

Soka Gakkai's 80 years of spreading peace



Meeting commemorating 80th anniversary of Soka Gakkai on 3 November in Hachioji, Tokyo. Front rows: visiting SGI members from Africa. Photo: Seikyo Shimbun.

November 18th marked the 80th anniversary of the founding of what is now the international Soka Gakkai movement.

What started 80 years ago as the meeting of two schoolteachers in 1930's Japan has become a worldwide, socially engaged, Buddhist movement with 12 million members and a wide range of activities promoting peace, cultural exchange, grassroots education and sustainable living.

The Soka Gakkai International (SGI) promotes a unique philosophy known as 'human revolution', whereby the inner change sparked by Buddhist practice leads to increased courage, compassion and wisdom, fostering fulfilled individuals with a wish to contribute to creating a better world.

Members practise the Buddhism of the 13th-century Japanese monk, Nichiren (1222–82), who identified the Lotus Sutra of Shakyamuni Buddha and established the practise of chanting its title, *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo*, by which individuals can bring forth the wisdom, courage, compassion and Buddhahood they inherently possess.

Theory of Soka

The SGI's unique blend of Buddhist philosophy and social activism can be traced to November 18, 1930, the day that Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–

1944) and Josei Toda (1900–58), both practitioners of Nichiren Buddhism, published Makiguchi's theory of 'Soka' or value-creating education, and they took this as the founding date for what became the Soka Gakkai, an association of reformist educators. By the early 1940s, the group had some 3,000 members, meeting regularly for



SGI's President Ikeda

Buddhist study and to discuss how to create value through child-centred education.

But the Soka Gakkai's emphasis on independent thinking over rote learning challenged the Japanese authorities, who wanted the education system to mold docile subjects. The militarist government cracked down on all forms of

dissidence and in 1943 Makiguchi and Toda were imprisoned as 'thought criminals'. Makiguchi held fast to his convictions and died in prison on November 18, 1944, aged 73.

Josei Toda was released from prison shortly before the war ended. Amid the devastation of post-war Japan, he set out to re-build the Soka Gakkai as a lay Buddhist organization. He saw the practice of Nichiren Buddhism as a means of self-empowerment, a message that appealed to many disenfranchised in Japanese society.

Daisaku Ikeda (1928–), Toda's successor, was 32 when he became president of the Soka Gakkai in 1960. Under his leadership, the movement began an era of innovation and expansion, and in 1975 the Soka Gakkai International was founded. Today it is a worldwide network committed to promoting peace, culture and education, with 84 independent constituent organizations and members in 192 countries and territories.

Current initiatives

Among its current initiatives, SGI has launched the 'People's Decade for Nuclear Abolition', with an array of educational tools aimed at galvanizing public support for nuclear abolition. It also helped initiate the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development and has created traveling exhibitions together with the Earth Charter International entitled 'Seeds of Change' and 'Seeds of Hope', which demonstrate the power of one individual to make a difference in tackling environmental challenges.

President Ikeda is widely recognized as a Buddhist philosopher, author and peace-builder. As an impassioned advocate of dialogue for peace, Ikeda has engaged in dialogue with a wide range of thinkers including Nelson Mandela and Wangari Maathai. To date 50 of his dialogues with individuals such as Mikhail Gorbachev and Linus Pauling have been published. He has devoted himself to building bridges of understanding among people of different cultures and faiths, and worked consistently to restore trust between Japan and China, and with the other countries in Asia that suffered from Japanese militarism during World War 2.

Ikeda has also established peace institutions and cultural exchange associations, as well as the Soka education system, which includes Soka University of America in California.

He has been widely recognized and received some 300 honorary degrees from over 50 countries.

See www.sgi.org ; www.daisakuikeda.org .