



Creating Value, Empowering Individuals: *Soka Gakkai* in the Light of Engaged Buddhism

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Abstract:

This paper explores how humanistic values lead to individual empowerment. Engaged Buddhism, a vehicle of Buddhism, defines how traditional Buddhist teachings confront contemporary issues. Considering Engaged Buddhism, various socio-political, economic, and environmental movements have undertaken to address corruption in our lives. Here, we will make a brief tour of *Soka Gakkai*. How does it stand for Engaged Buddhism? The contemporary Japanese social outlook is reflected in the Peace Constitution. The term *Soka Gakkai* demonstrates the functions of a society. We already said Buddhism supports secularism. *Soka Gakkai* ensures secularism and rejects communalism. *Soka Gakkai* focuses on implementing value for every individual and considers a person part of a single community. This philosophical movement aims to transform the culture of violence into a culture of tranquillity with positive initiatives.



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Introduction

At the outset, I want to be succinct in introducing *Soka Gakkai*. *Soka Gakkai* is a lay Buddhist global community founded in Japan. It is an epitome of Engaged Buddhism. Why did this organization gain international recognition, and how does this community confront social crisis? All these will be discussed after the introductory part. In the 21st century, people can easily access everything with the help of science and technology. The globalization culture makes people socio-economically advanced, but what is at stake? In this contemporary period, people's materialistic nature thwarts their spiritual nature. The materialistic nature causes the proliferation of social and environmental crises. Here, a question comes- how can we confront these worldly crises? In this regard, we must understand the causes of violence, war, terrorism, ecological destruction, global warming, and other issues. People shape their values and behaviour through factors such as religion and morality. In a particular region, people have different values, customs, and cultures within their respective communities, and we should be generous towards each other's communities if anything else triggers worldly turbulence. We can observe a profound transformation in ideology, culture, and society during this period. We live a fast-paced life, but one can ask oneself, 'Am I really happy?' Is material happiness absolute? Drastic situations, such as social conflicts, mainly arise from our inner impurities. Most people emphasise personal happiness and remain ignorant of others' well-being. Buddhism is a religion that focuses on the eradication of suffering. Buddhism teaches us that real happiness comes from within, not from material possessions. We mainly suffer due to the inner defilements and ignorance about the true nature of the self and the world. The essence of Buddhism provides a framework for ethical living that nurtures personal well-being and social harmony. Before beginning to discuss *Soka Gakkai's* aim and activities within the arena of Engaged Buddhism, it is important to pause on Engaged Buddhism.

Engaged Buddhism and its features:

During the Vietnam War in 1954, Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese veteran monk, first coined the term 'Engaged Buddhism'. We have heard about different traditional schools of Buddhism, but what is Engaged Buddhism? Buddhism is a religion that primarily focuses on alleviating suffering. In this sense, it is already engaged. Then, in what sense did Hanh use this term? Hanh perceived that in contemporary times, people are ill due to a lack of communication, craving, hate, wrong perceptions, a hectic life, and the fear of death. These psychological conditions lead to war, terrorism, suicide, destruction of the ecosystem, etc. Such social conditions affect human life, collective welfare, and community relations. Some people, individually and collectively, started a movement to address contemporary issues like violation of human rights, violation of Women's rights, unemployment, war, partial treatment in case of healthcare, environmental despoliation, etc. Some ordained monks and some lay Buddhists are advocates of this movement. They responded to these global issues by applying traditional Buddhist teachings, primarily ethical disciplines. They believed Buddhism is not just meant for personal practice but provides a framework for social and political engagement.

It is fathomable that Buddhist ontological teachings act as a foundation for spiritual and social activism. To be an Engaged Buddhist, one has to be spiritually advanced with three factors:

- The path of mindfulness has the most felicity during the contemporary period. All Engaged Buddhists practice mindfulness meditation to respond to contemporary crises with patience and generosity. Mindfulness helps us deal with suffering rather than escape from it. We predominantly suffer due to unawareness of reality and our actions. Social transformation is possible with mindful living. Mindful living means being aware of the present moment and the circumstances.
- The second characteristic of Engaged Buddhism is interconnectedness. The mindfulness training helps us be aware of our dependence on other conditions of our existence. We are all interconnected- this understanding persuades some responsible Buddhists to respond non-violently to worldly sufferings. If any living being suffers, the senses of compassion and empathy invigorate some Buddhists to become social, environmental, or political activists. Engaged Buddhism is all about communal living with peace and harmony. Communal means to consider the whole world as a *Sangha*.
- The third characteristic of Engaged Buddhism is both world-affirming and spiritually transcendent. Engaged Buddhists, unlike traditional Buddhists, come forward to help others, not for gaining merit for oneself, but rather, they help others as they feel their pain. Practical activism is their motto: reconstructing a peaceful society rather than liberating from this *samsara*.

Buddhist Understanding of Value Orientation:

Buddhism wants to make people aware of human values. The value crisis has caused social change, a materialist outlook, and social disintegration in the contemporary period. Many thinkers perceive traditional values as perilous; hence, we are experiencing such drastic social problems. Buddhist teachings are pragmatic rather than focusing solely on religious practices such as rituals, observances, and worship. A responsible person must know the boundary between traditional values and materialistic values. Life is all about value orientation; each person's experiences vary according to how they implement their values. Considering the theory of *Madhyamapratipada* in the contemporary context, our lifestyle should be moderate, neither influenced by materialistic values nor engaged in the social sphere. Buddha, in his discourses, never emphasised the idea of liberation from this *samsara*. He reiterated the liberation from negative thoughts and embraced spiritual values. It means one's evil thoughts lead to evil actions, which cause suffering in one's life as karmic consequences. Material needs must be served as necessary for greater development, i.e., spiritual advancement. Buddhism emphasised that our personal value system will undergird spiritual values beyond materialism. Everything possesses a good and an evil nature, and material needs qualify as good nature, but materialistic values affect one's overall health and collective well-being. In this regard, we can remind you of a saying of Buddha:

*Tinadosanikhattaniicchadosaayajpaja
tasma hi vigaticchesudinnajbotimahapphalaj.
Dhammapada. (Verse 359)*

It means that desires or greed are among the causes of negative thoughts. Negative thoughts ruin our overall well-being, so we must know our needs and spiritual values.

SokaGakkai as Engaged Buddhism:

Japan is well-known for its vast majority of Buddhist followers. Though this country also has so many social challenges, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, a Japanese educator, founded a non-governmental organisation and a lay Buddhist movement named 'Soka Gakkai' in 1930. This organisation gained international recognition due to its Engaged Buddhism standard. The term "Soka" is a Japanese word that means "Value Creation", and the term "Gakkai" stands for "Society". The three aspects of SokaGakkai are mindful living, faith in Nichiren Buddhism, and social activism. Here, a question arises: In what sense is SokaGakkai identified as an engaged Buddhist movement? In this regard, Christopher S. Queen upheld three criteria for identifying examples of Engaged Buddhism-

1. The leaders are reformers with a recognised Buddhist identity.
2. The doctrine is a modern reinterpretation of ancient Buddhism.
3. The institution as a manifestation of Buddhist symbols in the public sphere."

Now, let us interpret whether this movement fulfils the above criteria. Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, founder and first president of Soka Gakkai, was a lay Buddhist. Josei Toda and Daisaku Ikeda, his successors and presidents, were also lay Buddhists, and the present president, Minoru Harada, is also a lay Buddhist leader of this ongoing religious movement. Nichiren Buddhism, another sect of Buddhism, is the foundation of Soka Gakkai. Nichiren Buddhism promotes faith in the Lotus Sutra, chanting the Daimoku, or title of the Lotus Sutra, "*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*", and practising harmless activities can improve one's nature. These three ideals can help us attain Buddhahood in this life. While relating the third criterion of Engaged Buddhism, we can find Soka Gakkai in its flag, which uses a tricolour of blue, yellow, and red, and in between, there is a *dharmacakra*. This tricolour blue, yellow, and red represents peace, glory, and victory respectively, and seeks happiness and peace for every person. This lay Buddhist community emphasises the idea of value creation. Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, this community's first president, focused on a humanistic outlook. He recognised that everything must be valorised to bring forth its original nature. Suppose we value everything in our lives, even trouble; we gradually learn how to respond to it. Through faith and practice, one can realise one's/inherent dignity to imply inner strength for creating a better society.

Importance of Chanting in the Soka Gakkai Movement:

Chanting is special in every religion according to different cultures, traditions, and regions. Chanting is common in Buddhism, both in monastic and lay communities. But the foremost question is, in what context is chanting performed? Chanting is mainly performed during ceremonies and devotional practice in temples and homes. Monastics practice chanting as a part of their daily activities to advance spiritually. Here, a question may arise: how does the practice of chanting promote social activism? As *Soka Gakkai* is a social activist movement centred on its social welfare activities and on chanting the mantra *Namu Myoho Renge Kyo* to transform the human spirit, *Soka Gakkai* rooted its activities in the Socially Engaged Buddhist global order while following the Nichiren tradition of devotion to the Lotus Sutra. A cogent response to the above question about the social dimension of chanting the Daimoku of the Lotus Sutra is that the power of chanting fosters a sense of harmony with neighbours and nations. The followers of *Soka Gakkai* are asked to practice chanting daily as it causes personal transformation through

courage, compassion, and wisdom. Chanting is regarded as the way to cleanse inner impurities of anger, greed, and delusion to actualise Buddhahood. When the followers of *Soka Gakkai* chant the sutra, it gives them a sense of collective energy, supports one another's spiritual growth, and shares their struggles. Chanting is done to recharge one's positive energy and face problems with full responsibility for one's actions. It means that chanting is one of the paths of human revolution, i.e., fundamentally changing the sense of self-centeredness into a sense of living for others. In this respect, we can remind you of a saying of the Buddha from the *Dhammapada*:

*Na tam mata pita kayiraanneva pi canataka
Sammapanibhitamcittamseyyasonamtatokare.* (Verse 43)

This expression states that a well-directed mind always engages in welfare activities. Buddhism believes that spiritual transformation precedes social transformation. The practice of chanting is a method to change one's life and social conditions. Chanting gives us the courage to create positive values in our lives and communities.

The Concept of Ten Worlds in *Soka Gakkai*:

Soka Gakkai is critical to Nichiren Buddhism, and the members of this community are influenced by the concept of Ten Worlds. *Soka Gakkai* engages in social and political activities, believing that it can transform society into a Buddhist realm. Buddhism believes that social chaos is the manifestation of inner impurities. Specifying this thought, we can adduce the first verse of the *Dhammapada*:

*Manopubbangammadhamma
Manosetthamanomaya
Manasacepadutthena
Bhasativakarotiva
Tatonamdukkhamanveti
Cakkamvavahatopadam.* (Verse 01)

This verse clearly expresses that our mind is the forerunner of all phenomena. If we purify our thoughts with wisdom and compassion, our actions will always lead to beneficence.

The Ten Worlds are not ten different realms; instead, these are ten states or conditions one can experience. Our life is a series of moments and experiences, and the ten states of the mind are responsible for beneficial and harmful actions. The ten worlds range from lower states of life, or the Six Paths, to higher states of life, or the Four Noble Worlds. The Six Paths are Hell, Hunger, Animality, Asuras, Humanity, and Heaven. Voice-Hearers, Cause-Awakened Ones, *Bodhisattvas*, and *Buddhahood* are the Four Noble Worlds. Each state is inherent in every individual, and one can be in any of these realms through their thoughts and actions. Here, a question comes up: Are any of these states permanent? A cogent response would be "all these 'worlds' coexist in the minds of humans, but when one world manifests itself more strongly, the other nine worlds are generally latent." So *Soka Gakkai*'s goal is to promote social transformation through the idea of the human spirit. The key aspect of the concept of Ten Worlds is Mutual Possession. It means existing in hell, which contains the potentiality for the other nine states. The state of Buddhahood can be attained even while remaining in the most negative circumstances. The leaders of *Soka Gakkai* sponsored a series of cultural meetings and

meditation retreats to encourage their followers to reflect on a new way of thinking to save ourselves from our evil thoughts. They believe no external force causes harm to oneself and the world. We should advance ourselves to support the development and culture of each other's societies while recognising differences.

***Soka Gakkai* and Buddhist Humanism:**

Soka Gakkai does not believe in rebirth in the sense of taking birth in Buddha's 'Pure Land'. This earth can be a land of purity, peace, education, and compassion. This movement focuses on transforming the culture of inner impurities like greed, delusion, and violence into a culture of dignity, freedom, and peace. A relationship between *Soka Gakkai* and Buddhist Humanism is that both philosophical movements promote human welfarism. *Soka Gakkai* enriches its intervention by imparting socio-ethical education, valuing each individual, and cultivating peace. Buddhist Humanism focuses on humans' worth and their capacity for positive change. We live in a human-centred world. If we think we have the potential to save ourselves from our immoral actions, then we can do it. The members of *Soka Gakkai* base their activism on a humanistic approach, i.e., this humanistic outlook must be present in every aspect of life, including education, economic development, and politics. Women's empowerment, gender equality, and the promotion of human rights and environmental development are central to *Soka Gakkai*'s work. Here, a reflection can be put on light- does a humanistic approach promote ecological values? An environment is a complex of humans, animals, and plants, and humans, with their rationality and spirituality, must empower themselves to care for the planet. Humanism prompts individuals to be aware of addressing environmental issues, and the social, cultural, and moral values must be the foundation for environmental values. As human beings have the potential to create and destroy, one must intervene in the creative nature in a proactive way to combat environmental issues. Buddhist Humanism emphasizes human dignity and individual responsibility for social transformation.

Human Revolution: A Way to Human Security

Daisaku Ikeda reified the idea of social transformation through the lens of self-improvement with the idea of Human Revolution. Human Revolution means people can revolt against negative traits like anger, fear, and selfishness and motivate themselves to achieve inner transformation. Inner transformation is a process of bringing forth one's positive traits through actions. The human revolution calls for a radical transformation of the present condition, in which we break free from the shackles of the "lesser self" and express our "greater self". We know about many kinds of revolutions, such as political, scientific, social, and industrial. However, no other revolutions bring much better for the society as long as people are free from their evilness. So, the human revolution is the foundation for any other revolution, because each worldly crisis arises from inner defilements. Positive thinking can make a better society. Every religion directs us on how to live a harmonious life, but everything starts with our way of thinking. Every individual has the potential to bring forth their inner good through behaviour and actions, before what is prioritised is our willpower and belief to be in a pure, positive, and enlightened condition of life. The state of Buddhahood is not something enigmatic. In simple terms, Buddhahood is possible when we shift our thinking from personal concerns to thinking

and doing for others. This attitude of thinking strengthens and accelerates the state of Buddhahood. Everything needs a definite path to actualise the highest potential of life. Here, a question arises: What are the ways to express Buddha's nature by itself? According to Nichiren Buddhism, we cannot change a society within a few days; it is hard to do so. We can take responsibility to change the nature of our negative past causes right from this moment. Every change starts with awareness about mental and social conditions. We must develop a robust vitality that helps us tackle our problems with a sense of inner liberation. In this regard, Daisaku Ikeda stated, "A great human revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation and, further, will enable a change in the destiny of all humankind."

Here, a question may arise in our minds: Does human revolution guarantee human security? Human revolution encompasses personal transformation and social transformation. Social transformation is possible by revising the social, political, and economic infrastructure. Human security means that the government must fulfil the basic needs of every individual. The government must reform the social institutions to improve education, cease violence, and protect the environment. Human security promotes people's safety in an environment, mainly in their working place, to get care for their health and be protected from violence. Thus, human revolution leads to a radical transformation of one's mind and the society where human security is always prioritised.

Implementation of "Values" for a Moderate Lifestyle:

Makiguchi believed that chanting, study, and practice are ways to enrich one's personality, eradicate the suffering of others, and frame respect and equality as essential conditions for humankind. Before all these, we should create positive value for individuals and society to face daily challenges. Makiguchi countered the Western concept of human values, i.e., "truth", "beauty", and "good", with "beauty", "gain", and "good". Why did he substitute gain in place of truth? Makiguchi perceived that people are generally self-centred; they improve and create new things to meet their demands. But humanity urges a balanced life between personal and social happiness. We can attain true happiness in this life when we value "beauty" and "gain" for an individual's life and practice "good" as a social value. *Soka Gakkai* promulgated their notion in every part of this world with the thought that Buddhahood is already within us in a deep sleep and needs to be awakened to lead a balanced life. A value-creation society mainly promotes education as the psychological need to enter a spiritual realm. We need to be revolt means human revolution in contemporary days, emphasizing human security as a key to achieving true happiness. Implementing values in the right way surely reflects transformation, from an individual to a whole community. The value "good" supports welfare activities. This value makes the other two values "beauty" and "gain", possible. A question always comes up: why do humans revolt against social challenges? The human revolution in *Soka Gakkai* qualifies one's humanity to root out violence and injustice through peace cultivation. A rich life is always directed to a transformation of one into many. Spiritual enhancement is based on both the rights of psychological needs, i.e., education, and physiological needs, i.e., food, healthcare, and shelter. If social infrastructure fails to meet basic needs, it needs to be reformed. When everything becomes a culture, then why not the human spirit become a culture?

Soka Gakkai and Buddhist Democracy:

Soka Gakkai stands against both economic systems- socialism and capitalism. They upheld a concept of 'Buddhist Democracy'. How is it conducive for humankind? Buddhist democracy is interchangeable with Humanistic Socialism. In both cases of Capitalism and Socialism, a single unit will benefit and promote its authority. However, Buddhist democracy stands for the means that welfare actions have the only aim to prioritise social harmony. Buddhist democracy derives from the Buddhist doctrines of *Madhyamapratipada* and *Pratityasamutpada*. *Madhyamapratipada* stands for a balanced life. In this sense, Buddhist democracy solves the practical imbalances between socialism and capitalism. *Pratityasamutpada* reminds us of our socialistic nature, which impacts our karmic consequences. Among these three values, "beauty" and "gain" justify capitalism, and "good" justifies socialism. In this period, people always competed between winners and losers. This system is a condition of capitalism, and its bitter competition divides society into two groups. This kind of government provides essential facilities to a specific group of people, empowering some deprived people to achieve true freedom and equality. Daisaku Ikeda insisted that Buddhist democracy is possible when a government leader has moral responsibility and a compassionate outlook toward all living beings, with minimal conditions such as quality healthcare, a sustainable environment, liberal education, and equal treatment. If these conditions are fulfilled, unfair economic practices and social discrimination can be overcome.

Education and Self-empowerment:

The *Soka Gakkai* adopted some charters in 1995, updated in 2021, which give education prime importance. A peaceful, multinational world is not utopia; it is possible with an enlightened citizenry. Education plays a vital role in transforming a limited, parochial worldview into a sense of seeing beyond the self and understanding the unity of humanity. Education is not just a way to get well jobs and fulfil our desires, but it is the way to overcome inner defilements and be in a world of peace and tranquillity with others. Social consciousness emerges from an educated mind, and it can kill the twin evils of hatred and greed that stem from an ignorant mind. Humanistic education is one of the most important subjects imparted in *Soka Gakkai* educational institutions. They hired teachers who met these criteria: they should be sensitive and caring. Desire and curiosity can enhance an enthusiastic mind's ability to discover strengths and weaknesses. The *Soka Gakkai* leaders understood that formal education alone cannot revive a mind with social responsibility; humanistic education is the key to intertwining self-empowerment and social well-being. Why does self-empowerment prioritize in this movement? *Soka Gakkai* members realised that self-empowerment advances the path to a better understanding of the world.

Self-empowerment does not mean domination; rather, it enhances our spirituality and enables us to engage in welfare activities. Education makes the invisible things visible; likewise, self-empowerment transforms powerlessness. Self-empowerment is the bedrock to understanding that one is fully responsible for one's destiny. A person with deep faith, good education, a benign nature, and hard work can be a master of one's life and has the consciousness of social responsibility. *Soka Gakkai* reiterates the importance of educational intervention in supervising values on the path of empowerment. A formal education cannot

inspire a mind to empower oneself with its ability. Humanistic education is the way to actualise our capability and power to contribute to a greater purpose, and every purpose with value can signify a transformation of an environment. If asked why we need education, a general answer is to live a dignified life, but a sound answer is to realise the truth: real happiness, which is achieved through education. A global citizen is always focused on humanistic values rather than materialistic values.

Does *Soka Gakkai* support Absolute Pacifism or Conditional Pacifism?

Absolute Pacifism is the ideology where war and violence are wrong in principle, and violence must be avoided in every situation; whereas, Conditional Pacifism supports violence if it is justified in certain circumstances. It means that violence is not wrong in a specific problem. Both of these stands fall under the category of moral prohibition. Here, the question is what standpoint does this religious group follow? Like every country, Japan is a victim of a social crisis. The leaders of *Soka Gakkai* have also been politically active with their renowned party, Komeito. In particular circumstances, their position sounded like a Conditional Pacifist. In general, this socially engaged Buddhist community promotes the message of absolute pacifism with multi-nationalism. Robert Kisala, a leading scholar of Japan, believes that maintaining absolute pacifism is possible only for those who want to be within the outer limits of society. Other than this, when a movement seeks to shift in a more realistic way towards the centre to influence mainstream society, a conditional stance is expected for the sake of national defence and social order. Again, let us consider another reflection from a Buddhist scholar, Richard Hughes Seager, who notes that *Soka Gakkai* bases its movement on three resolutions: absolute pacifism, the sanctity of human life, and human dignity. Many thinkers criticised this organisation for their centric nature and community-based activities, but this allegation remains unsolved. Daisaku Ikeda practised many peace-related activities, but his position in a definite way can be considered multi-nationalism rather than pacifism. Being a Buddhist as well as a political activist, he wanted to cease the root cause of the trouble. According to him, a social activist and spiritualist must learn to act with "soft diplomacy"ⁱⁱⁱ rather than completely deny pacifism. Engaged Buddhism embraces the culture of maintaining modesty with majesty to reduce the threat of war between nations. World peace can be accomplished with the foundation of personal transformation. When the people of nation-states become "global citizens," this leads to a transition from nation to multinationalism.

Conclusion:

As per our concern, we are so conditioned that our social consciousness goes on a holiday. *Soka Gakkai* and some other Engaged Buddhist communities felt the need to uplift our spirituality to cease social turbulence. We are responsible for these catastrophes and have the potential to cease this world fire. Everything starts with values, i.e., oneself, friends, communities, and nations. Considering that each life is valuable and purity lies in this world, we can transform one's selfish nature into a compassionate one. The self-empowerment concept not only specifies material satisfaction, but also allows one to have a clear picture of one's position and self-confidence to overcome all adversities. Indeed, humankind is responsible for today's deplorable conditions. *Soka Gakkai*, with its idea of self-empowerment, reiterates that we can create this world into a

joyful world. Unlike the interpretation of Pure Land Buddhism, Engaged Buddhism proceeds to turn the horrendous conditions of the world into a world of true peace, harmony, and generosity. *Soka Gakkai International members* in Australia, Southeast Asia, and Canada advance their actions based on the ontological dimension of Buddhism, i.e., Karma and responsibility. *Soka Gakkai* believes that Karma has cumulative effects from all actions, good or bad. One's spiritual upliftment is the foundation for one's actions and well-being. This movement explains how chanting and faith can lead to Buddhahood in this realm. Human Revolution shapes the path for better actions for the nation, and education and self-empowerment are pillars for accepting each other's culture and differences. With these diversities, we learn to improve life for all of humanity. It is our responsibility to kill our evil nature so that our inherent potentiality for Buddhahood can be manifested. As a concluding remark, I would like to adduce a portion from the Lotus Sutra:

“The rain falls everywhere,
coming down on all four sides.
Its flow and saturation are measureless,
reaching to every area of the earth,
to the ravines and valleys of the mountains and streams,
to the remote and secluded places where grow
plants, bushes, medicinal herbs,
trees large and small,
a hundred grains, rice seedlings,
sugar cane, grape vines.
The rain moistens them all;
None fails to receive its full share.”

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