

## **Soka Gakkai Worldview Traditions**

### **In-Depth Subject Knowledge Essay**



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This in-depth subject knowledge essay is also available on our website. We also have an accompanying glossary, available both on our website and for download.

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# Beliefs, Teachings, Wisdom, Authority

## Introduction

Soka Gakkai is a Japanese new religious movement based on Nichiren Buddhism. It has been described as Japan's most successful new religious movement in terms of the number of members, including non-Japanese members in the West. It claims to have 8.27 million member households in Japan and a further 1.5 million members across 192 countries and territories worldwide.

Soka Gakkai started as an educational reform movement, emerging in Japan between the First and Second World Wars. It was established by a school principal, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944), who had earlier converted to Nichiren Shoshu, a minority lineage following the teachings of the thirteenth century monk Nichiren Daishonin (1222-82). Nichiren opposed the support that the military establishment of the time gave to certain Buddhist schools and challenged the status quo in other ways. As a result, the government exiled him twice and also tried to execute him. Nichiren's teachings have inspired religious expressions amongst several Buddhist sub-schools throughout the centuries.

## Basic beliefs

Soka Gakkai is part of the spectrum of Japanese Buddhist movements that draw inspiration from the teachings of the thirteenth-century monk Nichiren Daishonin (1222-82). Trained in the Tendai school of Mahayana Buddhism (Montgomery 1991: 98), Nichiren was opposed to the interpretation and practice of other forms of Buddhism in Japan. (For more background, please refer to 'Beliefs, Teachings, Wisdom, Authority' in the profile on Buddhism on this website.) Most notably, Nichiren was against Pure Land Buddhism, which focused upon the worship of the Buddha Amitabha (known as Amida in Japan) – one of the Buddhas in Mahayana Buddhism (Keown 1996: 66). Rather, Nichiren believed that we all contain within ourselves the potential for enlightenment and that this potential can be unlocked by devotion to the Lotus Sutra (a major Mahayana scripture) (Hammond and Machacek 2002: 1190). Instead of reciting the mantra *Namu Amida Butsu* ('Homage to the Buddha Amida') to ensure rebirth in Amida's paradise (the 'Pure Land'), Nichiren taught his followers to recite the mantra *Nam-myoho-rence-kyo* ('Homage to "The Lotus of the Wonderful Law"'). This refers to the full title of the Lotus Sutra, the 'Mystic' or 'Wonderful' Law taught in the Lotus Sutra, and the Law of life itself. The phrase encompasses

- nam (to dedicate one's life)
- myoho (life and death, or the enlightened Buddha and the ordinary person, as a single entity)
- (lotus flower, which produces seeds and flowers together and so represents the simultaneity of cause and effect)
- kyo (sutra or teaching).

The phrase is said to represent universal law and its repetition “allows each individual to tap into the wisdom of their life to reveal their Buddha nature” (SGI-USA 2016).

These particular beliefs are the result of different conceptualisations of the historical Buddha, also known as Shakyamuni (literally, ‘sage of the Shakyas’), in Mahayana Buddhism (Keown 1996: 15). The term ‘Shakyamuni’ usually refers to the historical Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563/480 – c. 483/400 BCE) after he attained Buddhahood, but could also signify a transcendent figure whose existence continues. Nichiren argued that the upheavals of his time were the result of people abandoning the original Shakyamuni for Amida (Montgomery 1991: 102). In time, however, many sub-schools developed within Nichiren Buddhism, including Nichiren Shu and Nichiren Shoshu, which survive up to the present and are not affiliated with each other. Eventually, the twenty-sixth high priest of Nichiren Shoshu, Nichikan (1665-1726), asserted that Nichiren and not Shakyamuni is the Eternal Buddha (Montgomery 1991: 172). Nichiren Shu followers continue to hold that the Eternal Buddha is Shakyamuni (Lee 2017). Members of Soka Gakkai believe that Nichiren is the Buddha for the ‘Latter Day of the Law’ (see below).

These interpretations of Shakyamuni and Buddhahood are related to the prominent role occupied by the bodhisattva – a figure who endeavours over countless lifetimes to lead others towards nirvana (enlightenment) – in Mahayana Buddhism (Keown 1996: 58). Eventually, the centrality of the bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism led to the blurring of the boundaries between defining a Buddha and an advanced bodhisattva (Keown 1996: 64).

Nichiren (the monk) also taught that Buddhism went through three general stages of growth, stagnation and decline. Although there were different opinions on how long these stages would take, it was generally accepted that the Former Age of growth lasted 1,000 years, the Middle Age of stability another 1,000 years, and the final Age of Decay (mappō) would last a total of 10,000 years (Montgomery 1991: 107). In thirteenth century Japan, it was widely held that the final age had already begun, but Nichiren was relatively optimistic about this. According to him, Shakyamuni had left appropriate remedies for each epoch. The Eight-fold Path, for example, was the right remedy to achieve nirvana during the Former Age. For the Latter Age, Shakyamuni left the teachings contained within the sixteenth chapter on Eternal Life in the Lotus Sutra (Montgomery 1991: 108). Soka Gakkai characterises the Age of Decay as the ‘Latter Day of the Law’, during which the wisdom of the Lotus Sutra is essential to correct internal confusion and distortion within Buddhism (SGI-UK 2017: 39).

## Scriptures

The central scripture for Soka Gakkai followers, as with other Nichiren Buddhists, is the Lotus Sutra, a text which is presented as taught by the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, although scholars suggest that it was perhaps composed around 200 CE. The Lotus Sutra and other Mahayana sutras teach that the Buddha had been enlightened from time immemorial, even though historically he appeared to live and die like an ordinary man (Keown 1996: 62).

The Lotus Sutra is the scriptural focus of reverence for Nichiren Buddhists. Its very title forms the basis of the Nichiren chant – nam is a Sanskrit word meaning ‘dedication’ or ‘devotion’ while Myoho Renge Kyo is the name of the Chinese translation of the Lotus Sutra (SGI-UK 2017: 18). According to Soka Gakkai, the combination of Sanskrit and Chinese in the phrase also indicates the universality of its teachings.

According to Soka Gakkai, it is not necessary to believe in Nam-myoho-rence-kyo in order to start practising the chant – faith develops organically after the practitioner begins to experience the benefits of chanting (SGI-UK 2017: 6).

In addition to the Lotus Sutra, Soka Gakkai followers also engage in in-depth study of other Buddhist texts, especially The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, compiled by Josei Toda (1900-1958), the group’s second leader. Also known as the Goshō, it carries immense prestige within Soka Gakkai, alongside the Lotus Sutra (Montgomery 1991: 189). Additionally, Soka Gakkai members around the world follow the teachings, public speeches and writings of their current leader, Daisaku Ikeda (b. 1928).

## **Revelation**

As a lay movement that had its origins in the Nichiren Shoshu sub-school, Soka Gakkai is not founded upon completely new sources of wisdom. Rather, the establishment of Soka Gakkai helped to transform Nichiren Shoshu from a minor sect into one of the largest religious movements in Japan after the Second World War (Montgomery 1991: 181). Soka Gakkai followers continue to revere the teachings of the monk Nichiren.

## **Founder**

Soka Gakkai was founded by Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944), a school principal (Hammond and Machacek 2002: 1189). Makiguchi had moved south to Tokyo from Hokkaido, the northernmost of Japan’s main islands. Makiguchi had been publishing books on education that sold reasonably well, but his approach to individual ‘value creation’ in pedagogy was stymied by the policies of Imperial Japan in the 1930s (Montgomery 1991: 181). In 1928, he converted to Nichiren Shoshu through the influence of another school principal. As a movement, Soka Gakkai dates its founding to the publication of Makiguchi’s Soka Kyoiku Gakkai (Value-Creating Educational Society) in 1930 (Hammond and Machacek 2002: 1189).

## **Successors and authority**

Makiguchi and his disciple, Jose Toda (1900-1958), were imprisoned during the Second World War on charges of lèse-majesté for refusing to comply with the Religious Organisations Act (1940). The Act effectively established Shinto as the national religion of Japan, and was designed to promote patriotism and loyalty to the rapidly militarising regime (Hammond and Machacek 2002: 1190). However, it was replaced with a new constitution in 1946 which broke the relationship between religion and the State. The new constitution

offered religious freedom for the first time in Japanese history and allowed religions to operate free from state interference, but also without state support (Reader 2002: 718).

Toda assumed the presidency of Soka Gakkai after Makiguchi's death in prison in 1944 and, upon his release, revitalised Makiguchi's fractured movement. He dropped the word 'Kyoiku' ('Educational') from the movement's name and reorganised it as a lay movement affiliated with Nichiren Shoshu. The emphasis on health, wealth and happiness in Toda's teachings resonated with significantly large audiences in post-War Tokyo, especially those who were displaced, and the movement grew rapidly (Montgomery 1991: 1190).

In 1947, Toda met Daisaku Ikeda, a 19-year-old who greatly impressed him. Toda soon employed Ikeda at one of his companies and became his mentor. In 1960, two years after Toda's death, Ikeda succeeded him as the president of Soka Gakkai. During Ikeda's presidency, Soka Gakkai launched its own political party, Komeito ('Clean Government'), in 1961, which went on to perform well in elections. The political success of Komeito, along with the more assertive proselytising by Soka Gakkai, alarmed many members of the public and provoked a considerable backlash (Montgomery 1991: 196).

At the same time, Soka Gakkai innovated and expanded even further under Ikeda's leadership. In 1975, he became the first president of the Soka Gakkai International (SGI) (SGI-UK 2017: 43). Since then, Ikeda has remained the president of SGI, whilst he has been succeeded by other leaders in the presidency of SG within Japan (although he remains the honorary president).

During these post-War decades, there were underlying tensions between Soka Gakkai and Nichiren Shoshu. Things came to a head in 1990, when the high priest of Nichiren Shoshu accused Ikeda of equating the priesthood with the laity (Hammond and Machacek 2002: 1190). Although the Soka Gakkai leadership issued a formal apology, these tensions continued to grow and in 1991, the Nichiren Shoshu high priest ordered Soka Gakkai to disband and excommunicated all members who remained affiliated to it.

The split with Nichiren Shoshu has appeared to benefit Soka Gakkai International, especially by enhancing the local autonomy of its international organisations which became more able to adapt to their immediate environments. To fill the clerical gap, Soka Gakkai developed roles for voluntary 'ministers of ceremony' who now preside over weddings, funerals, and other rituals (Hammond and Machacek 2002: 1191) (see Religious/Ritual Practice section below). Lay leaders outside of Japan had already been fulfilling this function prior to the formalisation of the role.

## Ways of Living

### Organisation

Soka Gakkai International has an estimated 12 million adherents in 192 countries (Gebert 2017). There are SGI organisations in more than 30 European countries with a total membership of more than 135,000. SGI-UK has a membership of 14,000 spread across 630 local groups. In Japan, Soka Gakkai has more than eight million affiliated households (Baffelli 2011: 217). After the schism between Soka Gakkai and Nichiren Shoshu, SGI organisations were able to claim greater autonomy and adapt more flexibly to their national and local contexts. In Japan, the post-schism organisation of Soka Gakkai is dependent upon its links with its political party, New Komeito. Komeito enjoyed electoral successes since its founding in the 1960s, but gained unprecedented influence when it re-launched in 1998 as New Komeito and became the junior partner in a government coalition in 1999, led by the Liberal Democratic Party (Baffelli 2011: 224; McLaughlin 2015: 3).

Traditionally, New Komeito's elected representatives have upheld Soka Gakkai's principles when voting in the Diet (the national legislature of Japan, composed of the House of Councillors and the House of Representatives). This includes the Diet's commitment to pacifism, which is also enshrined in Japan's post-war constitution (Article 9). In 2014, however, the overwhelming majority of New Komeito parliamentarians said they supported Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's proposal to amend the Constitution to allow for limited participation in 'self defence' (McLaughlin 2015: 8). They saw this not as a relinquishing of pacifism, however, but as a compromise through which other clauses on human rights, privacy and protection of the environment, might be added (Harding 2016).

The shift in attitudes amongst New Komeito's Diet representatives sparked off major protests amongst Soka Gakkai members starting in 2015. The Soka Gakkai leadership has officially distanced itself from the protests (McLaughlin 2015: 9). Meanwhile, New Komeito politicians continue to enjoy high levels of support at the local government level. These political developments within Japan do not appear to have had a negative impact on the organisation of SGI organisations in other parts of the world.

## Guidance for life

Soka Gakkai teachings emphasise the importance of people transforming themselves at the individual level as a means of transforming the world, through 'mentor and disciple' relationships (SGI-UK 2017: 3). SGI organisations are largely concerned about the negative impacts of climate change, nuclear armament, and poverty, and uphold a common charter with the following purposes and principles (Soka Gakkai International (SGI) 1995):

1. SGI shall contribute to peace, culture and education for the happiness and welfare of all humanity based on Buddhist respect for the sanctity of life.
2. SGI, based on the ideal of world citizenship, shall safeguard fundamental human rights and not discriminate against any individual on any grounds.
3. SGI shall respect and protect the freedom of religion and religious expression.
4. SGI shall promote an understanding of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism through grassroots exchange, thereby contributing to individual happiness.

5. SGI shall, through its constituent organisations, encourage its members to contribute toward the prosperity of their respective societies as good citizens.
6. SGI shall respect the independence and autonomy of its constituent organisations in accordance with the conditions prevailing in each country.
7. SGI shall, based on the Buddhist spirit of tolerance, respect other religions, engage in dialogue and work together with them toward the resolution of fundamental issues concerning humanity.
8. SGI shall respect cultural diversity and promote cultural exchange, thereby creating an international society of mutual understanding and harmony.
9. SGI shall promote, based on the Buddhist ideal of symbiosis, the protection of nature and the environment.
10. SGI shall contribute to the promotion of education, in pursuit of truth as well as the development of scholarship, to enable all people to cultivate their individual character and enjoy fulfilling and happy lives.”

## Religious/ritual practice

The main practice engaged in by followers of Soka Gakkai is o daimoku, or the daily chanting of the phrase Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Members hold that this practice is what helps them to raise their ‘life-condition’ and change previously held attitudes into more positive ways of being (SGI-UK 2017: 3). In addition, daily practice involves reciting important portions of the Lotus Sutra. Together, the daily practices of o daimoku and recitation of the Lotus Sutra are known as ‘gongyo’, which means ‘assiduous practice’. After a prospective member has been practising gongyo for a few months, they receive their own Gohonzon replica in a ceremony called gojukai, to “take the precepts,” or uphold exclusive reverence for the Gohonzon (McLaughlin 2013). The Gohonzon is a paper scroll inscribed with the words Nam-myoho-renge-kyo Nichiren.

Some tips from Soka Gakkai on how to chant include (SGI-UK 2017: 14):

- Sitting upright with palms together and eyes open
- Repeating the phrase Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, focusing on sincerity and correct pronunciation
- Chanting in a ‘firm, clear, vibrant’ voice without worrying too much about volume
- Chanting for as long as it is desired

Soka Gakkai also engage in regular study of the letters (‘goshō’) addressed by Nichiren Daishonin to his disciples. These individual practices are complemented by collective Buddhist activities organised by what are known as ‘local districts’, which can take the form of discussion meetings held in people’s homes (SGI-UK 2017: 5). Sharing the teachings with others with a view to helping them overcome their problems is a central practice of SGI.

Soka Gakkai voluntary ‘ministers of ceremony’ perform life cycle rituals for members including weddings and funerals.

## **The journey of life (life cycle)**

In line with historical Buddhist teachings, the Soka Gakkai see birth and death as essential phases of a 'changeless force' that exists eternally, or the fundamental 'life-force' around us (SGI-UK 2017: 29). What we know as 'life' is the phase in which the life-force is manifest, while what we know as 'death' is merely a phase in which the life-force is dormant. Birth and death thus repeat in an endless cycle whilst the fundamental life-force remains unchanged.

This relates to a belief common to most (Mahayana) Buddhists, that all living creatures are part of this cycle of birth and death and will continue to be reborn until they attain nirvana (enlightenment) (Keown 1996: 29). However, Buddhist teachings hold that neither the beginning of cyclic rebirth nor its end can ever be known with certainty. At the same time, it is widely held that the number of rebirths a person can go through is almost infinite. The concept of reincarnation predated the emergence of Buddhism in India and was already associated with the doctrine of karma – the idea that our moral deeds in our present lives would determine the circumstances of our rebirth.

The Soka Gakkai understanding of nirvana and karma is slightly different from that in some other forms of Buddhism, however. The Lotus Sutra teaches that one is already enlightened – “the essential nature of our lives at any moment is that of a Buddha”, a state also known as “Buddhahood” and as “awakening to the greater self” (SGI 2015). When this is realised, life can be lived full of joy and purpose – with the primary purpose being to awaken others to their Buddha nature. The circumstances of our lives, including suffering, “become the means to demonstrate the power of the Buddha nature and form bonds of empathy with others” (SGI 2015). Our lives are not then guided by karma but by this mission.

## **Holy Days and celebrations (life cycle)**

Soka Gakkai followers do not have their own distinctive calendar of sacred events.

## **Ways of Expressing Meaning**

### **Stories of faith**

The biography of Nichiren Daishonin bears some similarities with that of the Hebrew prophets, who decried the decline of society with the abandonment of true religious convictions. Nichiren's teachings involved engaging with, and sometimes challenging, the disciplines that he was trained in, including Confucianism and the Chinese classics (Montgomery 1991: 99). This oppositional orientation prevailed within Nichiren Shoshu after Nichiren was designated as the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law by the sub-school's twenty-sixth high priest, Nichikan (1665-1726).

In the history of the Soka Gakkai, the imprisonment of their founder Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944) and his disciple Josei Toda (1900-1958) offer an example of this opposition within a modern context of conscientious objection. Makiguchi has acquired martyr-like status in the official narrative of Soka Gakkai history, which emphasises that he fell victim to “bad treatment, malnutrition and old age” while incarcerated for his beliefs (SGI-UK 2017: 41).

## Symbols of faith

For Soka Gakkai followers, the Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is not merely expressed through chanting – it is also embodied as an object of devotion, called the Gohonzon. Honzon means ‘object of fundamental respect’ and go means ‘worthy of honour’ (SGI-UK 2017: 19).

Each member of the Soka Gakkai receives a Gohonzon that takes the form of a paper scroll inscribed with Chinese and Sanskrit characters in black ink. Reading vertically downwards along the centre of the Gohonzon are the words ‘Nam-myoho-renge-kyo Nichiren’. This design of the Gohonzon is based on a copy transcribed by the Nichiren Shoshu’s twenty-sixth high priest Nichikan Shonin (1665-1726) (SGI-UK 2017: 19). These words are surrounded by characters representing the ‘ten realms’ of consciousness, which refer to ten basic life conditions which everyone possesses and can experience (Hammond and Machacek 2002: 1190). These are (SGI-UK 2017: 34–35):

- Hell
- Hunger
- Animality
- Anger
- Humanity or Tranquility
- Heaven or Rapture
- Learning
- Realisation or Absorption
- Bodhisattva
- Buddhahood

Rather than being external circumstances imposed upon the individual, these ‘life circumstances’ are modes of being that we all experience or could potentially attain. Our external circumstances merely reflect our inner life conditions – by changing our way of being in the world, we can improve our external circumstances (SGI-UK 2017: 1190).

The Gohonzon is also used in the Nichiren Shu sub-school, but here it is regarded as the transmission of the dharma (the Buddha’s teachings) from the original Buddha to his disciples and to us (Montgomery 1991: 171). The Nichiren Shoshu, however, hold that they alone possess the true Gohonzon, the Dai-gohonzon, which is sometimes described as the ‘reality’ of the God worshipped by other religious followers, including Christians, Jews and

Muslims (Montgomery 1991: 170). Soka Gakkai do not uphold this Nichiren Shoshu doctrine.

Soka Gakkai followers do not have Buddha images or statues as this suggests that Buddhahood is separate from the individual. The SGI website states that the script, rather than a painted image or statue as the object of worship, is a “mirror” of “Buddha nature”, which is “universal” and “free of the connotations of race and gender inherent in depictions of specific personages” (SGI 2015).

## **Places of worship**

Soka Gakkai followers carry out individual daily worship in their own homes. Group discussion meetings in local districts are also organised in members’ homes.

## **Prayer and meditation**

Gongyo, literally ‘assiduous or constant practice’, forms the backbone of daily prayer and meditation in Soka Gakkai. It is performed each morning and evening. In Nichiren Buddhism, gongyo refers specifically to the recitation of part of the Hoben (second) chapter and the Juryo (sixteenth) chapter of the Lotus Sutra and the chanting of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. The recitation of the Sutra serves as the preparation to the main practice, which is the chanting (SGI-UK 2017: 22).

## **Pilgrimage, art and architecture**

There are several temples that have been pilgrimage centres for Nichiren Buddhists throughout the centuries, including Mount Minobu, Ikegami Hommon-ji, and other sites associated with the life of Nichiren (Montgomery 1991: 198). However, the head temple of Nichiren Shoshu – the Taiseki-ji, founded in 1290 – was not considered a major pilgrimage centre until it was visited by the second Soka Gakkai president, Josei Toda, upon his release from prison. Finding it in a state of neglect, he decided to revive it.

The significance of the Taiseki-ji for Toda was that it contained the Dai-Gohonzon (Montgomery 1991: 198). He and his successor, Daisaku Ikeda, made the revival of the Head Temple their priority. By the 1970s, Taiseki-ji was receiving more than 3.5 million pilgrims a year, surpassing Lourdes in France. In 1972, Ikeda inaugurated a new Grand Main Temple, the Sho-Hondo.

In the words of Ikeda, published in the Seikyo Times – the Soka Gakkai’s newspaper – in December 1972 (Montgomery 1991: 199):

Thus completed, the great building lies in all its splendour, immaculately white and brilliant in the brightness of the sun, a magnificent sight in central Japan. It soars towards the sky which is permeated with the immortal life of the universe, and rivals the sacred peak of Fuji

in dignity. To the south, it commands the cobalt blue of the Pacific, the unbounded expanse of water which reminds one of the infinite wisdom of the Buddha. Its figure is graceful, its appearance spectacular, perfectly blending with the perpetuity of the surrounding landscape. Where can a match be found for this edifice, either in solemnity or in grandeur?

However, Soka Gakkai members stopped visiting this temple when SGI split from the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood in 1991. Some of the temple buildings were destroyed by Nichiren Shoshu between 1998 and 1999, but other buildings remain.

## Expression and worship

From its earliest days, Buddhism has been a missionary religion (Keown 1996: 70). The Soka Gakkai are therefore not unique in upholding their concept of *kosen rufu*, or the mission of converting people to Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism (Baffelli 2011: 223).

What many people have often found controversial about the Soka Gakkai is the missionary zeal of its followers, including new converts. The movement's argumentative mode of recruitment, *shakubuku*, placed it under increased scrutiny especially after the Second World War in Japan. It led to tensions with other schools of Buddhism and religions, and raised panics that Soka Gakkai members were brainwashed (Hammond and Machacek 2002: 1190). In the decades immediately after the War, the giant rallies and parades sponsored by Soka Gakkai sometimes reminded onlookers of the demonstrations of the wartime fascist groups. These features resulted in Soka Gakkai gaining notoriety in Japan and being labelled a 'cult', led by unscrupulous leaders with ulterior motives.

This image needs to be balanced with other perspectives of Soka Gakkai's worship, especially outside Japan. In the USA, for example, the influence of celebrities within sports and entertainment (including Tina Turner, Orlando Bloom and Miranda Kerr) highlights the creative and inclusive aspects of Soka Gakkai practices.

## Art, music, drama and creativity

Although Nichiren Buddhism has a reputation for being intolerant towards other variants of Buddhism, the SGI organisations in different countries have adapted to their unique contexts quite flexibly. Thus, while Soka Gakkai in Japan remains relatively nationalist, SGI organisations tend to reflect the national cultures of their specific context and can be quite patriotic. This combination of patriotism and exotic foreign-ness partly explains Soka Gakkai's appeal, for example, amongst the so-called 'hippie generation' in the USA (Montgomery 1991: 211).

There have been high-profile celebrity converts to Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism prior to its schism with Soka Gakkai in the early 1990s and to post-schism Soka Gakkai. These include Oscar nominee Sal Mineo (of *Rebel Without a Cause*), Grammy-winning rock star Tina Turner, jazz legend Herbie Hancock, footballer Roberto Baggio, film star Orlando Bloom (of *The Lord of the Rings* fame), and pop star Boy George (Nusch 2018).

This popularity of Soka Gakkai amongst international celebrities grew alongside the changes introduced by Ikeda, such as cultural activities, including an Arts Division and a music corps starting from the 1950s (Daisaku Ikeda Website Committee 2018). In 1963, Ikeda founded the Min-On Concert Association to promote “the global exchange of musical culture with the aim of developing mutual understanding and respect among people of different races and nationalities” (Min-On Concert Association 2018).

## Identity, Diversity and Belonging

### Religious identity

As a lay organisation that had its origins in Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism, Soka Gakkai shares some common traits with other schools of Japanese Buddhism. For one thing, in contrast to Indian expressions of Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism is relatively more ‘social’ and emphasises community and group values (Keown 1996: 78). Some influential teachers have even frowned upon monasticism and encouraged monks to marry and remain active in social life.

The Soka Gakkai and Nichiren Shoshu, however, remained fiercely independent when Japan’s wartime government attempted to impose national unity by enforcing religious uniformity. The Imperial government pressured small sects to merge with larger ones so that they could be controlled more easily. The Soka Gakkai resisted this state imposition which led to the imprisonment of Soka Gakkai founder Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and his disciple Josei Toda. This zealous independence went on to inform the political and religious ambitions of the movement’s third president, Daisaku Ikeda.

Nichiren Shoshu, but not Soka Gakkai, has an ambition to convert all of Japan to Nichiren Buddhism. This goal traces its origins to a fusion of politics, faith and practice embedded in the Three Secret Dharmas that developed within Nichiren Buddhism. The first two dharmas – o daimoku (sacred chanting) and the Gohonzon (the mandala) – have been explained and were realised during Nichiren’s lifetime in the thirteenth century (McLaughlin 2015: 12). The third Secret Dharma remains to be achieved and is the most overtly political. This is the honmon no kaidan, the “true ordination platform” – a government-sponsored facility which will enshrine the Dai-gohonzon, to be worshipped through o daimoku when everyone in Japan has converted to Nichiren Buddhism.

It is against this background that the Soka Gakkai in Japan – as a branch of Nichiren – are often regarded as nationalists who are willing to fuse religion and politics (for instance, via the creation of Komeito). This fusion of Japanese nationalism and Buddhism does not apply, however, to SGI organisations.

## Family and community

In the post-War years, the appeal of Toda's leadership to the more marginalised members of Japanese society meant that Soka Gakkai attracted large numbers of people who were poor and uneducated, especially those who were housewives (McLaughlin 2015: 13). This attractiveness enabled Soka Gakkai in Japan and, to a greater extent, SGI organisations in other countries to encourage the growth of new communities amongst members.

## Diversity within the tradition

Soka Gakkai regards itself as the sole and true inheritor of Nichiren's dharma, which has often placed it squarely in opposition not only to other Buddhists, but to other Nichiren-based sub-schools (McLaughlin 2015: 4). This tendency to schism had an early precedent when the Nichiren Shoshu sub-school emerged in the late thirteenth century through the establishment of its head temple at Taiseki-ji. After Soka Gakkai broke with Nichiren Shoshu in the 1990s, however, there appeared to be an upsurge in diversity amongst SGI organisations in different countries.

The different SGI organisations also have their own approaches to inclusion and diversity. For example, SGI-UK highlights the testimonies of members who come from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community or who are of ethnic minority backgrounds (SGI-UK 2017: 27–29, 32–33).

## Other religions

As a result of backlash against Soka Gakkai's uncompromising interpretation of Buddhism and its controversial practices, such as shakubuku, SGI president Daisaku Ikeda toned down some of the movement's ideals. For example, in 1970 he conceded that Soka Gakkai did not intend to establish the kaidan, or "government-sponsored platform" (Baffelli 2011: 234).

Since establishing SGI, Ikeda has adopted a more innovative and engaging approach in spreading Buddhism worldwide. He founded the Soka schools, a non-denominational school system which includes all levels, including kindergarten, and a university in Tokyo and another in California (SGI-UK 2017: 44). Ikeda is also a proponent of dialogue and peace initiatives, and has published exchanges with figures as diverse as Mikhail Gorbachev (the last leader of the Soviet Union), Elise Boulding (the Norwegian Quaker and sociologist), Joseph Rotblat (the Polish Nobel Peace laureate), and Andre Malraux (the French novelist, art theorist and politician) (SGI-UK 2017: 44).

The fourth item in the SGI charter also affirms that the movement "shall respect and protect the freedom of religion and religious expression" (Soka Gakkai International (SGI) 1995).

## The middle way

The diversity within Buddhism has resulted in diverging interpretations of common concepts, such as the 'Middle Way'. For Soka Gakkai, drawing upon the teachings of

Nichiren Daishonin, the Middle Way is exemplified by the Daimoku – “the ultimate Law or truth of all things”. They see it not as a compromise between extremes, but as a way to attain balance in life (SGI-UK 2017: 31).

This framework is what enabled the second president of Soka Gakkai, Josei Toda, to focus his teachings on the attainment of health, wealth, and spiritual and worldly happiness. Toda likened happiness to the flavouring in soup, which should contain the right balance of sweet and sour. Too much sour would make the soup inedible, and some sweetness would need to be added. Toda even proclaimed, ‘If you do as I tell you, and if things don’t work out as you want by the time I come to (this town) next (year), then you may come up here and beat me and kick me as much as you want. This is a promise.’ (Montgomery 1991: 185)

This passionate emphasis on personal empowerment and salvation was appealing to substantial numbers of Japanese, especially residents of Tokyo who had to rebuild their lives in the aftermath of the Second World War (Montgomery 1991: 185). The focus on personal transformation continues to be a prominent feature, for example in the testimonies of SGI-UK members who have struggled with grief, addiction, divorce and abuse (SGI-UK 2017).

## Meaning, Purpose and Truth

### Religious experience

Soka Gakkai members, especially converts in the West, are often happy to relate their religious experiences. In an interview, Tina Turner responded to a question about the relationship between singing and spirituality by saying:

Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is a song. In the Soka Gakkai tradition we are taught how to sing it. It is a sound and a rhythm and it touches a place inside you. That place we try to reach is the subconscious mind. I believe that it is the highest place and, if you communicate with it, that is when you receive information on what to do. Singing a song can make you cry. Singing a song can make you happy. That’s spirit—the spirit inside of you. If you look up ‘spiritual’ in a dictionary, you will find that it is your nature, it is the person you are. When you walk into a room, a person might say, ‘Oh, she’s got great spirit.’ Or you can walk into a room and someone will say that you don’t have spirit because it’s not visible. You’re kind of off or negative. Meditation and praying change your spirit into something positive. If it is already positive, it makes it better (Miller 2016).

The British rapper, poet and activist, Shauna O’Brian (also known as MC Angel) – who also identifies as lesbian – recounts a history of drug and alcohol abuse before she encountered Soka Gakkai. According to her:

Other than going to discussion meetings, I initially struggled with doing activities and developing a bigger involvement in the SGI. Thanks to the persistent and compassionate support from local members and leaders, I slowly began to do more....I started to take responsibility for my life and I gave up drinking around four years ago. I threw myself into SGI-UK activities within the youth division. Previously I had felt heavy in the mornings, but

after SGI-UK activities, alongside other young people, I felt light. I started to realise the fatigue had been caused by deep suffering and that Buddhist activities were transforming my negative tendencies. Through my Buddhist practice I have transformed so much of my life and I have received such care and love. I have felt supported through every challenge and obstacle, while empowered to make healthier choices for my own life (SGI-UK 2017).

## Answers to ultimate questions

As noted in other sections above, Soka Gakkai teaches that Nam-myoho-renge-kyo expresses the 'universal law of life', and that its recitation "allows each individual to tap into the wisdom of their life to reveal their Buddha nature" (SGI-USA: 2016). The phrase thus encapsulates the Soka Gakkai belief that each individual has Buddha nature. When an individual lives by the universal law, through dedication to and daily repetition of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, s/he can "deal effectively with any situation" and can work towards the happiness of self and others (SGI-USA: 2016). A central teaching of Soka Gakkai is that individual change will lead to societal, and then global, change: "empowered global citizens" will work for change in their own communities. SGI describes itself as "Buddhism in Action for Peace". SGI also teaches that dedication to the Lotus Sutra is the only means of salvation in the current 'Latter Day of the Law', also known as the 'Age of Decay' (mappō).

According to Soka Gakkai teachings, chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo enables us to "see, hear, smell and taste more clearly", while "our sense of touch becomes more sensitive, and we begin to perceive and make judgements about both the physical and abstract world with greater clarity" (SGI-UK 2017: 38). This accords with the Buddhist teaching about the Nine Levels of Perception or Consciousness shared by all living beings.

The first five consciousnesses corresponded to the five senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. The sixth consciousness enables us to make judgements about physical things – for example, recognising that a chair is hard and that we can sit on it, or that an apple is edible. The seventh consciousness is about discerning the abstract and making moral judgements. The eighth consciousness stores our underlying habits, dislikes, likes and other personality traits as an accumulation of our karma. The ninth consciousness is the life-force itself, which Nichiren Buddhists call Myoho-renge-kyo. Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo thus enables us to attain the ninth consciousness and to purify all the other eight consciousnesses.

## Religion and science

The relationship between religion and science is generally uncontroversial amongst Soka Gakkai followers. In fact, the movement has two universities – one in Tokyo (founded in 1971) and one in Orange County, California (founded in 2001). Its Tokyo university campus opened with three faculties – Economics, Law, and Letters – in 1971 ("History | SOKA UNIVERSITY | Discover Your Potential" 2018).

The Engineering faculty was added in 1991 and was expanded to Science and Engineering in 2015, while Nursing was added as a faculty in 2013. The California university is a four-year liberal arts college and graduate school which states that it was “founded upon the Buddhist principles of peace, human rights and the sanctity of life” (Soka University of America 2018).

## **Values and Commitments**

### **Moral issues**

As a consequence of their beliefs about karma and the cycle of rebirth, Buddhists hold all life as sacred. This can lead to complicated positions on issues such as abortion because, according to early Buddhist teachings, individual human life begins at conception. Interpreting these early sources in light of modern scientific discoveries, most Buddhists hold that individual life begins at fertilisation. Abortion is therefore illegal in Sri Lanka and Thailand but is legal in Japan. As with many other Buddhists in the West, SGI followers may hold a range of personal views on abortion. Regardless of the official doctrinal position on abortion, however, some Buddhists in Japan offer the ritual of mizuko kuyo, or a memorial service, for aborted children (Keown 1996: 102–3).

### **Ethical guidelines**

Soka Gakkai place great importance on achieving a balance of individual health and happiness and the larger transformation of the world (SGI-UK 2017). While organisations such as SGI-UK do not pass judgement on individuals who abuse drugs or alcohol, it highlights the stories of those who have left these lifestyles behind after encountering Soka Gakkai.

In relation to gender and sexual diversity, SGI-UK embraces members of diverse identities and backgrounds. It also does not pass judgement on the morality of non-marital heterosexual relations.

### **Individual responsibility**

SGI positions itself as a movement of ‘human revolution’ – the world will only change when the people’s individual hearts change. Small-scale activities are meant to have big impacts. Individual practices become the building blocks of local discussion meetings, which in turn become the building blocks of larger-scale initiatives for community support and social change. What remains unclear, however, is the extent to which members of SGI organisations (and SG within Japan) are permitted or empowered to express dissent and disagreement. The outcome of tensions between rank-and-file Soka Gakkai members and New Komeito in Japan could provide a clue as to how this could play out in the future (Baffelli 2011; McLaughlin 2015).

## Community support

In the UK, SGI has four centres which are open to movement members and the public. The UK headquarters are located at Taplow Court, Buckinghamshire, and there are three centres in London: SGI-UK West London Centre, South London National Centre and the London Ikeda Peace Centre. Each centre contains at least one room dedicated to chanting in front of the Gohonzon. In SGI, core activities are organised locally in what are known as 'districts' (SGI-UK 2017: 5). These is where old members and new encounter community support in their daily practice and faith. There are roughly 630 local districts in the UK, and meetings can be found through the search function of the SGI-UK website (SGI-UK 2018).

At the same time, Soka Gakkai upholds the 'mentor and disciple' relationship that is characteristic of Nichiren Buddhism – followers regard Ikeda as their mentor and seek to emulate his example (SGI-UK 2017: 45).

## The environment

Soka Gakkai is explicit about its deep regard for environmental sustainability. The preamble to its charter names the "degradation of the natural environment and widening economic chasms between developed and developing nations, with serious repercussions for humankind's collective future" as one of its concerns (Soka Gakkai International (SGI) 1995). The ninth point of the Charter states: "SGI shall promote, based on the Buddhist ideal of symbiosis, the protection of nature and the environment".

## Global vision

Since 1983, Daisaku Ikeda has written peace proposals which are sent to the United Nations and other world leaders. Soka Gakkai regards Ikeda's proposals as reflecting and influencing global efforts such as the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals (SGI-UK 2017: 11).

Soka Gakkai also states that it stands behind the values of universal peace, and endorses the work of organisations such as the Nobel Peace Prize-winning International Campaign for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) (SGI-UK 2017: 10).

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