

**The Soka Gakkai International:  
Religious Roots, Early History and Contemporary Development**

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## Preface

The aim of this presentation is to provide scholars and students a brief yet substantive look at the Soka Gakkai International (SGI). The first part offers an overview of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition that leads to Nichiren<sup>1</sup>, the thirteenth-century Japanese religious reformer whose teachings are the foundation for this contemporary lay Buddhist association. The second part sketches a history of the founding and development of the SGI itself, including its activities in the United States, where Nichiren Buddhism took root in the early 1960s. Charts and illustrations highlight contextualizing elements to this presentation.

The followers of Nichiren in his own time came from a wide range of educational and social backgrounds, a characteristic also found in the modern SGI membership. The accessibility of Nichiren Buddhism pervades both the religious and social dimensions of the movement, as described by sociologist of religion Karel Dobbelaere:

Nichiren Buddhism sees itself as the “Buddhism of sowing.” This means that it is always possible to implement a new cause which will produce a new effect. Indeed, thanks to the core practice, the chanting of *daimoku*, followers may “change poison into medicine,” i.e., create value whatever their karma happens to be. Inspired by the teachings of Nichiren, SG thus recommends to its members a methodical way of life: self-analysis within a religious framework. It is a Buddhism of action which seeks to promote a “human revolution,” and the organization helps its members by establishing a “pillar” to guide and support them. Nichiren Buddhism and its expression through SG offers its followers the necessary tools to realize their own revolution and, in this way, to transform their environment simultaneously.<sup>2</sup>

It is hoped that this presentation may yield some insight into the breadth of the Lotus Sutra-based tradition on which the SGI is founded.

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<sup>1</sup>Some literature and many contemporary followers, including those in the SGI, refer to Nichiren Daishonin (literally, Nichiren the Great Sage).

<sup>2</sup>Karel Dobbelaere. *Soka Gakkai: From Lay Movement to Religion*. USA: Signature Books/CESNUR, 1998. 77–78.

## Early Buddhism

Buddhism generally is believed to have arisen in what is now India during the sixth or fifth century B.C.E. from the teachings of the historical Buddha, or “enlightened one.” Shakyamuni<sup>1</sup> (literally, “sage of the Shakya tribe”) was kept in isolation during his youth by his father, but excursions beyond the palace walls led to one of his most fundamental realizations: Life inevitably manifests suffering and impermanence. This is represented in Buddhism as the four sufferings of birth, aging, sickness and death which affect every living being, without exception. Choosing to confront this dilemma, Shakyamuni renounced his claim to his father’s throne and embarked on a search for a way to transcend the sufferings of life. After years of practicing the most extreme forms of asceticism and no closer to an answer, he concluded that the path to understanding lay neither in self-denial nor in the pleasure-filled life of his youth, but in between them, in a Middle Way. Abandoning his ascetic practice and meditating deeply through the night, he “destroyed his remaining impurities, eliminated his false views, and experienced the goal of Buddhahood (literally ‘the state of being awakened’).”<sup>2</sup>

Thus began the career of one of the great religious figures of history. By all accounts he was a man of boundless compassion and peace, “a thinker of giant proportions who, for the sake of people in ages to come, persisted in his efforts to ... free human existence from all impediments.”<sup>3</sup> By the time of his death, thousands had been converted to the new wisdom he propounded. Some joined his monastic order, renouncing the secular world; but many did not, remaining as “householders” amidst the flows of society.

Within a year of Shakyamuni’s death, most scholars agree, the first of four Buddhist councils was held. It apparently was highly successful in solidifying

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<sup>1</sup> His family name was Gautama, “most excellent cow” in the context of cow veneration, and his given name was Siddhartha, “one who has achieved his goal.” See Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Charles S. Prebish, *Historical Dictionary of Buddhism* (Metuchen, NJ and London: Scarecrow Press, 1993) 4.

<sup>3</sup> Daisaku Ikeda, *The Living Buddha: An Interpretive Biography*, trans. Burton Watson (New York and Tokyo: John Weatherhill, Inc., 1976) vii.

the teachings, unifying the Buddhist order and providing a practical foundation for the conduct of its affairs. Approximately 100 years later a second council was convened to resolve a dispute over rules of monastic behavior. Over the ensuing century and a half, as Buddhism continued to spread, further doctrinal disputes arose. By the third council, circa 250 B.C.E., sponsored by King Ashoka<sup>4</sup>, the one thousand monks in attendance sought to clear up confusion and to correct misinterpretations of the Buddha's teachings.

Within a century of that third council a major new movement had developed, called Mahayana (literally, "greater vehicle"). Rejecting what they perceived as isolationism and exclusivism in the traditional schools, its adherents introduced the idea of a practice exemplified by dedication to the salvation of others as well as the self—the Bodhisattva way—which they believed more accurately reflected the intent of Shakyamuni than the self-oriented practice of the traditionalists. Mahayana spread rapidly along the Silk Road into China, then into Korea and Japan. The schools of the earlier tradition, collectively called the Nikaya sects because they are based on the Nikaya sutras, spread into Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup> Tantric Buddhism, also known as Vajrayana or Esoteric Buddhism, developed around 600 C.E. and became a formalized stream within Mahayana that spread to Central Asia, China, and Tibet, where it has remained an important influence. In India itself, Buddhism was gradually absorbed into Hinduism, virtually ceasing to exist as an independent faith.

## The Development and Spread of Mahayana Buddhism

Mahayana, within a few hundred years of its inception, split into two main schools. The first, Madhyamika, is grounded in the work of the great Indian philosopher Nagarjuna (c. 150–250) who elaborated the doctrine of *sunyata*, the non-substantiality or "emptiness" of all phenomena. (This influential concept is discussed further in the section "Nichiren and the Core of

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<sup>4</sup> King Ashoka was seminal in the spread of Buddhism throughout India; he sent Buddhist emissaries as far as Syria, Egypt, and Greece. Though devoted to the spread of Buddhism, he did not enforce Buddhism as a state religion, but protected the religious freedoms of the Jains, Brahmans, Ajivikas, and others in his kingdom.

<sup>5</sup> The only surviving sect from this group is the Theravada school.

Mahayana Doctrine.”) The second school, Yogachara or Consciousness-Only school was based on yogic practice. For them, all phenomena arise from the *vijnana*, or consciousness, and the basis of all functions of consciousness is the *alaya-consciousness*.<sup>6</sup>

Both schools spread into China, where there is a reliable record of a practicing Buddhist emperor by around 250 C.E. T’ien-tai, a major school within the Mahayana tradition, was founded in China by Chih-i (538–597). This school emphasized doctrinal studies and meditative practices based on the Lotus Sutra. It also taught the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, the unification of the three truths and the six stages of practice. After traveling to China for further studies, Saicho (767–822), also known as the Great Teacher Dengyo, returned to Japan in 805 and established what later became known as the Tendai sect.

According to Chih-i’s interpretation, the Lotus Sutra proclaims the Buddha nature to be inherent in all human beings. This provided the theoretical basis for Nichiren’s 13<sup>th</sup>-century assertion that all people can attain Buddhahood as they are and within the context of the phenomenal world. He taught that everyone has the potential to attain Buddhahood “in this lifetime” and “in one’s present form” without going through countless lifetimes of Buddhist austerities. Nichiren was among the first to embrace the idea that Buddhahood is a real, rather than theoretical, possibility for all human beings and, within the context of feudal Japan, asserted the revolutionary view of the equality of men and women.<sup>7</sup>

## Nichiren’s Life and Teaching

Nichiren was born on February 16, 1222, in a small fishing village named Kominato. His parents sent him at the age of 12 to a local temple to begin his formal education. There he perfected his skills in reading and writing in both Japanese and Chinese, the latter being the language of official and scholarly communication at the time. The temple where he studied, Seicho-ji, belonged to the Tendai school which nominally adhered to the teachings handed down

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<sup>6</sup> See the Nine Consciousnesses below in the section “Understanding How and Why Self-Transformation is Possible.”

<sup>7</sup> See “The True Aspect of All Phenomena,” in *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, 385.

from the T'ien-t'ai school in China. In fact, the T'ien-t'ai teachings had become mixed with rituals from other religious schools—a syncretism typical of Japanese Buddhism in the thirteenth century. Nichiren was disturbed by this confusion of doctrines and decided at age 16 to continue his religious studies rather than return to secular life.

Nichiren later recounted that he had prayed to the Bodhisattva Space Treasury to become the wisest person in Japan and had been presented with “a great jewel as brilliant as the morning star.”<sup>8</sup> He set out in 1239 to find documentary confirmation of his understanding at the centers of Buddhist learning elsewhere in Japan. During the succeeding fourteen years that he spent studying Buddhist texts and doctrine, he became increasingly critical of the various Buddhist schools, finally becoming convinced that the Lotus Sutra (*Hokekyo* in Japanese) was the only teaching that fully expressed the truth to which he had been awakened. He returned to Seicho-ji in 1253 and, shortly afterward, very early in the morning of the twenty-eighth day of the fourth month, chanted the *daimoku*—the invocation of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo—for the first time, proclaiming that this phrase embodied the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra, that is, the ultimate truth of all phenomena.<sup>9</sup>

Preaching this doctrine at the temple where he had been educated precipitated the first of many persecutions and attempts on his life. Persevering with equanimity despite such hardships, he continued to teach that chanting the phrase Nam-myoho-renge-kyo would lead practitioners to perceive their essential, enlightened nature and thereby attain Buddhahood. In order to enable people to sustain their practice after his death, he inscribed a mandala called the Gohonzon as the focus for the religious practice of his followers.<sup>10</sup> He taught that chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to the Gohonzon would enable people to discover their own essential unity with the ultimate reality of the universe. According to Nichiren, this practice, when rooted in

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<sup>8</sup> See “Letter to the Priests of Seicho-ji,” in *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, 650.

<sup>9</sup> A detailed discussion of the meaning of the phrase *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* can be found in Richard Causton, *The Buddha in Daily Life: An Introduction to the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin* (London: Rider, 1995) 96–222.

<sup>10</sup> In the Japanese word “Gohonzon,” “go” means worthy of honor and “honzon” means object of devotion.

faith and sustained by study and compassion for others, is the way of enlightenment.

Nichiren spent his life teaching this doctrine, always supporting the spiritual growth of his lay followers as well as training young priests. In his final years Nichiren appointed six senior disciples to carry on his teaching. On his deathbed, he named one of them, Nikko, as his successor.<sup>11</sup> He died on October 13, 1282.

### Nichiren and the Core of Mahayana Doctrine

“All existence is suffering and change.” This is the first of Shakyamuni’s “four noble truths.” The second is, “Suffering is caused by craving.” But why *do* we selfishly crave? Why are we so foolish? The answer given by Buddhism is that our minds are filled with illusion, fictions that we embrace as true. The aim of Buddhist practice, therefore, is to enable us to see through these illusions, to arrive at a correct understanding of the way things are and free ourselves from selfish craving and, hence, from suffering.

Nagarjuna developed the concept of “non-substantiality” in connection with those of dependent origination and the nonexistence of self-nature. Because phenomena arise only by virtue of their relationship with other phenomena, they have no distinct nature or existence of their own; and there is no independent entity that exists alone, apart from other phenomena. Nagarjuna described a Middle Way that regards the categories of existence and nonexistence as extremes and aims to transcend them. The practical purpose behind the teaching of non-substantiality lies in eliminating attachments to transient phenomena and to the ego, or the perception of self as an independent and fixed identity.

Chih-i asserted that the Buddha nature was possessed by both sentient and non-sentient beings. Thus every individual fully possesses the ultimate truth of the Buddha nature and is interconnected with all of existence. Furthermore, anyone has the potential to discover this reality at any time.

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<sup>11</sup> Within a few years, the other five senior priests had broken with Nikko. They contested—and the surviving sects they founded still contest—the authenticity of the documents naming Nikko as Nichiren’s successor.

The continuity of this thought is evident in Nichiren's explication of the Middle Way. Working within the framework established by Nagarjuna and reprised by Chih-i as the doctrine of the "three truths," Nichiren stated that: "Life is indeed 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. It is the mystic entity of the Middle Way that is the ultimate reality."<sup>12</sup> In describing the Middle Way in this fashion, Nichiren emphatically affirms that the Buddha nature is the fundamental reality of our lives and of the world in which we live.

It is not necessary to flee from the everyday world or eliminate all desires in order to perceive this reality and attain enlightenment. In place of the very complex and primarily linguistic and philosophical formulations that had developed over the centuries and effectively excluded the general populace from enlightenment—either because they focused on a monastic vocation or simply because they offered no accessible means to achieve this end—Nichiren offered a strikingly new method of self-awakening. Indeed, he sought to demonstrate that all people—female or male, upper class or lower, intellectual or not—can attain enlightenment in this life as they are.<sup>13</sup>

This is possible, according to Nichiren, because a correct understanding of the Middle Way reveals that although a person's life manifests both impermanence and non-substantiality, it equally manifests the unchanging reality of all existence. Thus it is the fundamental reality of all human existence and in no way the exclusive possession of a select few. For Nichiren, the phrase *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* expresses this truth in its purest form since it both invokes and embodies the ultimate reality that pervades the universe. This is the basis for his assertion that reciting the daimoku would enable an individual to connect with this reality of one's life and the universal Buddha nature.

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<sup>12</sup> "On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime," in *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, 3–4. The three truths are non-substantiality, temporary existence, and the Middle Way. See Glossary in *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, 1279.

<sup>13</sup> Nichiren expanded the earlier theoretical understanding that all people possess the truth of the Law into a concrete practice that would enable all people to actively experience this reality. From a Mahayana view, Theravada and most esoteric Buddhist schools lead only those individuals who first purge themselves of desire to attain wisdom and some form of personal enlightenment.

As mentioned earlier, in order to facilitate this practice Nichiren inscribed the Gohonzon—a written, thus physical manifestation of his life and enlightenment.<sup>14</sup> The Gohonzon serves as the mandala, the “object of devotion,” for those who practice Nichiren Buddhism. It serves as a focus for them in seeking to discover their own enlightened reality through chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and reciting portions of the Lotus Sutra. According to Nichiren, it is not merely the individual’s life that is transformed through this practice; because of the interconnectedness of all life, society and the environment, too, will be reshaped on their most fundamental level.<sup>15</sup>

## Understanding How and Why Self-Transformation Is Possible

Two concepts central to Nichiren’s Buddhism that are also keys to an understanding of the connection between the individual, the everyday world and enlightenment are the Ten Worlds and the “nine consciousnesses.”<sup>16</sup>

The expression “Ten Worlds” describes potential states of life, or categories/realms of being, experienced in every human life. They range from the lowest—hell, hungry spirits, animals and *asuras* (literally, belligerent demons)—through human beings (tranquility), heavenly beings (rapture), voice-hearers (learning) and cause-awakened ones (realization), to bodhisattvas and, ultimately, Buddhas (enlightenment). Not moods we pass through, they are patterns that tend to dominate one’s entire existence. Although each person tends toward one particular state more than any other, whatever one’s life-condition at a given moment, it can instantly fall into a lower state or rise to a higher one. The aim of Nichiren Buddhism is to establish and maintain the predominance of the state of Buddhahood.

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<sup>14</sup> The Gohonzon is inscribed in Chinese and Sanskrit characters. It is kept in an altar and is the focus of the daily religious practice of Nichiren’s followers in the Soka Gakkai International (SGI). Nichiren discusses both the form and significance of the Gohonzon in his treatise, “The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind Established in the Fifth Five-Hundred-Year Period After the Thus Come One’s Passing,” in *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, 354–77. He provides a specific description of the meaning and placement of the inscribed characters in “The Real Aspect of the Gohonzon,” *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, 831–33.

<sup>15</sup> A full discussion of this mutual transformability can be found in Nichiren’s treatise “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land” in *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, 6–30.

<sup>16</sup> See Causton, *The Buddha in Daily Life*, 35–78.

The states of hell through heavenly beings are commonly known as the “six paths,” because they are the worlds through which unenlightened beings transmigrate. Hell, for example, is a realm of utter anguish and misery, where rage is often manifested in self-destructiveness and where there seems to be no possibility of positive interaction with the external world. The rapturous state of heavenly beings, on the other hand, might be characterized by someone who has had some personal desire fulfilled. In each of these cases, as in all of the “six paths,” one is unable to recognize the transitory and illusory nature of one’s perceptions.

The four higher realms—learning, realization, bodhisattva and Buddhahood—are also known as the “four noble worlds.” They have in common an effort first to understand, then to transform, oneself and one’s environment. In the worlds of learning and realization, people make an effort to grasp the deeper reality of their own existences and the lasting truth within life. In so doing, they begin to perceive the causes of suffering and work to transform that suffering into the basis for personal growth. While in the world of learning, one strives for self-development by learning from the ideas, knowledge and experience of others. In the world of realization, insight begins to emerge through one’s own contemplative interaction with the surrounding world based on an understanding of causality.

While people in the latter two states are primarily concerned with their own development, those in the higher, altruistic realm of bodhisattvas pursue enlightenment while devoting themselves to compassionate acts for the sake of others. Buddhahood, the highest realm, is characterized by boundless compassion, wisdom, joy and the courage and strength to surmount all hardships in order to help others attain this state. It is important to note that this highest life-state is not at all separate from the other nine. Rather, it manifests itself wholly *in* the other nine, and functions to transform and harmonize them, making them all the means to compassionate understanding and action rather than potential obstacles to it.

A correlative theory, that of the “nine consciousnesses,” offers a Buddhist explanation of what, in Anglo-Western thought, is usually conceived of as the mind, but it provides a means of understanding subjective and precognitive existence as well as everyday mental functions. The first five in this articulation correspond to the five senses; they are the gateways to the

external world. The sixth consciousness integrates the sensory data from the first five and allows us to form judgments and carry out our daily activities.

The seventh consciousness, by contrast, is the site at which a person's inner life unfolds and is, to a degree, unfettered by external conditions. This abstract mind, or *mano*-consciousness, allows one to reflect on one's existence rather than simply to deal with external matters of daily life. This is where one's sense of self, or separateness, comes into being. *Mano*-consciousness spans both the conscious and subconscious dimensions of life.<sup>17</sup>

The eighth consciousness is called the storehouse or *alaya*-consciousness since this is where one's karma is stored. According to both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, karma is the cumulative effect of the causal forces produced by everything one thinks, says and does. The karmic sum of these actions influences everything a person experiences.

The deepest and, from the Buddhist perspective, most important level of consciousness is called the ultimately pure or *amala*-consciousness, because this level of consciousness is not affected by one's karma. It is this ninth level that unites all human beings with the reality of the universe. As already indicated, Nichiren taught that chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo enables an individual to reach this level of consciousness and draw forth her or his enlightened nature (the tenth realm). Perceiving life from the vantage point of the ninth consciousness, one is able to purify all the functions of the other eight levels and manifest one's Buddhahood.

These interrelated concepts, the Ten Worlds and the "nine consciousnesses," describe the total cognitive faculties and interactive potentials of the individual. Each person always possesses all ten life-states, but the dominant one at any given moment affects the other nine. If Buddhahood dominates, it will function to purify the lower realms. Its counterpart—tapping into the ninth level of consciousness—enables one truly to see and transform one's

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<sup>17</sup> Scholars of psychology and of Buddhism have posited correspondences between the theory of the nine consciousnesses and concepts elaborated by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Buddhism's sixth consciousness, for example, has been correlated with Jung's idea of ego-consciousness, the seventh with Jung's concept of personal unconscious, and the eighth with Jung's collective unconscious. For more information concerning these connections, see Thistle N. Stacks, "The Nine Consciousnesses and Jung's Theory of the Collective Unconscious," *Seikyo Times* December 1996: 6–13.

reality. The course of one's life is neither fixed nor preordained, although it is clearly influenced by the causes one has made from the infinite past. These Buddhist concepts suggest that instead of feeling trapped in any given life situation, one can break free of those restrictive circumstances. Because of the inseparability of one's inner, subjective life and the external, objective world, through Buddhist practice it is possible to positively transform one's life and environment and create happiness for oneself and others. Nichiren's teachings aimed to enable all human beings to do precisely this.

## The Origins of Soka Gakkai and the Growth of Its Activities

The SGI owes its existence first and foremost to a pair of remarkable men, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–1945) and Josei Toda (1900–1958), who became the first and second presidents of Soka Gakkai in Japan. In 1928, Makiguchi, a Japanese schoolteacher and philosopher of education, embraced Nichiren Buddhism and persuaded Toda, his friend and supporter in educational matters, to join him in conversion. Two years later, Makiguchi and Toda jointly founded the Soka Kyoiku Gakkai (Value-Creating Education Society), an organization imbued with the spirit of Nichiren Buddhism but dedicated to educational reform based on Makiguchi's pedagogical ideas.<sup>18</sup> The Society's inaugural act on November 18, 1930 was to publish Makiguchi's four-volume work, *Soka kyoikugaku taikei* (System of Value-Creating Pedagogy)—the expression of a lifetime of educational thought and practice.

In 1937, two notable changes occurred in the Society. The first took place when Makiguchi began to give more attention to the possibilities inherent in organized action and launched a new, more public phase of its growth.<sup>19</sup> The second change was in focus. He had initially regarded educational reform as the basis for social reform, but after 1937, he came to see religious reform as

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<sup>18</sup> For Makiguchi, the fundamental criterion for value-creation (“*soka*”) was whether something adds or detracts from, advances or hinders the human condition. The ultimate goal of value-creating education is to foster people of character who strive for the greatest good—peace—and are committed to protecting life's dignity. Further information on Makiguchi and the other leaders of the Soka Gakkai can be found in Richard Wilson, “The Three Presidents,” *Seikyo Times* November 1994: 18.

<sup>19</sup> For further information on these events, see Dayle M. Bethel, Preface to *Makiguchi the Value Creator* (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, Inc., 1994) 96.

more important.<sup>20</sup> The organization's primary focus became the propagation of Nichiren's Buddhism as the basis for personal and societal reform.

In addition to the increasing confidence Makiguchi and Toda gained in their faith, the new focus of the Society was also influenced by the rise of militarism in Japanese social and political life in the 1930s:

The militarists embodied everything Makiguchi had fought against all his life. ... The combination of growing conviction in Buddhism and a growing sense that educational reform could not succeed in the climate of those days led to the transformation of the Soka Kyoiku Gakkai from an educational organization into a religious one.<sup>21</sup>

From the late 1930s to early 1940s, as the organization grew to a membership of about 3,000 followers, the Soka Kyoiku Gakkai and Makiguchi in particular began to attract the attention of the state authorities. Makiguchi, with the support of other leaders in the Society, vigorously opposed the military government's efforts to impose the overall authority of state Shinto in religious and social affairs. For this he was disavowed by the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood, which chose to cooperate with the wartime regime. Makiguchi also denounced the Japanese war effort, calling it a national catastrophe. In 1943, Makiguchi, Toda, and the entire top leadership of the organization were arrested as "thought criminals," on charges of *lèse-majesté* and violating the Public Security Preservation law (Peace Preservation law).<sup>22</sup> Despite frequent interrogation and torture, Makiguchi refused to compromise his beliefs and died at the Tokyo Detention House in 1944 at the age of 73.

Most of the Society's remaining leadership recanted their faith to gain release from prison, but Toda did not. During his incarceration, profound spiritual experiences convinced him that Nichiren Buddhism was unassailable in terms of both doctrine and practice, and that he himself had a unique mission to

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Wilson, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> For more information on the historical events surrounding this episode, see Tsuyoshi Nakano, "Religion and State," in *Religion in Japanese Culture: Where Living Tradition Meets a Changing World*, ed. Noriyoshi Tamaru and David Reid (Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1996) 115–36.

spearhead a new movement of unprecedented scale. Rebuilding and expanding the Soka Kyoiku Gakkai as a means to that end became his ultimate goal. Released from prison in July 1945, bankrupt and with broken health, he nonetheless began almost immediately to reconstruct the organization.<sup>23</sup>

One of his first steps was to drop “Kyoiku” (“education”) from the organization’s name. It became simply Soka Gakkai (Value-Creating Society) and definitively shifted its focus from educational reform to the propagation of Nichiren Buddhism. Toda became the organization’s second president in 1951. The Soka Gakkai’s membership expanded rapidly in the following years and by 1957, the year before his death, Toda had led the organization from the few thousand members who gathered after the end of World War II to a membership of 750,000 households ... an astounding growth of more than 250 times in a dozen years.

Daisaku Ikeda, Toda’s leading disciple, was inaugurated as the third president of the Soka Gakkai in 1960 at age 32. He held this post until 1979, when he became honorary president of the Soka Gakkai in Japan. He became president of the Soka Gakkai International, formed in 1975 as an association linking the many national organizations around the world, and continues to serve in that capacity, communicating the spirit and practice of Nichiren Buddhism in modern terms.

Two notable trends have marked the era of Ikeda’s leadership. The first is the continued growth of the organization, which currently numbers approximately 12 million individuals, with more than a million practicing in countries other than Japan.<sup>24</sup> Within a few months of his inauguration in 1960, Ikeda traveled abroad, something Toda had never been able to do. He formed the first overseas chapter in the United States, where a few immigrants, primarily the Japanese wives of American servicemen, were struggling to maintain their practice. Current membership in the United States is about

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<sup>23</sup> Toda regarded General Douglas MacArthur as embodying the function of the Buddhist deity, Brahma, because he established religious freedom in Japan. See “The Thousand-mile Journey,” in *The Human Revolution*, Volume 1:95 (New York: Weatherhill, 1972)

<sup>24</sup> As of 2004, there are SGI members in 188 countries and territories around the world.

300,000. The large majority is non-Japanese; indeed, the ethnic makeup of the membership is highly diverse. As Clark Strand writes in the Winter 2003 issue of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Quarterly*: “Soka Gakkai has attracted real diversity among its membership, and no other American Buddhist group has. ... Racial diversity is in some sense the birthright of the Soka Gakkai because of its origins in the prophetic, socially engaged Buddhism of Nichiren, and ultimately because of the Lotus Sutra itself, which posits the fundamental equality of all beings.” The organization has grown similarly in other countries.

The second notable trend under Ikeda’s leadership has been the “opening up” of the organization—the development of working relationships worldwide with individuals and organizations on issues of global concern. This cooperation falls into three broad, overlapping categories: peace, culture and education.

Peace activities include the SGI’s active involvement with the United Nations as a non-governmental organization; annual peace proposals by Ikeda submitted to the UN; peace education programs; inter-religious dialogues; fund-raising efforts in support of the UN’s refugee relief and other humanitarian programs; anti-war and anti-nuclear weapon exhibits, petition drives and publications, usually cosponsored with like-minded organizations.<sup>25</sup>

Several affiliated institutions focusing on peace research, peace activities and inter-cultural dialogue have also been established. These include the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century ([www.brc21.org](http://www.brc21.org)), which promotes women’s leadership for peace, supports education for global citizenship, and fosters community-building—locally and globally—through dialogue; the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, which works with university researchers on ways to apply Eastern, especially Buddhist philosophical approaches to contemporary problems; and the Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research ([www.toda.org](http://www.toda.org)), which promotes peace initiatives at national, regional and international levels by encouraging and proposing concrete

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<sup>25</sup> A fundamental impulse for these activities comes from Toda’s 1957 declaration calling for the total abolition of nuclear weapons.

strategies that can be translated into action, in areas such as human security, social justice and global citizenship.

In the cultural arena, the SGI sponsors international friendship exchanges as well as world peace and cultural festivals. In Japan, the Soka Gakkai, under the aegis of the Min-On Concert Association, regularly sponsors performance tours by world artists. The Tokyo Fuji Art Museum serves a similar function in the art world. In France, the Victor Hugo House of Literature holds a collection of some 1,900 items related to Hugo's life and work, including several articles that have been named as national treasures. On a more community-based level, activities in the United States include music, dance, and other creative presentations that serve to foster cross-cultural understanding and appreciation, including the International Committee of Artists for Peace (ICAP) which provides peace education through the performing arts.

Finally, in the area of education, we come full circle. Makiguchi's thoughts on education<sup>26</sup> are thriving in Japan in the Soka Schools system which extends from kindergarten to university-level education. Soka University of Japan currently has academic exchanges with over 70 colleges and universities around the world. Soka kindergartens have been established in Hong Kong and Singapore. Soka University of America (SUA), an independent, co-educational institution of higher education, consists of a graduate school in Calabasas, California, which offers a master's degree in second and foreign language education, and a liberal arts college in Aliso Viejo, which offers a bachelor's program in liberal arts with concentrations in the humanities, international studies and social and behavioral sciences.

SGI's educational activities focus on global concerns such as ecology and sustainable living, human rights and a culture of peace.<sup>27</sup> Whether exhibits or

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<sup>26</sup> The philosophy of value constructed by Makiguchi underlies all of his pedagogical work. For a succinct discussion of its basic elements, see Bethel, *Makiguchi*, 49-57. A detailed elaboration of his theories can be found in *Education for Creative Living: Ideas and Proposals of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi*, ed. Dayle M. Bethel and trans. Alfred Birnbaum (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1989).

<sup>27</sup> For information on SGI exhibits and activities in the United States, contact the SGI-USA Communications Department, 606 Wilshire Blvd., Santa Monica, CA 90401 or see <[www.sgi-usa.org](http://www.sgi-usa.org)>.

discussion forums, humanistic learning characterizes this aspect of the SGI's efforts.

There is a fourth area of activities, though only in Japan: political engagement. From 1955, during Toda's leadership, the Soka Gakkai fielded individual candidates for elective office on both the local and national levels. Later, under Ikeda's leadership, the Komei (literally, "clean government") coalition was organized. It became a full-fledged party, Komeito, in 1964. Given the Soka Gakkai's experience of religious persecution during World War II, Toda and Ikeda saw the need for such a political party to represent the marginalized voices of the general populace and raise the level of discourse in Japan's fledgling, postwar democratic system. Komeito formally separated from the Soka Gakkai in 1970. New Komeito is currently the third leading party in Japan and a member of the coalition government. The Soka Gakkai maintains its right to express an ethical stance on political issues.

### **Break in Relations Between the SGI and Nichiren Shoshu**

Just as in other religions with strong lay organizations, conflict and tension existed between the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood and the SGI. A defining event occurred in November 1991, when the high priest of Nichiren Shoshu excommunicated the entire lay association of the SGI, effectively banning the 12 million SGI members from participation in religious activities sponsored by the sect. The clergy also refused to allow new members of the SGI to receive the Gohonzon, which is central to the religious practice instituted by Nichiren.<sup>28</sup>

Although the causes for this separation are complex, and the context colored by Japanese history as well as by traditions within the Nichiren Shoshu sect, the conflict stems from the priesthood's claim that the lay organization must submit to the absolute authority of the high priest and, further, to the superiority of the priesthood as interpreter of Nichiren's teachings. The SGI took the position that the priesthood had lost contact with the basic egalitarian spirit of Nichiren's teaching. This, the SGI claimed, had led away from Nichiren's injunction to work compassionately for the happiness of all

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<sup>28</sup> In response to these actions, virtually the entire membership of the SGI signed petitions requesting that the high priest resign.

humankind, toward an insular doctrine of priestly heritage that would secure an authoritarian, clerical control over the religious practice and activities of all lay believers—including their right to share their faith with others.

In his book on the development of the SGI in Britain, sociologist Bryan Wilson offers this brief commentary on the situation:

The priesthood was a conservative body, small, secluded, and with horizons narrowly circumscribed by the centuries of Japanese insulation from the external world. Soka Gakkai International was a movement of revitalization, adapted to modern conditions, pursuing from the outset a policy of expansive growth, and quickly acquiring an international clientele and orientation. The priesthood was characteristically authoritarian, status conscious, and hierarchic; the lay organization was populist, egalitarian, and unwilling to concede the sort of status differences, which were endemic in conceptions of priesthood.<sup>29</sup>

The SGI maintains that Nichiren recognized no distinction in capacity or faith between priests and lay persons, and that his fundamental intent was to encourage all people who sincerely seek to follow his teaching. As a result, there seems to be a permanent rupture between the SGI and the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood—they operate as fully independent entities.<sup>30</sup> Given this reality, the SGI independently began to issue the Gohonzon to its members in late 1993. The Nichiren Shoshu priesthood insists that the SGI has no right to disseminate or interpret Nichiren Buddhism or provide the means for individuals to take up their practice of Buddhism, while the SGI continues its worldwide efforts to inform people about this faith and to promote mutual respect and understanding among individuals and communities.

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<sup>29</sup> Bryan Wilson and Karel Dobbelaere, *A Time to Chant: The Soka Gakkai Buddhists in Britain* (London: Oxford University Press, 1993) 233.

<sup>30</sup> In Japan, reformist priests have supported the SGI and aligned their temples with the position of the lay organization. Beyond this, the schism has prompted a dramatic increase in the freedom with which the SGI is able to pursue interfaith dialogue on peace, human rights and environmental concerns.

## Human Revolution: Encouraging Spiritual Transformation as the SGI Grows

The ongoing efforts of individual SGI members seeking spiritual self-reformation underlie all the activities described above. The term long used by the organization for this self-reformation is “human revolution.” Drawing on Nichiren’s teaching, the SGI affirms that such inner change invariably leads to a transformation of the outer world as well. As Ikeda has written:

The movement that we advocate for a human revolution does not stop at a change of personality, but extends to a change in the most basic attitudes and perceptions about the nature of life itself; it is a change of the entire human being. I know and believe as the firmest article of faith that the human revolution of a single person can change the fate of a nation, our world, and all humanity.<sup>31</sup>

The activities of the SGI-USA and all SGI member organizations currently reflect a renewed awareness that the twofold transformation of self and environment depends on the individual growth and happiness of their diverse membership. In 1995, the SGI adopted a charter that embodies this awareness and now serves as a standard for the future development of its member organizations.<sup>32</sup> While large-scale activities still occur, the self-directed, inner transformation of the individual has unquestionably become the primary focus of the SGI’s activities throughout the world. The SGI maintains that such individual changes, reinforcing each other, can eventually effect a deeply positive change in humanity and the nature of societies worldwide. Since such changes are never easy, the SGI aims to provide an environment in which mutual support for this most challenging endeavor is available.

Bryan Wilson and David Machacek write that: “The concept of ‘human revolution’ encompasses goals of reforming institutional structures, but asserts that the way to reform social institutions—to improve education,

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<sup>31</sup> Daisaku Ikeda, “The Human Revolution: A Prerequisite for Lasting Peace,” *The McGill Journal of Education* Fall 1987: 257.

<sup>32</sup> *Global Citizens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 3.

promote tolerance, protect the environment, and end war—is through individual enlightenment. Thus, reform is directed foremost to individual lives and by extension from individual lives to communities, nations and the world.”<sup>32</sup>

Interpreting the Parable of the Medicinal Herbs from chapter 5 of the Lotus Sutra as a poetic depiction of a culture of peace, Daisaku Ikeda writes:

The parable describes a variety of plants watered by a cloud that envelops the Earth: “Though all these plants and trees grow in the same earth and are moistened by the same rain, each has its differences and particulars.” In terms of Buddhism, this image depicts how all people can benefit from the impartial Buddhist law and, like the three kinds of medicinal herbs and two kinds of trees, can attain a state of enlightenment that is expressive of their unique character and individuality. ...

Here the blessings of the sun and the rain depict equality under the heavens, while the earth that sustains the plants depicts equality on Earth. In Buddhism, this represents the true path of culture whereby we respect each other’s differences and celebrate our diversity while equally sharing the life-sustaining gifts of Earth and the firmament.

The SGI aims to apply a philosophy of humanism, rooted in respect for the sanctity of life, in the fields of peace, culture, and education. In this way, we seek to foster a robust and universal culture of peace. These three fields correspond to the Buddhist concept of the “three virtues,” those qualities inherent in humankind identified by Nichiren as most worthy of respect: a sense of responsibility, compassion, and wisdom.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> “The SGI’s Peace Movement” in *Buddhist Peacework: Creating Cultures of Peace*, ed. David W. Chappell (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1999) 133.

# **Charter of the Soka Gakkai International**

## **Preamble**

We, the constituent organizations and members of the Soka Gakkai International (hereinafter called “SGI”), embrace the fundamental aim and mission of contributing to peace, culture and education based on the philosophy and ideals of the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin.

**WE RECOGNIZE** that at no other time in history has humankind experienced such an intense juxtaposition of war and peace, discrimination and equality, poverty and abundance as in the twentieth century; that the development of increasingly sophisticated military technology, exemplified by nuclear weapons, has created a situation where the very survival of the human species hangs in the balance; that the reality of violent ethnic and religious discrimination presents an unending cycle of conflict; that humanity’s egoism and intemperance have engendered global problems, including degradation of the natural environment and widening economic chasms between developed and developing nations, with serious repercussions for humankind’s collective future.

**WE BELIEVE** that Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, a humanistic philosophy of infinite respect for the sanctity of life and all-encompassing compassion, enables individuals to cultivate and bring forth their inherent wisdom and, nurturing the creativity of the human spirit, to surmount the difficulties and crises facing humankind and realize a society of peaceful and prosperous coexistence.

We, the constituent organizations and members of SGI, therefore, being determined to raise high the banner of world citizenship, the spirit of tolerance, and respect for human rights based on the humanistic spirit of Buddhism, and to challenge the global issues that face humankind through dialogue and practical efforts based on a steadfast commitment to nonviolence, hereby adopt this Charter, affirming the following purposes and principles:

## **Purposes and Principles**

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 grass-roots exchange, thereby contributing to individual happiness.
5. SGI shall, through its constituent organizations, 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 organizations 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 environment.
10. SGI shall contribute to the promotion of education, in the pursuit of truth as well as development of scholarship, to enable all people to cultivate their characters and enjoy fulfilling and happy lives.

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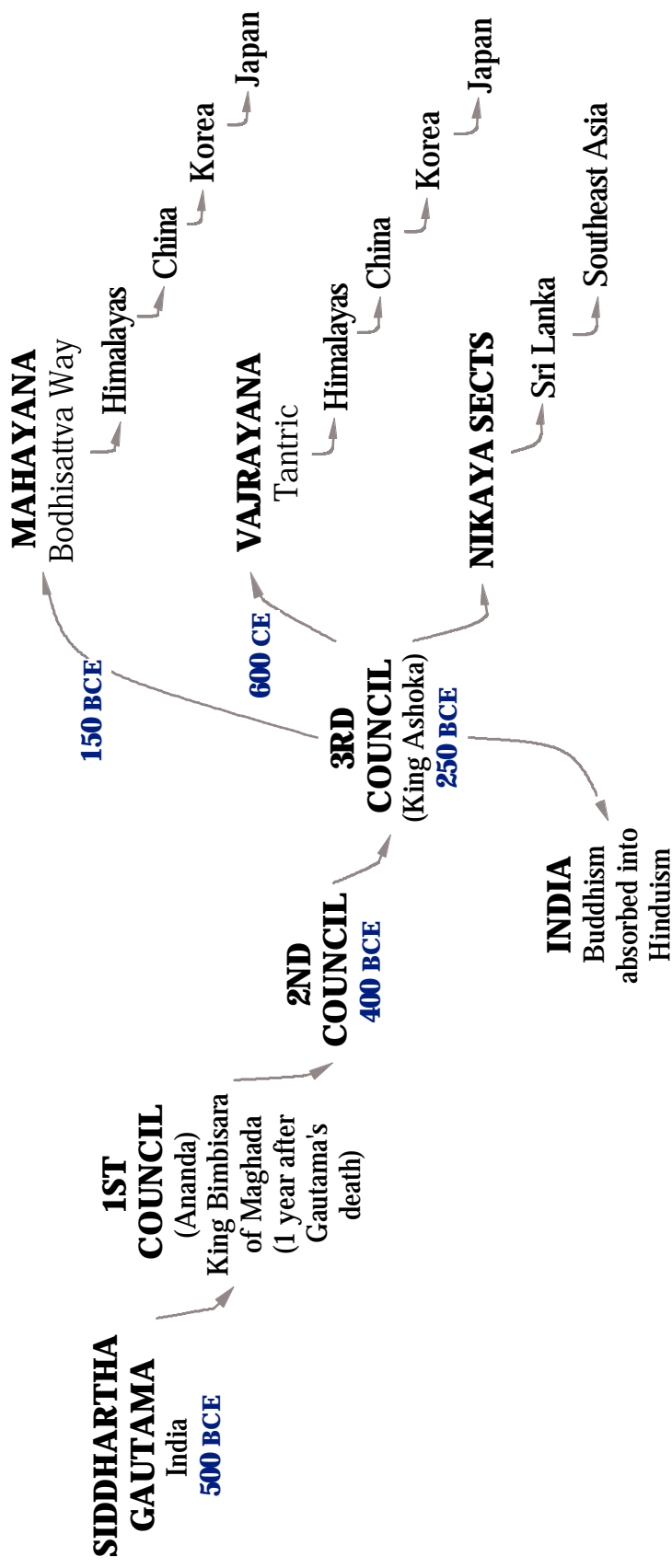
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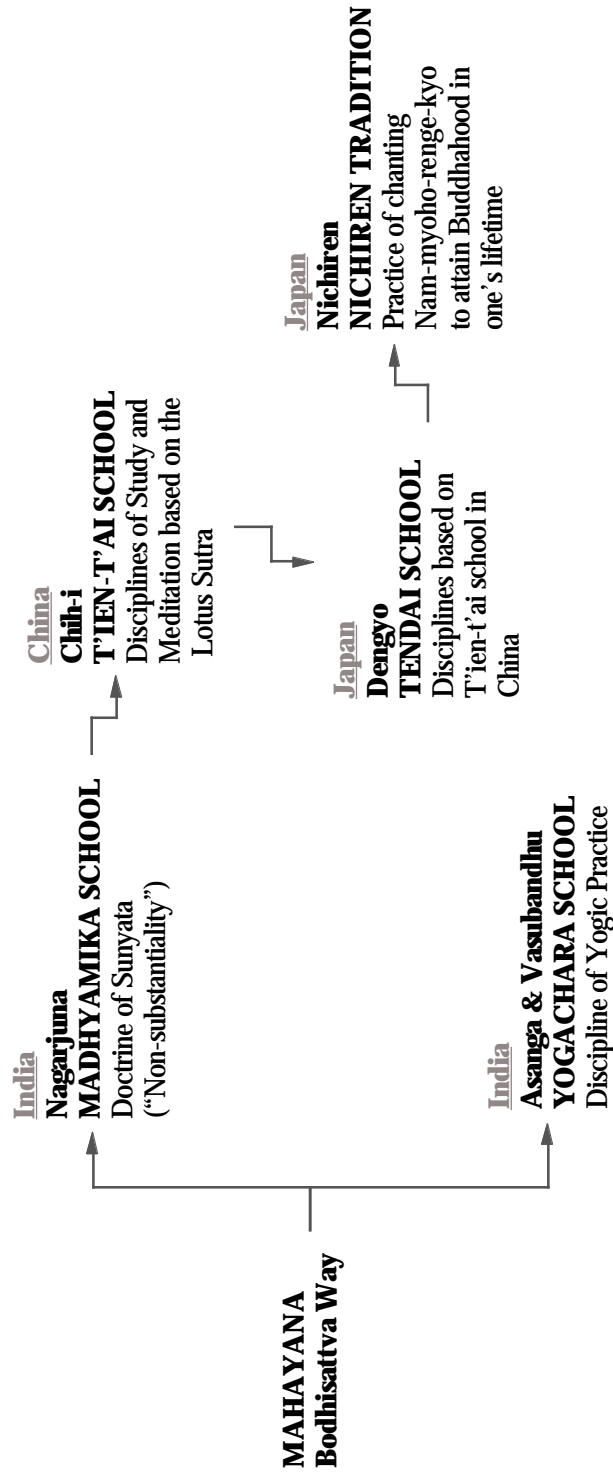
# DEVELOPMENT OF BUDDHISM



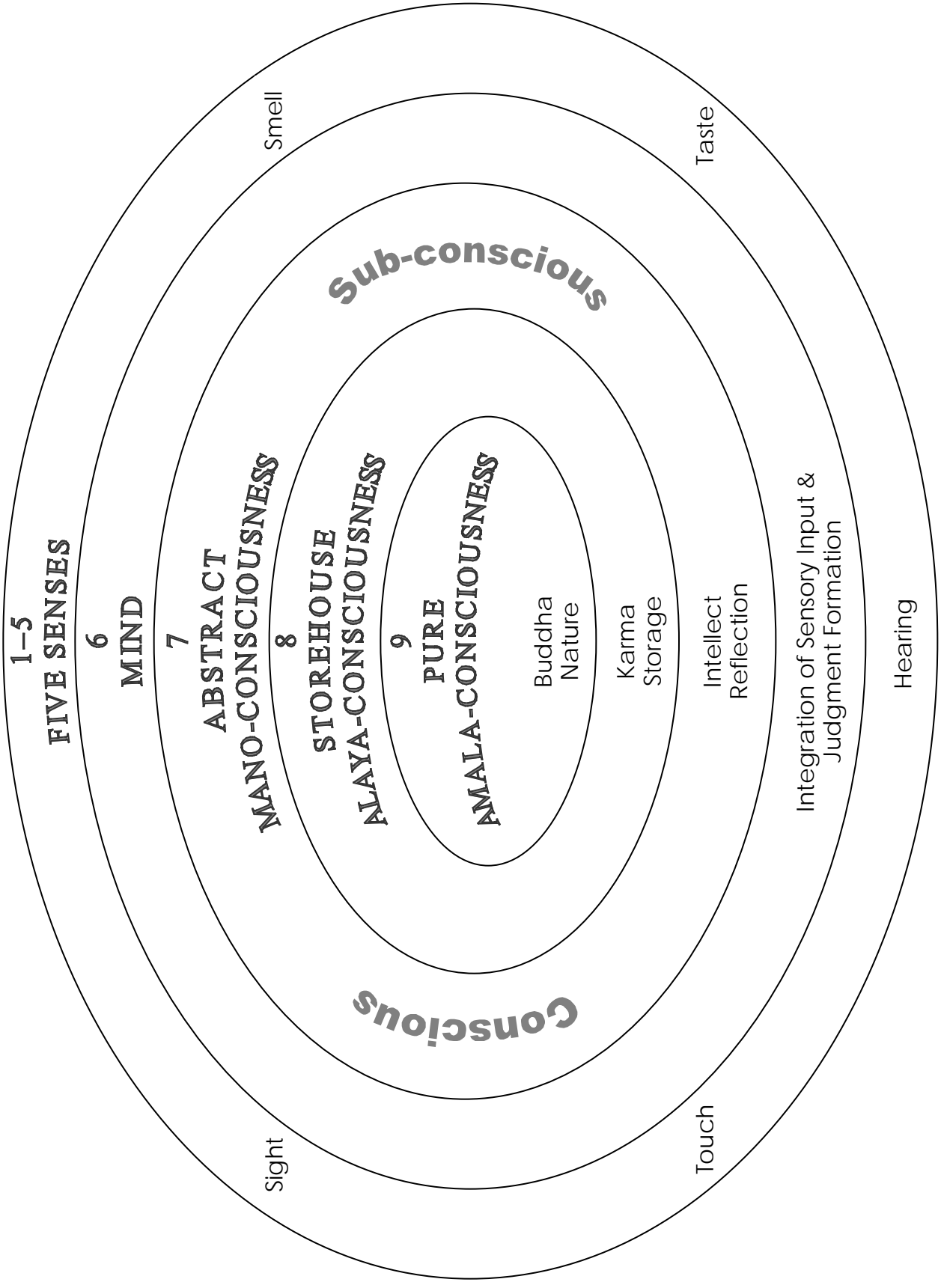
# LIFE OF NICHIREN

YEAR	EVENT
1222	Born in Kominato (present Chiba Prefecture) – 2nd month, 16th day
1233	Enters local temple of Seicho-ji
1237	Receives tonsure and enters priesthood
1239	Studies Buddhism throughout Japan
1253	Proclaims Nam-myoho-renge-kyo – 4th month, 28th day
1260	Submits “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land” <i>(Rissho Ankoku Ron)</i>
	Attack at Matsubagayatsu; disciple killed
1261	Exiled to Izu Peninsula (until 1264)
1271	Tatsunokuchi Persecution, Sado Exile (until 1274; then hermitage at Minobu)
1279	Atsuhara Persecution; inscribes Dai-Gohonzon
1282	Names Nikko as successor; dies 10th month, 13th day

# Mahayana Buddhism

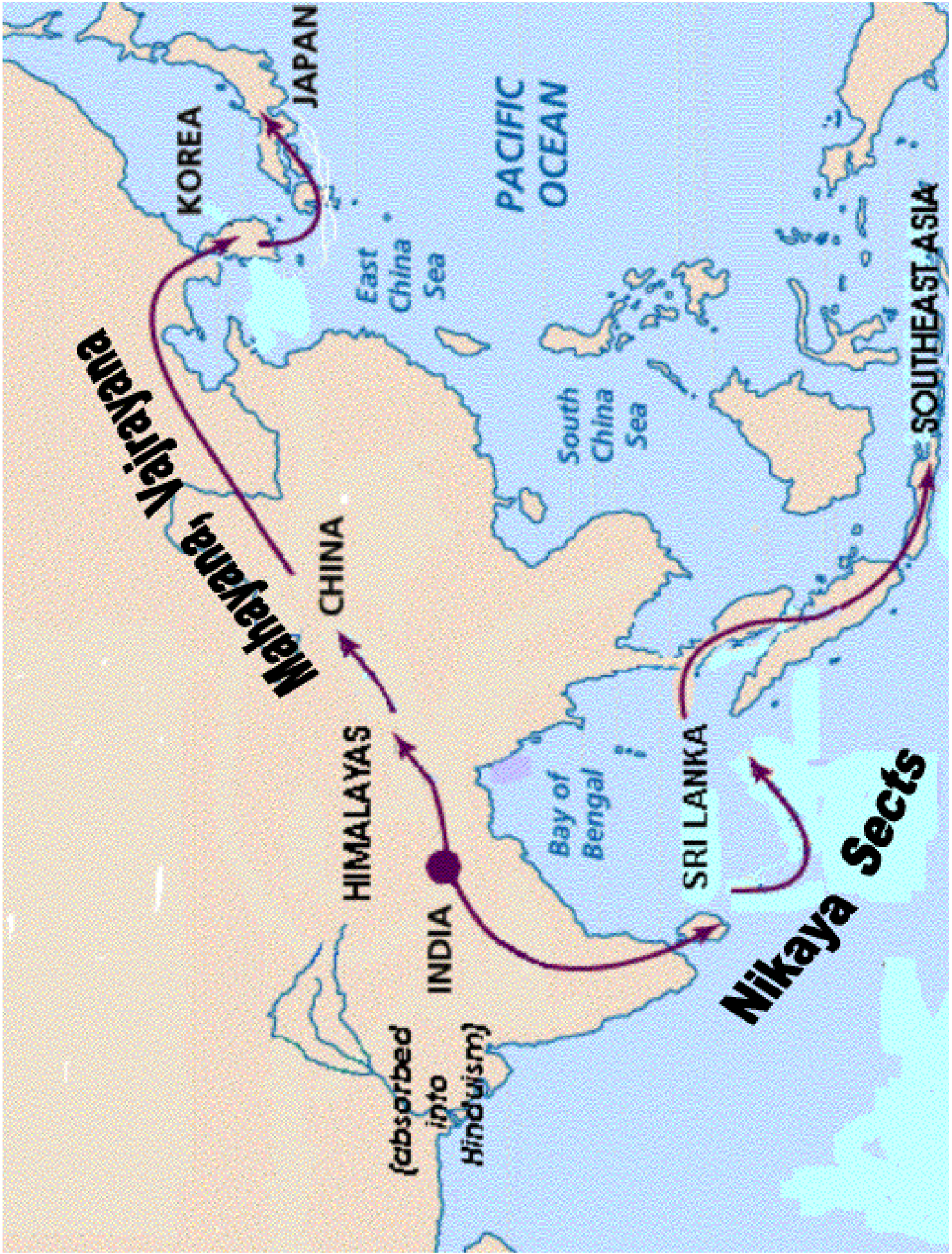


# NINE CONSCIOUSNESSES



## **SGI IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>EVENT</b>
1928	• Makiguchi & Toda Embrace Nichiren's Teachings
1930	• Soka Kyoiku Gakkai (Value-Creating Education Society) Founded, Makiguchi Becomes 1 <sup>st</sup> President
1937	• Focus Changes From Educational to Religious Reform
1943	• Makiguchi & Toda Oppose Government's War Efforts • Nichiren Shoshu Priesthood Disavows Makiguchi • Makiguchi and Toda Arrested
1944	• Makiguchi Dies in Prison at Age 73
1945	• Toda Released from Prison • Organization Renamed Soka Gakkai
1951	• Toda Becomes 2 <sup>nd</sup> President of Soka Gakkai
1958	• Toda Dies, Membership Exceeds 750,000 Households
1960	• Ikeda Becomes 3 <sup>rd</sup> President of Soka Gakkai & Establishes First Overseas Organization
1975	• Founding of SGI (Soka Gakkai International), Ikeda Becomes SGI President
1991	• Separation From Nichiren Shoshu Priesthood



# TEN WORLDS

**FOUR  
NOBLE  
WORLDS**

**10 - BUDDHAHOOD**

*Enlightenment*

**9 - BODHISATTVA**

*Compassion*

**8 - CAUSE-AWAKENED ONES  
(Realization)**

*Insight from Own Experience*

**7 - VOICE-HEARERS**

**(Learning)**

*Learning from Others*

**6 - HEAVENLY BEINGS**

**(Rapture)**

*Transient Joy*

**5 - HUMAN BEINGS**

*Tranquility*

**4 - ASURAS**

**(Belligerent Demons)**

*Ego - Centeredness*

**3 - ANIMALS**

*Foolishness*

**2 - HUNGRY SPIRITS**

*Greed*

**1 - HELL**

*Rage*

**SIX  
EVIL  
PATHS**