

Daisaku Ikeda: A Tribute

We join members of the Soka Gakkai around the world in paying tribute to the extraordinary life and contributions of our mentor, Daisaku Ikeda, Honorary President of the Soka Gakkai and President of the Soka Gakkai International (SGI).

Daisaku Ikeda was a Buddhist philosopher, peacebuilder, educator, author and poet who dedicated his life to promoting peace through dialogue and spearheaded the development of the [Soka Gakkai](#) as a community-based Buddhist organization of over 12 million members worldwide. Mr. Ikeda passed away peacefully on November 15, 2023, at the age of 95.

Born on January 2, 1928, in Tokyo, Japan, Daisaku Ikeda was the fifth son of a large family engaged in seaweed farming. In his youth, he suffered from chronic tuberculosis and was not expected to live beyond 30.

Mr. Ikeda survived a tough childhood that was overshadowed by escalating nationalistic militarism. The education system of the time aimed to produce loyal subjects trained to serve the interests of the state. When he was 13, Japan entered World War II.

Mr. Ikeda's elder brothers were all conscripted. His eldest brother, who had shared with the young Daisaku what he witnessed of the true horrors of the war in China, was killed in the Imphal Campaign in Myanmar. Witnessing his mother's grief when news of her son's death was finally broken to her in 1947, he acutely felt the cruelty, futility and waste of war.

My mother is also the starting point of my activities for peace. She remained brave and undaunted though four of her sons were taken away from her, one after another, to fight in World War II. But when, after the war, she received the news that her eldest son had been killed in the fighting, she was heartbroken. I will never forget the sight of her pain and sorrow at that moment as long as I live.

[\["The Spirit of Reverence for Life," essay on Wangari Maathai\]](#)

A few months later, together with fellow members of a small reading group that exchanged books saved from the ruins of war, he attended a meeting about philosophy held at a local house. There, he encountered [Josei Toda](#) (1900–58), who was sharing Nichiren Buddhism with its teaching that

aimed to liberate people from their sufferings and create a society based on respect for the fundamental dignity and equality of all people. This empowering philosophy based on the Lotus Sutra offered hope to ordinary people suffering economic deprivation and hopelessness amid the devastation of Japan's defeat.

Mr. Toda conversed openly and naturally. There was no trace of the condescending, puffed-up arrogance so common among religious and political figures wrapped up in formalities. Though it was our first meeting, I felt free to ask whatever questions I had in my young heart. . . . That Mr. Toda had been persecuted by the Japanese militarist authorities and spent two years in prison for his beliefs was pivotal in my decision to embrace him as my mentor. . . . I wanted to live my life as a person of courage who would not bow to any kind of oppression by the authorities. That was why I was seeking a practical philosophy that would help me do that.

[\[The Wisdom for Creating Happiness and Peace, 28.10\]](#)

Mr. Toda, an educator, ardent pacifist and leader of the Soka Gakkai Buddhist group, emphasized the unlimited potential inherent in each individual's life. He was engaged in rebuilding the Soka Gakkai, which had been suppressed by the militarist authorities during the war. Mr. Ikeda embraced Nichiren Buddhism and the relationship with his mentor Josei Toda defined the rest of his life.

Reflecting on my life leaves me with a sense of wonder and awe at just how much Toda Sensei's existence has meant to me. That a man so mediocre as myself could succeed the late Toda Sensei as head of the Soka Gakkai and assist in the unprecedented undertaking of *kosen-rufu*, the propagation of the spirit and teachings of true Buddhism, is due solely to the fact that I have never for so much as an instant let the image of this great leader depart from my mind and heart. The greatest happiness of my life is that I was able to meet him and become his disciple and follower, and that the relationship of teacher and student was sustained until the very end of his life.

[\["Encountering Josei Toda"\]](#) in *Jinsei no onshi* (My Teacher in Life), published in 1969]

Mr. Toda taught the young Ikeda all he could, giving him a broad education that he would draw on over the course of his life. Mr. Ikeda was by his side as they spread the teachings of Nichiren throughout Japan. He was present when, at the height of the Cold War in 1957, Mr. Toda made a declaration calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons, shortly before his death in 1958. This declaration inspired Mr. Ikeda to lifelong advocacy toward nuclear abolition.

If we are to put the era of nuclear terror behind us, we must struggle against the real “enemy.” That enemy is not nuclear weapons *per se*, nor is it the states that possess or develop them. The real enemy that we must confront is the ways of thinking that justify nuclear weapons; the readiness to annihilate others when they are seen as a threat or as a hindrance to the realization of our objectives.

[Proposal, [“Building Global Solidarity Toward Nuclear Abolition,”](#)
September 8, 2009]

In May 1960, Mr. Ikeda was inaugurated as the third president of the Soka Gakkai at the age of 32. He dedicated his life to the growth and development of the Buddhist organization, traveling throughout Japan to encourage and empower local members, especially youth.

Young people are the treasures of a nation and the wealth of tomorrow’s world. Nothing is more precious. Undermining the future of youth and robbing them of their vitality is like tossing that treasure into the sea.

[[The Wisdom for Creating Happiness and Peace, 20.1](#)]

He also oversaw the broadening of the Soka Gakkai’s mission to include the promotion of peace, culture and education. Under his leadership, the organization reached a membership of more than 8 million households in Japan, making it an influential presence in Japanese society.

The Lotus Sutra teaches of the great hidden treasure of the heart, as vast as the universe itself, which dispels any feelings of powerlessness. It teaches a dynamic way of living in which we breathe the immense life of the universe itself. It teaches the true great adventure of self-reformation.

[[The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra, Vol 1, pp. 14–15](#)]

Soon after his inauguration as president in 1960, Mr. Ikeda embarked on the first of many journeys to support Soka Gakkai members outside Japan in their Buddhist practice. In 1975, the Soka Gakkai International was founded as a global association linking Soka Gakkai organizations around the world, and he became its president.

Dr. Ikeda's vision of personal transformation as the driving force for social change, referred to as "human revolution" has molded my approach to decision making and has served me well, not only as a musician, but as a spouse, father, teacher, friend, Buddhist . . . and ultimately as a human being.

["Is We the New Me?" by Herbie Hancock, Soka University of America Commencement Address, May 24, 2013\]](#)

President Ikeda was a prolific writer who published more than 250 translated works, ranging from commentaries on Buddhism to biographical essays, poetry and children's stories. He also authored an extensive novelized history of the Soka Gakkai, *The Human Revolution* (12 volumes) and *The New Human Revolution* (30 volumes).

A spirit of encouragement is integral to [Ikeda's] poetry and inseparable from it. . . . [A close long-term colleague] remarks: "This practice of encouragement, for him, is everything. When he composes poems—whether long or short—his single-minded determination is, 'I'm going to enable this person to become happy without fail. I have to do something for this person.' The momentary crystallization of that spirit, that heart, becomes the poem—it turns into language immediately."

["Daisaku Ikeda's Poetry of Encouragement" by Sarah Ann Wider in *Encountering the Poems of Daisaku Ikeda*, p. 136]

Starting in the 1970s, President Ikeda met with key individuals in a wide array of fields to promote peace through dialogue and mutual understanding. He also devoted great effort to promoting Sino-Japanese relations, believing that constructive engagement with China was fundamental to the stability of the region.

He engaged in dialogue with the leadership of China, the Soviet Union and the USA, striving to defuse Cold War tensions. He later reflected that he was in a privileged position because he was not constrained in the way a politician would be: "I can talk to people as one human being to another. And it was in that role that I hoped, in some small way, to help bring together the will for peace on all sides."

President Ikeda also conducted dialogues with prominent figures from around the world in the fields of culture, education and different faith traditions, including British historian Arnold Toynbee and former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, in order to identify ways of tackling the complex problems facing humanity. More than 70 of these [dialogues](#) have been published in book form.

Ikeda took copious notes on our conversation. I was so struck by that. What I sensed most from him was a tremendous sincerity, unpretentious, open and honest, with no ego at all. He seemed to be coming from a place of such profound nonviolence, humility, and concern for humanity that even after spending a relatively brief time with him, I felt heard, seen, known, and whole.

[*A Baptist Preacher's Buddhist Teacher* by Lawrence Edward Carter Sr., p. 124]

A firm believer in the central role of the United Nations as a forum for peace, from 1983 to 2022, President Ikeda authored [annual peace proposals](#) providing a Buddhist perspective and concrete suggestions to move forward discourse on the key challenges of the day, including disarmament and the abolition of nuclear weapons, environmental protection and the promotion of human rights. He developed a philosophy of humanism anchored in the principles of Buddhism and advocated education for global citizenship. In 1983, the [SGI was accredited as a nongovernmental organization \(NGO\)](#) in consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

I know of no one who has highlighted the role and responsibility of the United Nations so consistently, relentlessly and substantively for such a long period of time as President Ikeda. For the last 40 years, his annual peace proposals have contained brilliant ideas and suggestions for the good of humanity. I am encouraged he has highlighted empowerment of people as a major element in building the Culture of Peace.

[Ambassador Anwarul K. Chowdhury, former UN Under-Secretary-General and High Representative, quoted in [Soka Gakkai press release, Jan. 26, 2022](#)]

Daisaku Ikeda founded the Soka education system, which encompasses kindergartens in five countries, elementary to graduate study in Japan, schools in Brazil and Malaysia and a liberal arts college in the USA. Soka (literally “value-creating”) education is a student-centered approach based on the educational philosophy of Soka Gakkai founding president [Tsunesaburo Makiguchi](#) (1871–1944). Believing that a transformative process of education is key to reshaping the times, he saw education as the most crucial undertaking of his life.

I think I can state with confidence that the following are essential elements of global citizenship: The wisdom to perceive the interconnectedness of all life; the courage not to fear or deny difference but to respect and strive to understand people of different cultures and to grow from encounters with them; and the compassion to maintain an imaginative empathy that reaches beyond one’s immediate surroundings and extends to those suffering in distant places.

[[“Thoughts on Education for Global Citizenship.”](#) lecture delivered at Columbia University, USA, June 13, 1996]

President Ikeda also founded organizations for the advancement of peace and culture, including the Min-On Concert Association, Tokyo Fuji Art Museum, the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, the Toda Peace Institute and the Ikeda Center for Peace, Learning, and Dialogue. He also founded the Komeito political party in Japan to promote social welfare and peace.

Daisaku Ikeda was a passionate poet, accomplished nature photographer and devoted father to three sons, one of whom predeceased him. The 71-year partnership he had with his wife Kaneko underpinned all his efforts, and he described her as his “best and closest comrade through all life’s struggles.”

Daisaku Ikeda’s legacy, as mentor, author, philosopher and champion of dialogue, will live on through the millions of people he has inspired in person and through his extensive writings.

President Ikeda is, in my opinion, the most seasoned dialogical partner in the world today. Since his celebrated dialogue with Arnold Toynbee, for half a century he has been the champion of cultivating world peace through dialogue, which entails the art of deep listening. Through dialogical encounters with many public intellectuals from all corners of the world, President Ikeda has helped extend intellectual

horizons and deepen critical self-reflectivity of dozens of thinkers of our time. His contribution to the life of the mind throughout the world is enormous.

[Tu Weiming in *Taiwa no bunmei, heiwa no kibou tetsugaku o kataru* (A Civilization of Dialogue, a Philosophy of the Hope for Peace), *Ikeda Daisaku zenshu* (Complete Works of Daisaku Ikeda), Vol. 117, pp. 390–91]

His robustly positive approach to life is summed up in this passage from the preface of *The Human Revolution* which exemplifies his own life: “A great inner 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.”

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