in their community and in their own lives.

VOV addresses the root of violence—the misconceptions we have about the value of the person right in front of us and the value of ourselves.

Rooted in the Buddhist principle of respect for the sanctity of life, the VOV campaign has been taken up by SGI youth in countries around the world. Utilizing various resources such as the VOV exhibition, they are educating people in their communities by holding workshops at local venues such as high schools and universities. Through the VOV website (www.vov.com), youth around the world are signing up to become VOV ambassadors, sharing their stories and taking the VOV pledge. Right now, VOV is also being incorporated into the iChoose anti-bullying program created by the International Committee of Artists for Peace.

Recently, on September 24 and 25, 2013, youth members of SGI-USA together with local youth held an iChoose event at the Prosser Career Academy in Chicago, Illinois. This included a musical production, a panel of youth sharing experiences of how they overcame violence in their lives, and the VOV exhibition. In 2011, with street violence at an all-time high in Chicago, SGI youth embarked on a dialogue campaign, using the VOV exhibition.

As a young man, I take it very personally that the majority of physical violence committed in the United States is perpetrated by male youth. I am committed to stamping out the misconceptions about the value of ourselves and others, starting with the issue of bullying, which SGI President Daisaku Ikeda has called “war in miniature.” I am confident that the earlier we plant the seeds of nonviolence in people’s lives, the better their chances of living a genuinely happy and contributive life.

Conservation and Education in the Amazon
By Celso Hama, Brazil SGI

In 1992, the city of Rio de Janeiro hosted the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). New awareness about sustainability was born, and the Brazil SGI (BSGI) expanded its projects in the area of environmental education. The Amazon Ecological Conservation Center (CEPEAM in Portuguese), founded by SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, was inaugurated the following year.

The Center’s objectives are to establish a reserve for conservation and protection for future generations; to restore degraded areas; support environmental education; become a refuge for wild flora and fauna; and to develop environmental conservation projects with a focus on improving the quality of life of local people.

The Center is located near Manaus, at the point where the Solimões and Negro rivers meet. It was built on land that had lost much of its original forest cover. Since it opened, 20,000 trees of over 60 species have been planted to restore the forest ecosystem. The center plans to establish a germplasm bank to conserve seeds.

In terms of environmental education, each week, approximately 50 students take part in visits through the Escola Itinerante (“Traveling School”) project, promoted by the Manaus Municipal Department of Victory Over Violence (VOV) is a campaign that exists not merely as an opposition to violence, but to educate young people about how to recognize and counteract the root causes of violence in their lives. The campaign was launched by the youth of SGI-USA in 1999, sparked by the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colorado, that year. It is a response to the unacceptable and growing rate of violence involving youth in the United States. Linked to the United Nations “Culture of Peace” initiative, VOV exists for anyone across the globe with even the smallest desire to extinguish the flames of violence in society, in their community and in their own lives.

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In 2008, twenty-four young people aged 18–26 including Muslims, Black Christians and SGI Buddhists from South London embarked on an innovative and dynamic project that was launched at the Tooting Islamic Centre and Mosque, South London, aimed at creating greater understanding and friendship between religious communities.

Initiated by SGI-UK, the “Three Faiths Community Project” was supported by a grant from the Home Office under its “Community Cohesion” program. It was one of around 20 projects then taking place around the UK, and the aim was to develop a respectful framework in which young people can transcend differences, build upon shared understandings and create a new and dynamic active citizenship.

The project is currently delivering its second program, with 15 young adults from Muslim, Christian and Buddhist faith groups meeting on a monthly basis at the Centre for Creative Collaboration, University of London, in Central London. The aim is to further enable young adults from different faith communities to interact and strengthen their leadership qualities and attributes—both in their own faith communities and in the wider community by creating trust and friendship with each other through experiential learning and group work.

The current participants include five Buddhist members representing SGI-UK, five Christian members and five Muslim members. The project is supported in terms of facilitation by the Department of Social, Therapeutic and Community Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London, in partnership with SGI-UK and the Centre for Creative Collaboration, University of London.

The impact of the project in my own life has been huge. I have lived in South East London for 30 years. The housing estate I lived on was segregated according to race. In 1992, I moved to a school that was quite large and ethnically diverse. Soon after, in 1993, a local black teenager, Stephen Lawrence, was murdered in our area by a gang of white men.

This experience had a profound effect on my life. Following the Three Faiths training, I can see that racism only continues when our natural abilities of empathy, compassion and respect for all people are not cultivated or used. I am now much more confident in my ability to transform racism, and am encouraging others to do the same.

In 2010, I was a finalist in the national NHS Leadership Awards as Community Leader of the Year, and was offered funding for a project of my choosing. I chose to help fund a second round of the Three Faiths Project in London, and this has now been running since February 2013.

Environment and Sustainability. Students, many of whom have never visited the forest before, learn about the ecology of the Amazon and then go to the river to identify fish species. University field groups also often visit the Center.

The Center also works with the local Agenda 21 program, engaging communities in Manaus in environmental education activities using the three-step formula “Learn, Reflect, Empower.” One such activity involves transforming used cooking oil that otherwise ends up in the forest streams into something more useful—soap. This simple activity makes people realize that they can do something for the sake of the environment. Former Center Director, Akira Tanaka comments, “Comparing the students’ faces before and after the activity, they leave looking totally different, shining, full of positive feelings and self-confidence.”

The Center also carries out extension work with nearby communities, including the Kambeba indigenous people, providing seedlings of plants that generate essential oils, such as andiroba and pau-rosa, which can help earn an income for the community.

In recognition of its achievements, the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources accredited the CEPEAM area as a Private Reserve of Natural Heritage, making it one of a select group recognized and protected by the government.
A Palace of Artistic and Cultural Exchanges

By Dinesh Chandren, Soka Gakkai Malaysia

GI President Daisaku Ikeda has written: “The differences between people need not act as barriers that wound, harm and drive us apart. Rather, these very differences among cultures and civilizations should be valued as manifestations of the richness of our shared creativity.” Soka Gakkai Malaysia’s Wisma Kebudayaan culture center (WKSGM) in downtown Kuala Lumpur was established to foster appreciation of “shared creativity” among people of various ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds, in line with the SGI’s ideal of promoting peace, culture and education.

Malaysia is a land of dazzling cultural diversity. In order to promote harmonious coexistence and interaction, we need to create avenues for creative and friendly exchange.

Since opening its doors in 2001, the 12-story WKSGM building, which houses an auditorium, a conference hall, meeting rooms and exhibition halls, has welcomed over 250,000 people to its various events. These include art exhibitions, folk music, choral and dance performances, and talks on arts and culture. Through these activities, we have built ties of friendship with various local and international arts and cultural personalities and organizations, government-linked bodies and foreign embassies in Malaysia. WKSGM has also hosted a range of interfaith initiatives and gatherings.

The arts and cultural events at WKSGM also play a role in raising awareness around important social issues, helping build a more compassionate and caring society. In June 2012, for example, WKSGM hosted the “Coming of Age: Forgotten Faces of a Greying Asia” photo exhibition by David Tay Poey Cher, president of the Photographic Society of Singapore. This exhibition showcases images of senior citizens throughout Asia and addresses the issue of aging societies and restoring dignity to elderly people who are often relegated to the fringes of society. Several thousand people viewed the exhibition over a three-week period, including kindergarten children.

Former Malaysian transport minister Ong Tee Keat has remarked that WKSGM is now an important landmark in the Malaysian arts and culture landscape. In the latest directory published by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, WKSGM is listed along with other prominent art galleries in the country.

We have a saying in Malay: to know is to love; if we do not know, we cannot love (tak kenal maka tak cinta). Coming into contact with rich, diverse, artistic and cultural expressions from around the world has certainly enhanced my appreciation for the beauty of this world. I believe that embracing and celebrating such artistic and cultural diversity is crucial for making the 21st century a “Century of Life.”
In 2009, a group of 10 SGI-Italy youth members met together to study a proposal by SGI President Daisaku Ikeda about building solidarity toward nuclear abolition. Inspired by the proposal, we had the idea of bringing to Italy the SGI nuclear disarmament exhibition “From a Culture of Violence to a Culture of Peace: Toward a World Free From Nuclear Weapons” that had already been shown in other countries.

In his proposal, President Ikeda wrote about creating a “wave of public opinion” against nuclear weapons. We realized that to do this, the exhibition would not be enough. This is how the Senzatomica campaign was born. The aim of the campaign is to raise public awareness about the nuclear threat and reject the idea of security based upon nuclear weapons. It asserts our right to live in a world free from these weapons of mass, indiscriminate destruction.

The exhibition is the core of the campaign, but it also includes events such as conferences, flash mobs, book readings, concerts and film screenings. These events draw on the participation of members of the broader public, not only SGI members.

In 2011, the exhibition was first held in Florence, and more than 60,000 people visited it when it was shown most recently in Milan in 2013. More than 15,000 were students, who are our main target group. In addition, there have been more than 300 Senzatomica public events around Italy, involving over 150,000 people.

The original exhibition is quite extensive, in 2013 we created a smaller version comprised of 15 easily assembled panels that can be quickly and conveniently set up. This has enabled us to host the exhibition in smaller, more varied venues such as schools and museums and even sports clubs. In this way, we have been able to reach a broader audience, and it is our hope to generate a wave of public opinion that will lead to the creation and adoption of a Nuclear Weapons Convention.

Being involved in Senzatomica activities has helped me become more aware of my own negative tendencies, such as being overly proud or self-centered, which cause me to suffer. In this way, I feel that I am carrying out my own process of “internal disarmament”—a struggle against the negativity within my own life.
dropped out of college, quarreled with my parents, ran away from home and lived on the streets of Mumbai, all to pursue my dream of a career in photography. Soon enough, not finding success and filled with despair, I returned to my parents’ home. Surprisingly, it was my mother who encouraged me not to give up. I returned to Mumbai to once again follow my dream.

So, 17 years ago, I was a bitter, frustrated young man desperate to make something of my life. Around that time, I was on an assignment, and the person I was working with interrupted our discussion to ask: “Why are you so angry?” I assured her my anger was directed only at my own inability to deal with life.

She told me I could change my life through Buddhist philosophy, but I retorted that such philosophies are okay only in books; on the street nothing works, and that is the reality. But, as she went on to tell me about Nichiren Daishonin’s teachings, I was moved by her words and decided to give prayer a shot.

At Bharat Soka Gakkai (BSG) meetings, I was surprised to find people honestly sharing their life and struggles so openly, simply to inspire others to live happier lives. Their kindness and genuine warmth made me reflect on my own attitude.

However, it wasn’t until three years later that I was truly jolted awake. I had been assigned to make a study presentation at a discussion meeting on the postwar history of the Soka Gakkai. Reading about this history, I was profoundly affected by the unbelievable dedication shown by SGI President Daisaku Ikeda and his mentor, Josei Toda, during those years and their total commitment to working for the happiness of people everywhere.

I felt a powerful new emotion: concern for human suffering.

Between 1999 and 2001, I participated in BSG relief activities in the wake of natural disasters in different parts of India. Working on these projects strengthened the feeling that I must contribute to the world I live in, a feeling that was reinforced when I went to Kashmir to shoot for a book. What struck me most was
What struck me most was the lack of spontaneity among the children in Kashmir. Little girls walked by almost silently, whispering among themselves. The older boys looked lost. Their faces haunted me.

The applause would not stop. The travel group has grown bigger every year. In October 2008, I started teaching photography to some of the girls. Five of them won national awards for their photographs in 2009, and an exhibition of their work was held in Delhi the following year. Now the girls are working on a book on Kashmir, doing both the text and photography. We intend to take a traveling exhibition of their photographs all over the world.

In 2011, the Children’s Film Society of India invited a group of 13 girls, 10 to 14 years old, to their international festival. For the first time they saw films starring children, made by people of different religions, languages and cultures. Their heads were bursting with ideas. Now they want to make films and tell their own stories.

Since 2008, a lot has changed in my life and in the lives of the girls. There are now groups of volunteers in different cities working for this program. The purpose of the project from the outset was to empower the orphaned girls, awaken them to their infinite potential, engage them in a broad spectrum of activities both inside and outside Kashmir, and through this engagement help them create proof in their own lives of their abilities, potential and strength. We hope that in time all the girls will become agents of change in Kashmir.

My determination is to expand the project to include the larger community. We are opening a library for children of the village and organizing health camps for women. We make every effort to involve intellectuals from universities and government officials in our work.

My determination is very simple: to use my life and skills to implement President Ikeda’s ideas in communities in conflict areas.

Agents of Change

I began wondering what I could do to implement the exchange of cultures and ideas that President Ikeda speaks of in his peace proposals. I recalled his essay, “Teachers of My Childhood,” in which he writes about his excitement about going on a school trip as a child, and I also remembered seeing a 1928 photograph of first Soka Gakkai President Tsunetaburo Makiguchi with nearly 50 pupils of Shirokane Elementary School on a school trip to Mount Takao, near Tokyo.

Inspired by these ideas, I proposed that the Basera-e-Tabassum girls go on a tour of different towns and cities during their winter school holidays. At first the idea met with resistance, but finally the local community agreed to send the girls along with two local teachers. The first group, of 27 girls aged 9 to 14, went on a five-week trip to Pune and surrounding areas, and I made an 11-minute film on the trip.

After our return, we screened this film at a lunch to which we invited the whole village.

The lack of spontaneity among the children in Kashmir. Little girls walked by almost silently, whispering among themselves. The older boys looked lost. Their faces haunted me.
When Lisa and I got married in 1989, I was running a small clothing import and sales business in Jakarta. The company fell into debt, as did many of our business partners. Creditors were constantly at our door. I would leave home early in the morning to search for work, while Lisa stayed home and dealt with the creditors, some of whom were verbally abusive to her. It was a time of incredible stress for both of us. It was during this period that Lisa and I were introduced to Nichiren Buddhism by a friend.

At that time, our son was one year old. We lost the store, we had to sell our house and car and were nearly crushed by worry over what was going to happen to our family. It was the thought of our son that enabled us to draw forth courage and keep going.

At our wits’ end, we often chanted late into the evening and made a point of not mentioning our struggles during the day to each other. I would often just say to Lisa, “I’m sorry to cause you suffering,” but she would respond by saying, “No matter what happens, I will stick by you. We’ll get through this together with faith.”

In a letter to one of his followers titled “The Three Kinds of Treasure,” Nichiren writes, “Buddhism teaches that, when the Buddha nature manifests itself from within, it will receive protection from without.”

One of our creditors, seeing how much Lisa and I were struggling and trying to do our best, offered us space in a building he owned so we could try to start up a business again. This was something we could never have foreseen.

We started with nothing, but both Lisa and I were happy just to be able to work. We could not help but smile at our customers. I believe our sincerity toward our customers helped us gain their trust. The business got onto a firm footing, and we were able to pay off our debt in three years. Following this, we set up a local clothing manufacturing business that has grown from strength to strength.

We are now better off than we ever were. The greatest fortune we gained, however, was that we, as partners, were able to encourage each other and bring forth hope from within our hearts when everything seemed hopeless.

Today, we employ 60 people and have stores in seven locations throughout the city.

Our greatest source of joy is to be able to encourage our fellow SGI members together and share our own story of hope with them.

Our son is currently studying abroad in Australia. Lisa often reminds him about the passage in the same letter by Nichiren that has become our favorite: “More valuable than treasures in a storehouse are the treasures of the body, and the treasures of the heart are the most valuable of all.”

The greatest fortune we gained, however, was that we, as partners, were able to encourage each other and bring forth hope from within our hearts when everything seemed hopeless.
The SGI and the Lotus Sutra

The Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is a lay Buddhist organization upholding the tradition that originated with Shakyamuni (Gautama Buddha) and developed as it was inherited by India’s Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu, China’s T’ien-t’ai and Miao-lo and Japan’s Dengyo and Nichiren.

The specific Buddhist tradition embraced by the SGI is based on the Mahayana scriptures and the Lotus Sutra in particular. The SGI is engaged in faith practices and activities in society that correspond with the compassionate spirit of the Lotus Sutra in the contemporary world.

The founder of Buddhism, Shakyamuni, was born some 2,500 years ago to the royal family of an area in what is now Nepal. Shakyamuni observed the sufferings of aging, sickness and death and, although he was then young and healthy himself, perceived that they were unavoidable aspects of human life. He renounced secular life and embarked on a quest for a true philosophy that would elucidate the meaning of life for all people.

Shakyamuni studied both traditional teachings and new teachings of his time but was not satisfied. He practiced meditation and contemplated deeply upon the root cause of suffering and a way to overcome it. Through this, he awakened to the eternal and universal law permeating the universe and the lives of each and every individual. This Law (Dharma) to which Shakyamuni awakened is the essence of Buddhism.

Shakyamuni realized that people were suffering due to ignorance of the sanctity of their own lives and to self-centeredness arising from attachment to elusive desires and destructive egotism. He taught that by awakening to the universal Law one could release oneself from the smaller self and manifest one’s pure state of life. He explained that this was the most dignified and essential quality needed in order to live fully human lives.

In other words, his aim was the revival of human vitality and the awakening of unsurpassed dignity in individuals’ lives so that they could unlock their boundless potential through activating their inner wisdom.

Shakyamuni also stressed that an awareness of the dignity of one’s own life should lead to respect for the dignity and value of the lives of others.

Following Shakyamuni’s death, his teachings, at the core of which were always compassion and wisdom, were compiled into various sutras, which became the basis for the establishment of a system of doctrines and schools of Buddhism.

The Mahayana Buddhist movement about 500 years after Shakyamuni’s time constituted a kind of Buddhist Renaissance, during which many new sutras were compiled, the Lotus Sutra being one of them.

The Lotus Sutra describes Shakyamuni’s vow made in the distant past to elevate the life state of all living beings to that which he had attained. It states that
the concept of
introduced their teachings to Japan and
other sutras. In the ninth century, Dengyo
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numerous cultures. In India, Nagarjuna and
people to reveal their unlimited potential
Dengyo devoted themselves to enabling
Vasubandhu, T'ien-t'ai, Miao-lo and
and embraced down the centuries across
of the Lotus Sutra should be shared among
enlightenment of all people, as expounded
in the Lotus Sutra.
Through this, the teachings of the
Lotus Sutra and Shakyamuni's true intent
became clarified and universalized, gaining
a multilayered richness.
Nichiren, who lived during a time
of great conflict and upheaval in 13th-
century Japan, empathized greatly with the
suffering of the people and searched for a
way to overcome suffering.
His intention was to become a true
disciple of Shakyamuni, who taught
Buddhism as a way to realize the genuine
of all Buddhas. Thirdly, it teaches that
at times when people have fallen into
suffering, disbelief and worry, the teachings
of the Lotus Sutra should be shared among
the people as it will provide hope, courage
and security. The Lotus Sutra expresses
the essential wish to attain unshakable
happiness for oneself and all others and
reveals Shakyamuni's core teaching of how
to lead people to overcome the root cause
of suffering.
Learning from this sutra, Nagarjuna,
Vasubandhu, T'ien-t'ai, Miao-lo and
Dengyo devoted themselves to enabling
people to reveal their unlimited potential
within their respective cultural contexts.
The Lotus Sutra has been transmitted
and embraced down the centuries across
numerous cultures. In India, Nagarjuna and
Vasubandhu widely propagated the ideas
and teachings of Mahayana Buddhism and
the Lotus Sutra. In East Asia, in the sixth
and eighth centuries respectively, T'ien-t'ai
and Miao-lo from China wrote about the
superiority of the Lotus Sutra over various
other sutras. In the ninth century, Dengyo
introduced their teachings to Japan and
worked to promote widely the concept of
happiness and dignity of all people. Through
his studies of the Buddhist sutras and his
predecessors' commentaries, he realized
that it is the Lotus Sutra that enables the
infinite potential of all people to flourish and
permeate throughout society.
Strongly determined to actualize a
harmonious society, Nichiren worked to
establish true happiness and dignity for
humanity. Although he suffered oppression
and persecution from those in power
who adhered to what he saw as mistaken
beliefs about Buddhism, Nichiren risked
his life to encourage and revitalize the
people, just as the Lotus Sutra taught.
Through this process, he established the
practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-
kyo, inscribing as the object of devotion
a mandala known as the Gohonzon.
Nichiren established a concrete practice
for attaining Buddhahood based on the
essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra.
Nichiren's guiding principle throughout
his life was to uphold human dignity as
a spiritual backbone for human society
and society. Today, the members of
the SGI, based on the teachings of Nichiren,
have inherited this mission. Their task is, in
short, the realization of a new humanism—
the pursuit of happiness for both self and
others, where trust, value creation and
harmony are key.

Through their daily practice, people
are able to challenge various obstacles and,
through the process of chanting, reflect
deeply on themselves and draw forth hope
and a spirit of challenge and
courage. They are also able to
redevelop a sense of values firmly
grounded in humanity and
construct a rich
personal identity. SGI
Buddhists call
this process of
inner-motivated
change, “human
revolution.”
The practice of Nichiren Buddhism
concerns itself with realizing one's
inherent potential and fulfilling one's
responsibility to the fullest, whether it be
in the home, community or workplace. It
is also about proactively contributing to
finding a solution to the various problems
facing the world. SGI members are
committed to promoting the importance
of peace and the ideal of respecting the
dignity of life and human rights through
various activities, such as through
holding exhibitions about the threat of
nuclear weapons or humanitarian relief
activities. The SGI is also working to
raise awareness of environmental issues
confronting the planet.
The SGI is an organization dedicated
to revitalizing this legacy of Buddhist
humanism, at the core of which are belief
in the Buddha nature and compassionate
action to reveal that nature. This is a
legacy inherited from Shakyamuni and
passed down by Nichiren. Regarding it as
the essence of Buddhism, the SGI aims
to transmit this tradition and spirit in
contemporary society and onward into
the future.
New Building Opens at Soka Gakkai Headquarters

The Hall of the Great Vow for Kosen-rufu opened on November 18, 2013, in Shinanomachi, Tokyo. It will serve as a focal point of the global movement for kosen-rufu, or world peace. This signifies a new phase in the development of the SGI as an international movement of lay practitioners of Nichiren Buddhism.

In a message, SGI President Daisaku Ikeda expressed his hope that the new Hall will be a place where people come together to renew their commitment to work for “the happiness and security of the people, the flourishing of society, the realization of world peace and the transformation of the destiny of all humankind.”
The Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is a worldwide association of 90 constituent organizations with membership in 192 countries and territories. In the service of its members and of society at large, the SGI centers its activities on developing positive human potentialities for hope, courage and altruistic action. Rooted in the life-affirming philosophy of Nichiren Buddhism, members of the SGI share a commitment to the promotion of peace, culture and education. The scope and nature of the activities conducted in each country vary in accordance with the culture and characteristics of that society. They all grow, however, from a shared understanding of the inseparable linkages that exist between individual happiness and the peace and development of all humanity.

As a nongovernmental organization (NGO) with formal ties to the United Nations, the SGI is active in the fields of humanitarian relief and public education, with a focus on peace, sustainable development and human rights.