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The SGI Quarterly brings together voices of a diverse range of individuals and groups exploring creative responses to the shared challenges of our time.

The Forum aims to generate dialogue and interest in topics related to building a culture of peace and to stimulate a growing network of global citizens active for the betterment of society. To view an archive of past articles and join the discussion, visit Common Threads, a tumblr page hosted by the Soka Gakkai International (SGI), at commonthreads.sgi.org.

In Focus highlights activities of SGI organizations and affiliate institutions around the world; People & Perspectives presents stories and reflections on a Buddhist approach to life; and Buddhism in Daily Life explores Buddhist principles and their application to modern living.

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“For all its warts, the United Nations still matters for its norms, legitimacy and idealism.”
Thomas G. Weiss

“The answer lies in the power and potential of youth to challenge the status quo and envision a new reality.”
Anna Ikeda

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Ten years ago, I was bent on revenge. A 16-year-old girl in Pakistan with deep anger and hatred in my heart, I wanted to avenge the murder of my friend who was killed for “honor.” She had fallen in love with a boy. This was outside of the interest of the family. When she told her mother of her love, her father and uncle found out. Considering it an act of restoring honor, the father and uncle shamelessly murdered my friend. The whole family knew it.

Outraged after losing a close friend to an honor killing, Khalida Brohi took a stand against this custom. Learning from setbacks in her campaign, she discovered a better way to empower the women whose lives were at risk, giving them opportunities to grow and develop leadership skills in their communities.

Overnight, I went from being a girl in love with the world to an outraged, impassioned poet and activist for the rights of girls and women. At the fragile age of 16, I did not know how I was going to fight this war, but I knew in my heart that I needed to do something. This was my calling.

I come from a conservative background myself. I belong to a small village in Balochistan Province, Pakistan, where my parents were forced into marriage at the young ages of 9 and 13.
I was fortunate to be given freedom and education by my parents, along with my eight siblings. Although my parents had fought to move out of the village before I was born in order to educate us in a city, we frequently returned to our home in the village.

My biggest realization was that I needed to involve the women for whom I was fighting.

It was during those visits that I would get a glimpse of the life of girls and women in my community. I saw the contrast between these two worlds: the one I shared with my school friends in the city and the one I shared with my mountain friends in the village. From an early age, I had witnessed my friends getting married very young—my best friends from childhood being exchanged and given to men they had never seen before. I had witnessed my own cousins and aunts suffer domestic violence. But it wasn’t until the murder of my friend that I questioned why I had been the one given all the freedom and choice. It was my responsibility to act, and it was time.

I did what I could as a teenager. I wrote poetry and went door-to-door in my village in Balochistan to start a campaign against this custom. I thought that no one knew about the custom, that when they found out they would share my sense of horror and outrage, but I quickly learned that I was wrong. According to the UN, in Pakistan more than 1,000 women die in honor killings every year, and hundreds go unreported. I was out to fight something bigger than I had imagined, and, in my rage, anger and youthfulness, I believed that I could.

I was soon discovered by groups in Islamabad, Pakistan’s capital city, for my outspoken activism and was invited to become part of a national campaign against honor killings. Within a year, I had joined an international program for young leaders and was invited to Australia.

Going to Australia fueled my anger further. The new world blew my mind! Women could drive. They could choose their futures. Women could wear what they wanted. And more than anything, women were confident.

I returned to Pakistan even more outraged than when I left. I started an online activism campaign on Facebook called the WAKE UP Campaign against Honor Killing. The outrage I put out went viral, and soon hundreds of young people wanted to join. The campaign grew even bigger with our videos and calls for action. People from around the world started to join, and while we considered it a success, more and more opposition started building up from the tribal communities, especially my own.

The following year, 2009, we faced greater opposition from my village. Our cars were stoned. Messages against my team and me were written across the walls in the village, and I had to go around the village concealed in veils. Before long, things got so bad that I had to leave the village and return to Karachi.

I was devastated by this failure. I blamed myself for everything. Returning to Karachi was the defeat I was not prepared for, and all of a sudden I was out of options on how to proceed.

Transforming Anger

But my biggest revelation was about to come. Upon returning to Karachi, I felt like I had exhaled for the first time since my friend’s murder. I was more focused and my head was clear of anger, and in that state of calm I started reflecting on our failures. That is when I realized I was wrong.

The Sughar Women HUB, a temporary facility used for workshops promoting women’s growth opportunities

I had started my work in hatred and anger, and that invited only anger. In the process of raising voices against the custom of honor killings, I was also insulting the core values that people had lived by for centuries. I was challenging my own traditions, which I had grown up with, and more than anything I wasn’t directly involving the people whose issues I was raising. In my anger to punish all the men who were involved in these murders, I was punishing myself by letting myself be governed by hatred. I realized that I couldn’t do that anymore. This fight could be fought in many other ways.
We had to use our enemies as our allies. The results would be slow, but they would be ensured if we worked to change the behaviors of the tribal men and unleash the potential of women.

My biggest realization was that I needed to involve the women for whom I was fighting. We knew Pakistan lacked meaningful prosecution and punishment for honor killings. We also knew that men’s perception of women was largely to blame for the persistence of such a heinous custom. But what we had not realized before was how women’s own perception of themselves played a role in perpetuating this behavior.

Women considered the violence and discrimination they faced as their acquired fate and told their daughters and peers never to complain when their husbands mistreated them. That’s why they never challenged a slap from a man or the insults that would come.

I understood what we needed to do next. We had to use our enemies as our allies. The results would be slow, but they would be ensured if we worked to change the behaviors of the tribal men and unleash the potential of women. We had focused all of our energy on making noise and lobbying the government but had failed to recognize the fact that our voices did not penetrate those places where tribal rules and regulations ultimately dictate people’s everyday lives.

We got right to work. We decided to go back to the communities and apologize for what we had done. We secretly called this the Apology Project. We went to the villages and explained that we understood that what we had done was a huge mistake, that we were ashamed of disrespecting their values and had returned to make it up to them.

We told them we would do this by promoting their traditions of music, language and embroidery.

Gaining Trust

At first, there was resistance to our idea from the men because we were definitely not trusted. But then, the tribal leaders gave in, and soon we were working with them to make CDs of old traditional songs, collecting old stories and fables in a booklet and promoting embroidery in a space we had received from the tribal leaders that we transformed into a learning and skill development center. Women from the village would come every day to “do embroidery” and receive education and become more aware of how they could play a great role in changing their lives. In this way, they began to learn about their rights.

It worked! The initiative, which we later named Sughar meaning skilled and confident woman, brought together 30 women in the first village and educated them about their rights. Moreover, their embroidery products generated income for them and their families. We developed further, opened more centers and focused on teaching three things: enterprise development and life skills; rights awareness; and how traditional embroidery can add value to products such as handbags and designer dresses.

Samina is one of the women from our center. Her right hand is paralyzed, and everyone in the village thought she would amount to nothing. But our classes inspired her to create astonishing embroidery that sold in the markets. Today, Samina runs a center as a facilitator teaching other women. Samina said of her experience, “I never realized what blessings I had been given. I had been mourning my lack of ability. I had never seen how able I was!”
We worked with men by organizing community gatherings and cricket matches; we knew that was one way to bring men together in any city or village in Pakistan. And when the match got very exciting, our team members who were doing the match commentary would start talking about women’s rights. Everyone would have to listen to these messages, and they became a topic of discussion in the markets, in communal places and over cups of chai.

In 2014, after reaching the lives of 800 women in the Sindh and Balochistan provinces of Pakistan, we decided to scale up further. Seeing that Sughar’s local efforts alone can only reach so far, we launched the Sughar Foundation in San Francisco, California, with the help of great mentors and advisers. Through this foundation, we plan to replicate Sughar’s ideas and success by providing grants to several other organizations across Pakistan and beyond. Our aim is to reach one million women in 10 years. Through the commitment and passion of empowered women, this can definitely be done!

Khalida Brohi is the founder and executive director of Sughar Empowerment Society, a nonprofit social enterprise based in Pakistan. Through working with tribal men and women in rural villages, Sughar aims to empower the women to become leaders in their communities. For more information, visit www.sughar.org.
Mary Kangethe describes how peace education has helped create connections across lines of ethnicity, gender and religion that have divided communities in Kenya.

At the end of 2007, Kenya was thrown into crisis when violence erupted in the wake of disputed presidential elections, claiming several hundred lives. In 2008, in response, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology introduced the Peace Education Programme. The program, which reinforces previous efforts to promote peace through education, has since been rolled out throughout the country, though emphasis is given to the regions that are prone to interethnic violence.

By building peace among members of the school community, peace education ultimately aims to contribute to peace and national cohesion in Kenya as a whole. Peace education is not taught as a stand-alone subject. It is integrated into all the subjects with the main carriers being life skills education, social studies, history and government, religious education and languages. The teachers are taken through experiential and activity-oriented training using a standard training manual. They are then provided with teacher activity books and a storybook as resource materials to support their delivery of peace education in the classroom.

Outside the classroom setting, teachers are encouraged to establish “Amani Clubs”—peace clubs; *amani* is the Kiswahili word for “peace.” Through the clubs, learners carry out activities, such as planting and nurturing trees, that enhance and develop qualities such as empathy and care for others; that promote the welfare of fellow students through efforts such as making contributions to those from disadvantaged backgrounds; that raise awareness about peace among members of the school community such as establishing peace corners; and that promote peace advocacy during schoolwide events such as assemblies.

Through the program, learners become aware of the causes of conflict and how to constructively resolve them in their daily lives. They are equipped with skills that promote peace and human dignity at all levels of interaction. A key aspect of this is developing respect for diversity. The classroom becomes an arena through which global values of positive interdependence, social justice and participation in decision-making are learned and practiced.

**Tana River County: A Case Study**

Tana River County is largely inhabited by three major ethnic groups—the Pokomo, many of whom are farmers of Christian or Islamic faith, and the Orma and the Wari, who are predominantly nomadic and Muslim. The region, which is prone to drought, presents an interesting case of the nexus between conflict and food security. Conflicts have occurred between the farmers and nomadic peoples over access to water, and the violence and disruption has particularly affected the lives of schoolchildren.

The worst incident in the area in recent times was in 2012 when at least 52 people were killed in ethnic violence between the Orma and the Pokomo. Poverty levels in the area remain high, and the average academic performance in both primary and secondary schools is below average.

It is against this background that the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology implemented peace education initiatives in the region.

After the 2012 violence, the ministry provided a platform for dialogue by bringing together school management boards,
parent-teacher associations and teachers in separate forums to deliberate on peace. With the common understanding of the importance of the education of children and young people in their communities, participants were able to engage in dialogue about sensitive matters in the region.

Recognizing the need for psychosocial intervention in order to help learners process the psychosocial effects of violence, the initiative in Tana River County involves various components designed to give students an outlet for expressing their experiences and feelings. These include art therapy sessions, sharing coping mechanisms, group activities where students are asked to envision a future without violence and depict it in a drawing, and music and dance activities to help students release the feelings evoked during the various sessions. Children also sing songs from all the communities in the area.

The ministry, in collaboration with Arigatou International, UNESCO and Life Skills Promoters, is currently piloting the Learning to Live Together (LTLT) intercultural and interfaith value-based education program in 14 schools in the county, reaching about 800 students. In the form of specially designed activities integrated into the students’ life skills lessons, LTLT aims to nurture ethical values and strengthen learners’ identity, critical thinking skills and ability to make well-grounded decisions. The results of the LTLT pilot program will largely inform the ongoing curriculum reform process in the country.

The Impact

Perhaps the greatest impact of introducing peace education to Tana River County has been its positive effect on teachers and the teaching process. Through participation in the LTLT teacher training workshops, interaction between teachers from different ethnic communities (which had been close to nonexistent before the training) has greatly improved, compelling them to challenge their attitudes and views of others. The initiatives have also provided new approaches to teaching. For example, the activity-based approach to content delivery in the classroom has enhanced the teaching process while simultaneously piquing student interest in learning and interacting across gender and ethnic lines. As learners engage in the activities, teachers report that gender and ethnic barriers are slowly brought down, even amid a sensitive cultural and religious environment that does not encourage interaction across gender.

Mary Kangethe is an assistant director of education in the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Kenya. She is the national coordinator of the Peace Education Programme and also the coordinator of the Inter-Country Quality Node (ICQN) on Peace Education that brings together 15 African countries.
Ela Gandhi describes her motivation for joining faith leaders from around the world at the 2014 Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons in issuing the “Faith Communities on the Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons” joint statement condemning nuclear weapons.

Growing up in the Phoenix Settlement, the first ashram founded by Mahatma Gandhi, gave me a deep appreciation of nature. It also helped me appreciate the teachings of all religions—all religions speak about the sacredness of nature.

The Phoenix Settlement comprised 100 acres of farmland outside the city of Durban, South Africa. Here, we had no municipal water supply, no electricity, no services such as refuse removal, sewers, roads or schools. In such an environment Gandhiji set up his own systems based on his ideas of environmentally sound practices—living close to nature and in harmony with it—and interfaith respect.

Mark Thomson’s book Gandhi and His Ashrams contains the following description of life in the ashrams: “If the first note was simplicity, the second was universal brotherhood, for here distinction of creed and race and color had been resolved in a higher synthesis which was wonderful to witness . . . Each day would thus involve instruction in general and literary knowledge, various techniques of creative work and a great deal of physical exercise. Gandhi never compelled or...
coerced the children to do anything, and believed that they should neither be insulted nor humiliated for any reason.” Thomson goes on, “Increasingly, Gandhi stressed his idea of satyagraha [Gandhi’s nonviolence philosophy] as a means of returning to the natural condition of man. The approach permeated his thought and action. For him satyagraha had become not merely a political technique of rebellion but an alternative medium of education and way of life.”

It was within this kind of context that I grew up and learned, firstly, that the destruction of nature was unacceptable, secondly, that it was our duty to befriend people and not make enemies, and thirdly, that observing a nonviolent lifestyle was what we need to aspire toward.

While life on the farm was not easy—we did not have a stove, electric lights or other gadgets that could be switched on at the touch of a button, nor endless running water—we were rigorously taught a healthy lifestyle. We rose early, worked in the garden, dug holes to bury waste and made compost heaps to grow household food. Our education was not limited to book knowledge but was based on an appreciation of life, of the importance of earth, of fertile soil, little butterflies and insects and of herbs and plants.

We were fortunate to grow up in an area where people of all races lived together in a racist South Africa. We grew up seeing people as people without any labels of race, class, caste or gender. We respected all, whether an older person or a child, because all had unique personalities and we could learn from them. Learning was important, and for us it meant taking in the good and discarding the bad. This could only be done if we did not dwell on the bad but instead concentrated on the good. This lifestyle did not allow us to breed and nurture prejudices or enmity but taught us to differentiate between all that is good and all that is bad. I was taught that it is actions that are good or bad, not people.

This aspect of education in my very early childhood was taught to me at home by my parents. I eventually attended school only when I was about 10 years old. By then, I had learned so much about being able to distinguish between right and wrong that my schooling did not have the effect of changing my perceptions of people, of nature, of history and science. I already understood these from the perspective taught to me at home by my parents and was therefore not influenced by the distorted perspectives on war and scientific achievement designed to make us feel inferior as “nonwhites” under the racial apartheid system of education.

These experiences of my childhood in the ashram and the teachings I absorbed there can never be reconciled with the destruction that is a consequence of nuclear power.

When I attended the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons, the testimonies presented there made it unequivocally clear how absolutely and terrifyingly destructive nuclear weapons are, both in the damage caused to nature and in the long-lasting damage to human development. People spoke of the horrifying effects on the human body in those areas which were affected by the atomic bombings, in those areas where tests were carried out and in those areas where nuclear accidents occurred. These testimonies clearly indicate the need to ban all nuclear activities as they pose a real threat to humankind’s existence on this planet.

For me, three statements from Gandhiji’s writings come to mind in relation to the issue of nuclear weapons:

- “Violent means will give violent swaraj [independence/freedom].” Violence only begets more violence.
- “If the mad race for armaments continues it is bound to result in a slaughter such as has never occurred in history. If there is a victor left, the very victory will be a living death for the nation that emerges victorious.”
- “Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man [woman] whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him [her].”

Having contemplated these words, I believe that Gandhiji would certainly have expected me to support the resolution drawn up by the faith communities expressing their concerns and seeking the cooperation of governments to stop the building of nuclear weapons.

Ela Gandhi, peace activist and the granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi, is the founder of the Gandhi Development Trust and a co-president of Religions for Peace. She was formerly a member of South Africa’s parliament and chancellor of the Durban University of Technology.
Making the UN Fit for Purpose in the 21st Century

Thomas G. Weiss

Seventy years after its founding, is the United Nations fit to deal with the global problems of the 21st century? Thomas G. Weiss, an expert on UN politics, considers the key problems and puts forward possible remedies.

The 70th anniversary of the signing and entry into force of the United Nations Charter, similar to previous birthday celebrations at five-year intervals, has been accompanied by reform proposals of every sort—in June 2015 alone, there were reports on peace operations, peacebuilding architecture and the crisis in global governance. Although more adaptation has taken place than many acknowledge—indeed, the founders would have difficulty in recognizing the system whose foundations were laid in 1945—eyes glaze over in considering “UN reform.” Appropriately so, because the UN system is woefully inadequate at substantial change. But why is it necessary? Why does so little happen? What, if anything, can be done? Could the ninth secretary-general, who takes office in January 2017, make a difference?

The Central Challenge

A dramatic transformation of the world organization, and not minor tinkering, is necessary to address the transboundary problems that former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan called “problems without passports.” They range from climate change, migration, mass atrocities and pandemics to terrorism, financial instability, poverty and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction . . . and the list goes on.

Ironically, the policy authority and resources for tackling global problems remain vested individually in the 193 UN member states, rather than collectively in the UN. The fundamental disjuncture between the nature of a growing number of global threats and the current inadequate structures for international problem-solving and decision-making explains fitful, tactical and short-term local responses to threats that require sustained, strategic and longer-term global thinking and action. Fundamental reforms of multilateral institutions are required to make them work effectively and in the common interest.

The UN’s Main Weaknesses

Three main maladies make the UN unfit for purpose.

Sovereignty’s Grip

The first malady is the enduring concept of the international community as a system of sovereign states, a notion dating back to the 1648 Treaties of Westphalia. As a result of sovereignty’s grip—which is either some 370 years old or 370 years young—the current international system functions amidst a growing number of anomalies between life-menacing threats and the existing structures to make international decisions to do something about them.

The vital interests of major powers obviously create obstacles to action by the UN, but less powerful countries as well as emerging powers are as vehemently protective of their sovereignty. All states are loath to accept elements of overarching central authority and the inroads that they would make on autonomous action.

The UN remains the most formidable bastion of sacrosanct state sovereignty even as technological advances, globalization and transboundary problems proliferate and national borders have less and less meaning. The domestic institutions that provide public goods in functioning countries do not exist for the globe—there exists no power to tax, to conscript, to regulate or to quarantine at the international level.

Artificial Divides

The second malady stems from the diplomatic burlesque that
passes for diplomacy on First Avenue in Manhattan or at UN gatherings elsewhere—for instance, the September summit in New York on Sustainable Development Goals or the December conference in Paris to confront climate change. The artificial divide between the aging acting troupes from the industrialized North and from the Global South provides the drama.

Launched in the 1950s and 1960s as a means to create some diplomatic space for negotiations by countries on the margins of international politics, the once creative voices of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77 developing countries have become prisoners of their own rhetoric. These rigid and counterproductive groups—and the resulting artificial divisions and toxic atmosphere—constitute almost insurmountable barriers to diplomatic initiatives. Serious conversation is replaced by meaningless posturing to score media points back home.

**Structural Challenges**

The third malady is structural: the overlapping jurisdictions of various UN bodies, the lack of coordination among their activities and the absence of centralized financing for the system as a whole. The UN’s various moving parts work at cross-purposes, rather than in a more integrated, mutually reinforcing and collaborative fashion. Agencies relentlessly pursue cutthroat fund-raising for their expanding mandates, stake out territory and pursue mission creep. While the UN’s organizational chart refers to a “system,” which implies coherence and cohesion, in reality this so-called system has more in common with feudalism than with a modern organization.

**It would be hard to find a better design for futile complexity than the current array of agencies**

A related disorder stems from the overwhelming weight of UN bureaucracy, its low productivity and the often underwhelming leadership within international secretariats. The stereotype of a bloated administration overlooks many talented and dedicated individuals, but the world body’s recruitment, retention and promotion methods are certainly part of what ails it. When success occurs, it usually reflects personalities and serendipity, rather than recruitment of the best persons for the right reasons and institutional structures designed to foster collaboration. It would be hard to find a better design for futile complexity than the current array of agencies, each focusing on a substantive area, often located in a different city from relevant UN partners and with separate budgets, governing boards, organizational cultures and executive heads.
Some Palliatives, If Not Solutions

The prescription to attenuate these maladies involves swallowing some bitter, but not unpalatable, medicine.

Recasting National Interests

The first remedy requires building upon spotty, yet appreciable, progress in recasting national interests. The prescription for the Westphalian system may be the most difficult pill to swallow, namely, redefining national interests to include the benefits of providing global public goods—such as breathable air and a response system for pandemics—and respecting international commitments. Democratic member states should theoretically find this pill easier to swallow because they have a long-term, rational and vital interest as well as a moral responsibility to promote multilateral cooperation. The existing system, in fact, represents, in many ways, liberal values.

Nothing better illustrates a possible reframing of state sovereignty than the responsibility to protect (R2P), which redefines state sovereignty as contingent upon a modicum of respect for human rights, rather than as absolute. While R2P imposes the primary responsibility for human rights on governments, it argues that if a state is manifestly unwilling or unable to honor its responsibility, or worse, is the perpetrator of mass atrocities, then the responsibility to protect its citizens shifts to the international community of states. The history of public international law, in fact, shows how states have accepted limits on their conduct by agreeing to constrain their margins of maneuver. Recalculating the benefits of global public goods and respecting solemn international commitments is the way forward, a gradual advance of intergovernmental agreements along the lines that the European Union has pioneered.

Forging Creative Partnerships

Moving beyond the North-South quagmire and toward issues-based and interest-based negotiations is the second essential remedy. We need different country configurations for different problems and to stop thinking about fixed memberships and universal participation for every item on the international agenda. States have, on occasion, breached the fortifications around the North-South camps and forged creative partnerships that portend other types of “coalitions of the willing” that could unclog UN deliberations. Less posturing and role-playing is a prerequisite for the future health of the world organization and world politics.
Examples of wide-ranging partnerships across continents and ideologies include those that negotiated the treaty to ban landmines and the treaty that established the International Criminal Court (ICC). The landmine partnership mobilized a diverse group of countries across the usual North-South divide as well as global civil society under the leadership of the World Federalist Movement and the usually reticent International Committee of the Red Cross.

The idea of a permanent criminal court had been discussed since the late 1940s, but received a push after the ad hoc tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda. The 60-country like-minded group that gathered in Rome in 1998 represented a formidable and persuasive coalition that joined forces with 700 members of an NGO coalition; and the ICC treaty moved ahead vigorously in spite of strong opposition from several permanent members of the Security Council.

An example from the economic arena is the Global Compact initiative, which brings civil society and transnational corporations into partnership with the UN; it moves beyond a shibboleth from the capitalist North that formerly had been rejected by the Global South. The Group of Twenty (G-20) is yet another illustration that shifted from being a photo op for finance ministers and got more serious after the 2008–9 global economic meltdown. Complaints about the G-20’s illegitimacy will ring hollow if a more stable global economic order results from which all states benefit.

Cohesion and Reinvigorating Human Resources

The third line of treatment would be to pursue the possibility of making the operational UN work with more cohesion, as advocated by “Delivering as One,” a study published a decade ago with some successful experiments in the field since, but that have insufficiently reduced turf struggles and unproductive competition within the so-called UN system. Donors should stop talking out of two sides of their mouths and insist upon the centralization and consolidation that they often preach before UN forums and parliamentary bodies, but never act upon.

A related therapy consists of taking steps to reinvigorate the personnel of the UN. There is an urgent need to revive the notion of an autonomous international civil service as championed by the UN’s second secretary-general, Dag Hammarskjöld. Competence and integrity should outweigh nationality and gender considerations as well as cronyism, which have become criteria for recruitment, retention and promotion. Moving back to the future would involve recruiting people exclusively on the basis of competence and integrity. There are numerous ways to attract more mobile and younger staff members with higher turnover and fewer permanent contracts while providing better career development for the world organization of the 21st century.

Conclusion

For only the second time—the first was in 1996—the electoral campaigns for the US president and the UN secretary-general are running in parallel. Both will be long and protracted. Each already has a growing slate of presumptive candidates pounding flesh and lobbying.

It is critical to identify and elect a secretary-general who understands the flaws in the UN’s structure and staffing and has the knowledge, determination and charisma to correct them. Indeed, the chances for significant institutional change are normally enhanced during the “honeymoon,” the first year of a secretary-general’s new term. Both Boutros Boutros-Ghali and Kofi Annan instituted their most sweeping staffing and management changes in 1992, 1997 and 2002. Let’s hope for similar initiatives from 2016’s successful candidate.

Individuals and states can be as strong as the institutions they create. There are plenty of things wrong, but some can be fixed. For all its warts, the United Nations still matters for its norms, legitimacy and idealism. The world organization urgently needs to reinvent itself and be a vital force in global affairs.

Thomas G. Weiss is presidential professor of political science and director emeritus of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at The City University of New York’s Graduate Center. A leading expert on the United Nations, he is the author or editor of some 50 books, including What’s Wrong with the United Nations and How to Fix It, the third edition of which will be released in 2016.
The looming social and environmental crises of our times are forcing a reexamination of the core assumptions of mainstream economic theory—that the rational pursuit of self-interest within a free market system will lead naturally to social well-being, and that social well-being is achieved through constant economic growth. As Neva Goodwin describes, if we are to ensure that the economy functions for the well-being of humankind, we must have a clear understanding of how economic forces work. Such an understanding, she says, requires consideration of the full context in which economic activities take place.

Humanity appears to be heading toward many kinds of disasters in the 21st century. Most obvious are the ecological dangers of climate change, water shortages and species destruction. The social and spiritual dangers of widening inequality, along with cultures of envy, fear and materialism, make it difficult for leaders to even mention that in order to address ecological realities there will be a need for behavior changes toward simpler, less consumerist lifestyles.

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A Contextual Approach

Rethinking the Purpose of Economics

Neva Goodwin

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The social sciences have developed over the last couple of centuries with the goal of bettering human conditions. Economics is the discipline that should help humanity
understand long-term as well as short-term goals and the trade-offs that need to be made in a context where not all goals can be achieved at once. Unfortunately, while professing to be “value-free,” the dominant, neoclassical theory of economics that was elaborated during the second half of the 20th century has in fact promulgated goals that lead us toward, rather than away from, the looming crises of our times.

**Questionable Assumptions**

At the micro level, neoclassical economists claim to derive all of their results from a single axiom about human behavior—that most people are rational, and that rational behavior may be understood as the pursuit of self-interest. From this statement about psychology, the claim is made that all of the efficiencies of the market arise out of the maximization of individual self-interest.

The implicit goals of microeconomics rest on three additional assumptions: that the maximization of consumer satisfaction is the only way to maximize well-being (the Marxian emphasis on the well-being of the worker is virtually ignored in the neoclassical psychology); that rationality includes the prediction that consumers know what will make them happy (e.g., they are not affected by advertising, except as a source of information); and that more happiness results from more consumption of the goods and services available through the markets.

These micro assumptions about human psychology and behavior support the basic macro-level goal which is generally the focus of economic advice. Growth in GDP (i.e., a nation’s total domestic economic transactions) is the ultimate macro goal on the grounds that this permits continual increase in the consumption of marketed goods and services. Milton Friedman’s writings in the 1950s and 60s popularized an additional assumption—that the social optimum of maximum national consumption could best be achieved by “freeing” markets as much as possible from nonmarket constraints, such as those imposed by government regulations on labor relations and environmental impacts.

All of this has come into question in recent decades. Behavioral economics, drawing upon advances in the understanding of the brain, makes it clear that the “rational economic man” assumption is a very poor description of reality. Psychologists have put forward strong evidence that happiness stems from many other things besides consumption through markets, and that, in fact, there is significant correlation between a materialistic outlook and unhappiness or mental illness.

Increased attention on the growing inequalities in wealth, power and opportunity emphasizes the social ills that accompany such inequality. “Free” markets are increasingly revealed as markets in which the rich and powerful are freed to off-load social and environmental costs onto those without power. And the looming dangers of climate change have made it clear that private profit (e.g., through the extraction and sale of fossil fuels or environmentally unsound resource use), rather than achievement of a social optimum, is often pursued even though it is in direct opposition to the general well-being of present and future generations.

A better set of ideas about the economy is needed. In developing with my colleagues the principles and understandings that we call “contextual economics,” we begin by emphasizing the goals and values that motivate human beings in all aspects of their lives including in their roles as economic actors. We recognize that the goals implicit in most economics texts today—such as increased wealth, consumption, efficiency or economic growth—are often extremely important as intermediate goals that can lead toward the final goal of well-being. However, there is increasing evidence, on scales ranging from the individual to the nation and the planet, that without a steady orientation toward a broader understanding of humankind within our social and ecological surround even the most successful pursuit of these intermediate goals can result in reduced well-being.

**Whose Well-Being Counts?**

Our approach emphasizes that human well-being is the ultimate purpose of economic activity. In that term we include future as well as present generations and recognize that ecological health is critical to human well-being, whether viewed instrumentally or as a goal in itself. We also assume (in an overt value judgment)
that a broader conception of well-being inevitably leads to a greater emphasis on distributional issues. The question “Whose well-being counts?” cannot, we believe, have any acceptable answer other than “Everyone’s, equally.”

Putting the Economy in Context

Contextual economics aims to provide a realistic understanding of the workings of local, national and global economies and economic forces. We believe that such an understanding is only possible when the economy is studied within its full social and psychological contexts—including human motivations, ethics, culture, norms, history, politics and institutions—as well as the physical contexts, which include technology and the built and natural environments. This is a radical reversal of the decontextualization that has taken place within economics over the last century. A few examples of its implications follow:

• Adequate consideration of the natural context suggests an ultimate limit to the scale of economic activity. It is not possible for a subsystem—the economy—to grow indefinitely if it is bounded within a finite supersystem—the ecological context. In fact there are strong signs that the ecological boundaries that make human life and human economies possible have been reached and surpassed. If the total global economy does not very soon cut back on the use and degradation of natural resources, severe ecological collapse will force us to accept local and global limits that will become ever more restrictive, the longer we overstep them.

• The technological and institutional contexts, seen together, indicate more potential for adaptive technological change than is often recognized in cost-benefit analysis. Economists, and those they influence, are so used to assuming that growth is essential for a healthy economy that they ignore technological and institutional creativity that could achieve human goals with less use of material resources. Too often cost-benefit analysis emphasizes the costs we would face if we impose regulatory or other limits on economic activity, while ignoring the benefits that will be achieved if the acceptance of limits forces people to come up with creative alternatives.

• Recognition of the social and psychological contexts suggests the need for more realistic assumptions about the goals that motivate people and the culturally and historically related norms that shape much of human behavior. Human beings are not just greedy consumers; we are also citizens, parents, friends and community members. We are affected by other people’s emotions as well as their beliefs and expectations. We care about how we are viewed by others, which in turn relates to how we fit into the norms of our society. A society’s patterns of interaction, social connections, levels of mutual trust and expectations of honesty and other behavioral norms are understood as “social capital,” which is critically important to the good functioning of an economy.

Human beings are not just greedy consumers; we are also citizens, parents, friends and community members.

Three Economies

In the process of developing the idea of contextual economics, we have found that human economies are best understood under at least three headings: the business economy, which is nearly all that is examined in standard texts; the public purpose economy of government, nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations including international agencies; and the core economy of households and communities. Actors in each of these spheres carry out the four basic economic activities: the standard three—production, distribution (sometimes in the form of exchange) and consumption—and a fourth, not commonly included, resource maintenance.

The following descriptions of the meaning and importance of resource maintenance illustrate how our understanding may be enhanced by the image of multiple economies:

• The business economy must maintain in good order such resources as machinery and inventories, worker skills and morale, and relations with suppliers and creditors.

• The core economy maintains critical human and social capital by nurturing children and maintaining physical health and constructive norms of behavior. It is also responsible for maintaining domestic and neighborhood physical environments.
• The public purpose economy plays critical resource maintenance roles in situations where actors in the other economies lack the ability (often due to poverty) or the motivation (especially where there is a conflict with immediate profits) to maintain the social and physical capital necessary for the present and future well-being of the broader community. Examples range from transportation infrastructure, environmental regulations and financial accounting standards to nursery schools, farmland preservation trusts and boycotts of goods that are produced using child or slave labor.

The economic ideologies that have been dominant for the last half-century have emphasized economic growth to continually increase production and consumption. This narrow approach has had great success in lengthening human lives, reducing child mortality and providing a high level of material affluence in many parts of the world. However, humanity has reached an inflection point: continuing on the same path seems likely to reverse these achievements by increasing inequality and envy in the context of the shrinking quantity and quality of essential resources.

The contextual approach allows us to reconsider economic goals—for example, to replace the goal of growth with the goal of well-being—within a fuller understanding of what actually contributes to human well-being. It allows us to explore the contributions to well-being that are made by the core (household and community) economy and the public purpose (government and nonprofit) economy instead of focusing solely on business. As we grapple with the real ecological and social limits to continuing on the path of growth as the highest goal, a fuller understanding of the contexts for the economy will open up possible solutions and satisfactions that are not available to a narrower, less integrated conception of human psychology and the natural world.

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In the following excerpts from an address delivered at Columbia University Teachers College, New York, on June 13, 1996, SGI President Daisaku Ikeda outlines what he considers to be the essential qualities that will enable individuals to create lasting value in this age of globalization. The full text of the address is published in A New Humanism: The University Addresses of Daisaku Ikeda.

The first president of the Soka Gakkai, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, whose thinking is the founding spirit of Soka University, referenced with great respect the writings and ideas of [John] Dewey in his 1930 work, The System of Value-Creating Pedagogy. Dewey and Makiguchi were contemporaries. On opposite ends of the earth, amidst the problems and dislocations of their newly industrializing societies, both wrestled with the task of laying a path toward a hope-filled future.

Greatly influenced by the views of Dewey, Makiguchi asserted that the purpose of education must be the lifelong happiness of learners. He further believed that true happiness is to be found in a life of value creation. Put simply, value creation is the capacity to find meaning, to enhance one’s own existence and contribute to the well-being of others, under any circumstance.

Both Dewey and Makiguchi looked beyond the limits of the nation-state to new horizons of human community. Both, it could be said, had a vision of global citizenship, of people capable of value creation on a global scale.

What, then, are the conditions for global citizenship?

Certainly, global citizenship is not determined merely by the number of languages one speaks or the number of countries to which one has traveled.

I have many friends who could be considered quite ordinary citizens, but who possess an inner nobility; who have never traveled beyond their native place, yet who are genuinely concerned for the peace and prosperity of the world.

I think I can state with confidence that the following are essential elements of global citizenship:

- The wisdom to perceive the interconnectedness of all life and living;
- The courage not to fear or deny difference, but to respect and strive to understand people of different cultures, and to grow from encounters with them;
- The compassion to maintain an imaginative empathy that reaches beyond one’s immediate surroundings and extends to those suffering in distant places.

The all-encompassing interrelatedness that forms the core of the Buddhist worldview can provide a basis, I feel, for the concrete realization of these qualities of wisdom, courage and compassion. The following parable from the Buddhist canon provides a beautiful visual metaphor for the interdependence and interpenetration of all phenomena.

Suspended above the palace of Indra, the Buddhist god who symbolizes the natural forces that protect and nurture life, is an enormous net. A brilliant jewel is attached to each of the knots of the net. Each jewel contains and reflects the image of all the other jewels in the net, which sparkles in the magnificence of its totality.

When we learn to recognize what [Henry David] Thoreau refers to as “the infinite extent of our relations,” we can trace the strands of mutually supportive life, and discover there the glittering jewels of our global neighbors. Buddhism seeks to cultivate wisdom grounded in this kind of empathetic resonance with all forms of life.
In the Buddhist view, wisdom and compassion are intimately linked and mutually reinforcing. Further, it is the compassionate desire to find ways of contributing to the well-being of others that gives rise to limitless wisdom.

Buddhism teaches that both good and evil are potentialities that exist in all people. Compassion consists in the sustained and courageous effort to seek out the good in any person, whoever they may be, however they may behave. It means striving, through sustained engagement, to cultivate the positive qualities in oneself and in others. Engagement requires courage, however. There are all too many cases in which compassion, owing to a lack of courage, remains mere sentiment.

Buddhism calls a person who embodies these qualities of wisdom, courage and compassion, who strives without cease for the happiness of others, a bodhisattva. In this sense, it could be said that the bodhisattva provides an ancient precedent and modern exemplar of the global citizen.

“Goodness” can be defined as that which moves us in the direction of harmonious coexistence, empathy and solidarity with others. The nature of evil, on the other hand, is to divide: people from people, humanity from the rest of nature.

The pathology of divisiveness drives people to an unreasoning attachment to difference and blinds us to human commonalities. This is not limited to individuals, but constitutes the deep psychology of collective egoism, which takes its most destructive form in virulent strains of ethnocentrism and nationalism.

The struggle to rise above such egoism, and live in larger and more contributive realms of selfhood, constitutes the core of the bodhisattva’s practice. Education is, or should be, based on the same altruistic spirit as the bodhisattva.

The proud mission of those who have been able to receive education must be to serve, in seen and unseen ways, the lives of those who have not had this opportunity. At times, education may become a matter of titles and degrees and the status and authority these confer. I am convinced, however, that education should be a vehicle to develop in one’s character the noble spirit to embrace and augment the lives of others.

Students and alumni at Soka University of America. The university’s mission is to foster a steady stream of global citizens.

To be meaningful, education for global citizenship should be undertaken as an integral part of daily life in our local communities.

Like Dewey, Makiguchi focused on the local community as the place where global citizens are fostered. In his 1903 work, The Geography of Human Life, which is considered a pioneering work in social ecology, Makiguchi stressed the importance of the community as the site of learning.

This is consonant with Dewey’s observation that those who have not had the kinds of experience that deepen understanding of neighborhood and neighbors will be unable to maintain regard for people of distant lands.

Our daily lives are filled with opportunities to develop ourselves and those around us. Each of our interactions with others—dialogue, exchange and participation—is an invaluable chance to create value.
My parents left the Philippines for better work opportunities in Israel, and although I was born and raised there, the law denied me citizenship. Because of my Filipino ethnicity, I also dealt with racism daily. One of my more vivid memories as a child was sitting with my mother at a bus stop when a man spat toward us and yelled, “Dirty Filipinos.” Another time, I remember swimming in a public pool when a woman yelled, “Get that brown boy out of the pool; he is polluting it.” My home should have been a safe haven, but instead my father “raised me by the belt.” This, to me, felt normal, but what really stayed with me was the verbal and mental abuse that I endured: “You are nothing. You are a piece of trash.” Worst of all, I believed it and grew angrier as the years went by.

Among the few people I trusted was a family that my parents worked for. They treated me like their own son. One of the family members was a famous dance teacher, and she personally mentored me and enrolled me in an acclaimed dance school. Dance became my way of proving my worth to myself and others.

Despite being an accomplished performer and teacher by age 18, I had to make a painful decision: leave Israel or risk being arrested and deported. Up until I was 18, the government had allowed me to live in the country as my mother’s “dependent,” but once I became an adult I was no longer allowed to work or live there. It was unfathomable that the place where I was born and considered home could treat me as if I were an unwanted intruder. This injustice only added fuel to my already boiling anger.

I moved to New York, where I continued pursuing my dreams as an artist. The year was 1999. I successfully acquired a work visa and toured the world with a major American dance company. But no matter how much outward success I had with my career, the anger I had developed growing up manifested in failed relationships with women and my family. No matter how I tried to think positively, I kept seeing the same results.

After being invited to an SGI meeting in 2008, I remember feeling confused. I could not wrap my head around how people could be so happy despite facing personal challenges. At the same time, I was extremely inspired and moved by everyone’s life state, especially those who seemed to be suffering the most. My friend’s mother was dying of cancer, but still his spirit was unshakable. Wanting to experience that kind of life condition, I began practicing Buddhism myself.

After I started chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, I began to notice how much I had let my environment affect my behavior. I also realized that my feelings of not being able to control my anger were related to my lack of self-worth and self-confidence. The first thing I chanted for was to respect my own life and that of others, even those I inwardly begrudged.

At the time, my parents were living in England, where they were unemployed and risked deportation. My mother was also suffering with depression. When I shared Buddhism with them, my father became furious and threatened to disown me. My Buddhist practice, however, enabled me to recognize the positive qualities I inherited from my parents, which I was never able to see before. I summoned up the courage to express my deep respect and appreciation for them.
Recognizing a tremendous change in me, they were inspired to start chanting and joined the SGI in 2014. Today, my parents are British citizens. My mother also overcame her depression, and my father and I now have heart-to-heart dialogues.

**Uniting to Take Action**

Through my Buddhist practice, I learned to fully appreciate my struggles and even my upbringing in Israel. As a result, I determined to create a dance outreach project at my former high school in Israel and show the SGI-USA “Victory Over Violence” exhibition there. The mission of my project was to share the importance of recognizing different types of violence in order to weed them out through dialogue and to highlight the importance of people from diverse backgrounds uniting to take action for such a cause.

I arrived in Israel to start the program in the summer of 2011. However, the students I taught fought with one another and complained daily. They said things like: “Dance is useless. We already learn teamwork playing soccer,” or “This sucks. Dance is stupid.”

But I refused to give up. At times when they tested my patience and I could feel my angry nature resurfacing, I took action based on the words of SGI President Daisaku Ikeda. Through them, I found the wisdom and courage to inspire the students, and the most difficult ones started to lead by example and became my greatest allies.

By the end of the weeklong program, all one hundred kids of Catholic, Jewish and Muslim backgrounds had developed strong bonds of friendship, and the show was a total victory. The students kept asking if I could stay longer and when I’d be back.

I’ve learned that only when I change from within and recognize the unlimited potential in myself and others can I build a culture of peace anywhere at any time, starting with my immediate environment.

I am now happily married and am determined to create an even more harmonious family, especially for my wife and our baby. I share Buddhism with everyone I know because I really believe people can transform their lives and experience tremendous benefits.

President Ikeda says, “Even if you have a kind heart, great ideas or wonderful aspirations, if you don’t have the courage to translate them into action, you’ll accomplish nothing with them. In fact, you’d be no different from someone who doesn’t have such things at all.”

With these words in my heart, my determination now is to develop my artistry and teaching skills and use my experiences to enable people to discover their unlimited potential and contribute to society.

My Buddhist practice enabled me to recognize the positive qualities I inherited from my parents, which I was never able to see before.

![Leonides with his father, wife and mother](image)
In 2008, I wanted to do some voluntary work around protecting the environment as I believe that the biggest threat to our continued existence on this planet is carbon dioxide and its contribution to the climate chaos we are experiencing. This fully accorded with my understanding of the Buddhist principle of the oneness of self and environment. So, in March 2009, I was heartened to find out about and be able to attend one of the first meetings of the Transition Initiative in our town of Marlow.

The Transition Town movement is about establishing a community-led process that helps a neighborhood become stronger and happier. It’s the opposite of sitting in our armchairs complaining about what’s wrong. It’s about getting up and doing something constructive alongside our neighbors and fellow townsfolk, transitioning to a more energy efficient future. I was one of a team of nine who set up the legal structure of Transition Town Marlow (TTM) and took part in a few initial projects.

My SGI activities and my TTM activities are both a journey, and practicing Nichiren Buddhism has enabled me to confront challenges, move forward and never give up.

At the beginning of 2011, people started to leave the TTM group for various reasons. Seven of the nine members left; it was only me and another person who remained. It was suggested then that maybe we should wind up the community interest company we had formed. I was not going to give up that easily and waste all the energy and work we had put in! Although we continued meetings throughout 2011, things were not looking good for TTM.

The Spirit to Never Give Up

I looked toward my Buddhist practice to try to understand how to transform this situation and continued on in the face of the adversity of a dwindling organization. The SGI provides a wonderful blueprint for how to operate an organization that revolves around people, and I saw that I could draw on my experience of organizing local SGI meetings to reinvigorate TTM.

I organized an open space event and set up Green Coffee in early 2012. These are forums where people can meet up and discuss what they would like to see happen in their community. Twenty people came to the open space event, and eighteen to Green Coffee. Two newcomers suggested a project of planting wildflowers for the protection of the bees and butterflies throughout Marlow. Since these meetings, eight people have started coming regularly to our TTM monthly meetings.

As happens in organizations based around people, rifts started happening. Luckily I was able to go on a Buddhist course around this time and I realized the connection between TTM and the philosophy of the SGI was even stronger than I had thought. I determined to take the SGI spirit of respect and transcending differences into TTM.

I started this process by employing dialogue, which SGI President Daisaku Ikeda talks about constantly. I encouraged people using a concept I had heard at a Buddhist lecture. With two individuals who have different ideas or ways of doing something, it can often come down to the belief that “I am right” and “You are wrong,” which creates the basis for conflict. However, when we begin to look at something with the eyes of a Buddha, our attitude changes to: “I have my way and you have your way.” I tried to apply this understanding to the members of TTM. I spoke to people individually and encouraged them to not give up.
I used what I had learned through my SGI activities to always express gratitude to people for their efforts, while weathering the storm of challenges with a smile on my face.

Fostering Community Spirit

In 2013, Marlow lost its small farmer’s market, which had struggled for many years. I saw this as yet another TTM opportunity. We formed a small team and started our own Marlow Community Market in May 2013.

Up until March 2015 the market was organized entirely by volunteers. I used what I had learned through my SGI activities to always express gratitude to people for their efforts, while weathering the storm of challenges with a smile on my face. It is a busy market, and sometimes it is difficult to keep every stallholder happy. I always remember that ultimately any Transition project is about the people, and the market certainly has a lovely atmosphere, often commented on by stallholders and customers alike.

One stallholder recently said: “The market is really enjoyable: making friends with the stallholders, buying each other’s wares and not least the lovely customers who wander in or come round each time.” For me, this is the Transition ethos in action, and most importantly it has been a really gratifying way for me to build peace in the community.

Marlow Town Council has taken note of what we are doing. They have invited me to two civic events and regularly ask to meet us as we are fulfilling many of their visioning targets. TTM and its community market have also been used in their publicity.

The cherry on the cake has to be that through the market TTM has raised nearly £4,000 (US$6,000), which will be used to create a community orchard in a local recreation ground. President Ikeda writes: “It is often the case that the free-soaring, progressive spirit of a single individual can open up a whole new current of thought.”

As I said before, it’s definitely a journey rather than a destination, one that continues to give me the greatest joy.

Liz with her husband at Marlow Community Market
In August of 2015, I was among a group of youth from around the world who gathered in Hiroshima for one purpose: to plan for future steps to abolish nuclear weapons in our lifetime.

The year 2015 marked the 70th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Despite a widespread understanding that nuclear weapons are inhumane and thus should never be used, they continue to play a key role in discussions surrounding international security and, ironically, peace. Seventy years of fear, of threat and of risk is enough, but what would bring about the necessary change to rid the world of these weapons?

We, the youth of the SGI, believe that the answer lies in the power and potential of youth to challenge the status quo and envision a new reality. It is time for young people to come together to grasp this potential and to make a breakthrough in achieving a world without nuclear weapons. Toward this end, we co-facilitated an International Youth Summit for Nuclear Abolition in Hiroshima from August 28 to 30 together with the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), Mines Action Canada (MAC), the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation (NAPF), PAX and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).

The Generation of Change

The summit brought together 30 youth from 23 countries including Costa Rica, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Pakistan, Tunisia, the UK and the USA. The youth are all actively engaged in nuclear disarmament and related fields at local, regional and international levels. The summit theme, “Generation of Change,” is a reflection of our determination that we will be the decisive generation to realize the goal of a world without nuclear weapons.

Holding the event in Hiroshima was an opportunity for this new generation of activists and scholars, most of whom had never set foot in the city before, to witness firsthand the extent of the atrocities that took place there 70 years ago. Over the first two days, the 30 youth took part in working sessions that included visiting the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, where the human suffering and devastation caused by the bomb are graphically depicted, meeting hibakusha (A-bomb survivors) and engaging in thematic discussions. The youth also developed an action plan, with one member of the group designated to take the lead on each action point, to ensure that the summit’s impact moves beyond just talk.

The final day of the summit was a public forum, where it was hoped that through hearing the speakers, engaging in dialogue with one another and interacting with the 30 young activists, the 250 participants would find inspiration to take action for a world free of nuclear weapons. At the end of the summit, the youth adopted a pledge for nuclear abolition that was presented to Ahmad Alhendawi, the UN Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth.

Strengthening the Network of Connections

One of the main aims of the three days was to build friendship and enhance the network of connections between the 30 youth, connections that will serve as a foundation for long-term collaboration and global solidarity among those who will shoulder the future of the movement. Additionally, we hoped to inspire more young people, present at the summit and beyond, to come to the realization that creating such a world is our shared responsibility. Indeed, the aim of the summit was to promote the idea that abolishing nuclear weapons is indeed “mission possible.”

As a cochair of this summit, it was my determination that all participants left feeling encouraged and inspired to embark on other projects, advocacy efforts and campaigns. In fact, the ripple effects of the summit have been truly encouraging. Many of the youth activists are sharing their experiences of visiting Hiroshima and promoting the youth pledge at local gatherings in their own countries. I believe these individual actions—no matter how small they seem—will indeed serve as a foundation for creating a nuclear-weapon-free world.
“Touching those roof tiles; that made it very real for me . . . to hold things in my hands that were directly part of the atomic bombing made the issue very tangible. It was a very powerful experience.”

Rick Wayman, director of programs at the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation

“We need to be laser-focused on action, training and deploying the right people at the right time with the right tactics to influence decision makers in a real way. And we need public pressure several orders of magnitude greater than we have today.”

Meredith Horowski, global campaign director for Global Zero

“The facts alone will not lead to an understanding of the reality. I wanted to show that these were real lives, faces, people, genuine human beings.”

Masaaki Tanabe, hibakusha and speaker at the public forum, who screened a film he made based on extensive interviews with survivors

“There is so much to be done, but somehow it was empowering rather than overwhelming. We are not working in competition. We are a team.”

Uday Pratap Singh, who has worked with Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament

Anna Ikeda is a program associate at the SGI Office for UN Affairs in New York and was cochair of the International Youth Summit for Nuclear Abolition. She helped launch “Our New Clear Future,” an SGI-USA youth-led movement to abolish nuclear weapons based on dialogue.
Europe is a wonderful place with a complex history. With its many languages, cultures, customs and borders, it has a long past of conflict and division. As young people practicing Nichiren Buddhism in Europe, we feel a keen sense of responsibility for taking action to create a new history.

The SGI’s European Youth Committee is comprised of 19 young people from 13 countries across Europe. It was formed in 2005 and is currently in its fifth generation. Committee members have national level responsibility within the SGI in their respective countries. Each committee is constituted for two years and works with the goal of fostering bonds of friendship across Europe that will in turn lay the groundwork for a united and peaceful continent.

Count Richard Nikolaus von Coudenhove-Kalergi (1894–1972), an early proponent of European unification, was the first public figure to publish a dialogue with SGI President Daisaku Ikeda. During their dialogue, which took place in 1967, he shared his vision for a unified Europe—one united in its humanity rather than simply politics or economics. In one of his writings, President Ikeda quotes Coudenhove-Kalergi’s description of his high expectation of the role played by youth: “Youth have a flame. Without this flame, an ideal cannot shine, nor can it triumph.”

The committee motto “One Europe” expresses our commitment to make the ideal of a united Europe a reality by developing a humanistic network across the continent that no adversity can shake. In doing so, we are building on the legacy of Nichiren and the founding presidents of the Soka Gakkai, who wholeheartedly devoted their lives to working for the happiness of all humanity, transcending all differences.

Our current initiative, “True Friends—Actual Proof Together,” articulates our determination to be friends who can create positive transformation in our own lives and help our friends do the same. Actual proof of positive growth and progress as a human being is an important part of our Buddhist practice.

Seeing actual proof of the genuine value our practice creates encourages us to continue making efforts, not only for our own happiness but for that of the people around us.

Our efforts to connect people have various aspects. One is that through working together to create warm, encouraging gatherings of people from across Europe, we are able to build solid bonds of trust with each other as we strengthen our commitment to peace. These gatherings also give us the opportunity to learn how to transcend our differences as we build friendships and strengthen our Buddhist practice together.

The committee also takes responsibility to help plan a number of SGI-Europe events each year. One example is the annual Milan Study Course where 450 people from across Europe gather in Milan, Italy, to study the philosophy of Nichiren Buddhism.

In a recent message, President Ikeda reminded us of the purpose of all our SGI activities:

In the 21st century, we of the SGI must become an unshakable pillar, building the foundation for lasting peace and establishing the philosophy of respect for the dignity of life as the spirit of the age and the world.

The next European Youth Committee will begin their journey together toward this vision from March 2016.

Lisa Cowan is the editor of the SGI-UK monthly magazine Art of Living and also works on external affairs for the organization. She served as the national young women’s leader for SGI-UK for five years and is currently the youth leader of SGI-UK and chair of the European Youth Committee. In her spare time, together with a good friend, Lisa runs a local choir that meets weekly.
Throughout the 2,500-year history of Buddhism, the concept of the Middle Way has seen multiple interpretations, but, simply, it describes the way or path that transcends and reconciles the duality that characterizes most thinking.

In the broadest sense, the Middle Way refers to the Buddha’s enlightened view of life and also the actions or attitudes that will create happiness for oneself and others; it is found in the ongoing, dynamic effort to apply Buddhist wisdom to the questions and challenges of life and society. In this sense, the search for the Middle Way can be considered a universal pursuit of all Buddhist traditions—the quest for a way of life that would give the greatest value to human existence and help relieve the world of suffering. It is for this reason that Buddhism itself is sometimes referred to as the “Middle Way.”

Shakyamuni’s life exemplifies a basic interpretation of the Middle Way as the path between two extremes, close to Aristotle’s idea of the “golden mean” whereby “every virtue is a mean between two extremes, each of which is a vice.”

Born a prince, Shakyamuni enjoyed every physical comfort and pleasure. However, dissatisfied with the pursuit of fleeting pleasures, he set out in search of a deeper, more enduring truth. He entered a period of extreme ascetic practice, depriving himself of food and sleep, bringing himself to the verge of physical collapse. Sensing the futility of this path, however, he began meditating with the profound determination to realize the truth of human existence, which had eluded him as much in a life of asceticism as it had in a life of luxury. It was then, in his rejection of both self-mortification and self-indulgence, that Shakyamuni awakened to the true nature of life—its eternity, its deep wellspring of unbounded vitality and wisdom.
Unification of the Three Truths

In sixth-century China, the Buddhist scholar T’ien-t’ai (Chih-i), based on his extensive study of Shakyamuni’s teachings in the Lotus Sutra, described life and phenomena in terms of three “truths.” These articulate the reality of all phenomena from three separate dimensions.

The truth of temporary existence indicates the physical or material aspects of life including appearance, form and activities. The truth of non-substantiality refers to the invisible aspects of life, such as our mental and spiritual functions, which lay dormant in our lives until they are manifested. T’ien-t’ai proposed a third truth, the essence or substance of life that transcends and encompasses these opposites. He defined this as the Middle Way.

T’ien-t’ai observed that the three truths are unified in all phenomena and thus clarified the indivisible interrelationship between the physical and the spiritual. From this viewpoint stem the Buddhist principles of the inseparability of body and mind and of self and environment.

Life’s Inherent Dignity as the Guiding Principle

Similar to T’ien-t’ai, Nichiren described life as an “elusive reality that transcends both the words and concepts of existence and nonexistence. It is neither existence nor nonexistence, yet exhibits the qualities of both.” In other words, life itself is the ultimate expression of the harmony of contradictions. Like the lotus flower that blooms unsullied by the muddy waters in which it grows, Nichiren maintained that human beings possess tremendous potential and the life condition of Buddhahood which they can bring forth in direct proportion to the depth of confusion and predicament they face. He encouraged individuals to perceive the inherent dignity of all life—their own and others’—and strive to make this the guiding principle of their actions.

From this perspective, to pursue the Middle Way is not a compromise. It is to bravely confront life’s challenges—identify root causes and seek means of resolution—while summoning the transformative strength and wisdom of Buddhahood from within one’s life to create harmony. Moreover, the Middle Way does not equate to society’s definition of what may be accepted or considered “normal” at any given time. Rather, it transcends subjective values and accords with something more fundamental—our humanity.

At the social and political level, the Middle Way could be expressed as the commitment to upholding respect for the dignity of life and placing it before adherence to a particular political or economic ideology. This approach is expressed by Gandhi in his well-known words: “Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him.”

The vision of the SGI is that individuals committed to this sustained effort to orient their lives in a positive direction will inevitably begin to move society itself in the direction of happiness and harmonious coexistence. SGI President Daisaku Ikeda writes that the Middle Way is a process of “living and making one’s mark on society while constantly interrogating one’s own actions to ensure that they accord with the path of humanity.”

The historian Eric Hobsbawm titled his volume on the 20th century The Age of Extremes. Indeed, the violence and grotesque imbalances of that era drive home the need to find a guiding principle for the peace and fulfillment of humankind. The Middle Way of reverence for the dignity and sanctity of life, making the welfare of people and the planet the starting point and final goal of every human endeavor, can provide a path forward.
Introducing **Common Threads**, a tumblr page hosted by the SGI, with the aim of generating interest in topics related to the development of a culture of peace and stimulating a growing network of global citizens active in the pursuit of peace. The blog features articles written by a diverse range of contributors in the hope of providing a space for sustained dialogue and for exploring creative responses to a changing world.

Visit **Common Threads** at [commonthreads.sgi.org](http://commonthreads.sgi.org).

We welcome you to join the conversation by following us on tumblr and liking, reblogging and commenting on posts. If you are interested in contributing an article or recommending a contributor, please contact us at [quarterly@sgi.org](mailto:quarterly@sgi.org).
The Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is a lay Buddhist association promoting peace, culture and education based on the profound respect for the dignity of life. SGI members uphold the humanistic philosophy of Nichiren Buddhism and are active in 192 countries and territories.

As Buddhists with a shared understanding of the inseparable linkages between individual happiness and the realization of a peaceful world, SGI members strive to actualize their inherent potential while contributing to their local communities and responding to common issues facing humankind. Our efforts toward the creation of a culture of peace are based on a steadfast commitment to dialogue, nonviolence and a sense of global citizenship nurtured through our daily Buddhist practice.

As a nongovernmental organization with formal ties to the United Nations, the SGI also collaborates with other civil society organizations and intergovernmental agencies in the fields of nuclear disarmament, human rights, sustainable development, humanitarian affairs and interfaith dialogue.