



A Positive Role for Humanity: SGI's Approach to Education for Sustainable Development

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The linkages between Buddhist thought in general - and SGI's values in particular - and the concept of sustainable development are many. Our commitment to this cause is heartfelt and ongoing, as is evidenced by SGI's consistent involvement in awareness-raising on environmental issues, our history of participation in the Earth Charter movement and our track record of practical grassroots action.

Buddhist concepts related to sustainable development include:

1. Reverence for and faith in the interconnectedness of all life

As a starting point for our commitment, reverence for all life is one of the fundamental values that Buddhism embraces. The principle of dependent origination further stresses a dynamic interdependence linking all life in a web of interconnection.

Buddhism teaches that we need to focus on achieving harmony in three categories of relationships: those between humans and nature, those between human beings, and the relationship with oneself, our "inner universe." We consider all these entities to be interconnected on the deepest

dimension, using the word *funii* to express the idea that they are "two but not two," separate but also inextricably linked and interdependent.

Nichiren, the 13th-century Japanese monk who founded the school of Buddhism that SGI members follow, stated: "If the minds of the people are impure, their land is also impure, but if their minds are pure, so is their land. There are not two lands, pure and impure in themselves. The difference lies solely in the good or evil of our minds." And SGI President Daisaku Ikeda expressed the same point in a 1990 proposal on the environment: "The external desertification of the planet corresponds precisely with the spiritual desertification of human life."

Based on these concepts Buddhists have strived to live harmonious lives with others, the natural world and themselves since ancient times.

2. Cause and effect

The concept of cause and effect in Buddhism includes both the physical and the unseen or spiritual aspects of life. It can be said that this concept represents interconnectedness among phenomena across the dimension of time.

This naturally leads us to realize that our present actions have a profound impact on future lives, and

that we should live in a sustainable way. If we make destructive causes, not only will future generations not be able to live happily, but we will cause harm to our own life.

Most crucially, however, this teaching stresses that the present moment provides the pivotal opportunity for positive change. A Buddhist text, the Contemplation on the Mind-Ground Sutra, states: "If you want to understand the causes that existed in the past, look at the results as they are manifested in the present. And if you want to understand what results will be manifested in the future, look at the causes that exist in the present."

3. Desire, attachment and greed

So how does Buddhism view development? For many, Buddhism is associated with asceticism and the attempt to eliminate desire and sever all attachments. However, the perspective of Nichiren Buddhism is that the physical and spiritual dimensions of life are ultimately inseparable. Humans are justified in seeking living standards which provide for basic needs in order to alleviate human suffering (consonant with the Buddhist value of compassion) and to open to everyone the concrete experience of dignity (the value of respect for the inherent dignity of life).

Of course, untrammelled desire, or greed, cannot lead to sustainable development. In Buddhism, greed is considered to be one of "three poisons" which are the fundamental sources of human anguish and suffering.

Buddhism teaches that we should not be enslaved by our personal desires, but should direct and transform them toward a more inclusive desire, say, for the happiness of one's community and the broader community of life. In this light, desires can be a vital stimulus for creating positive value.

A redirection of desires can be realized through individual spiritual development and societal

adoption of a more balanced set of values, which stress the cultural, social and spiritual aspects of life alongside the economic and material.

In this regard, we can find inspiration and important wisdom in the following phrase in the Preamble of the Earth Charter: "We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more."

Additional concepts pertaining to sustainable development and ESD emphasized within SGI which are relevant here:

1. The legacy of Soka Gakkai founder Tsunesaburo Makiguchi

Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944) was a geographer and educator who based his radical teaching methods on close study of the relationships between people and their immediate environment. He stressed that individuals should be aware of three levels of citizenship: our local roots and commitments; our sense of belonging to a national community; and an appreciation of the fact that the world is ultimately the stage on which we live our lives. He was an early supporter of the idea of global citizenship. At a time when Japan's education system was being used to mold obedient servants of the state, Makiguchi took a dramatically different view—that education should be learner-centered and focused on empowerment and the fulfillment and happiness of children.

The aim of education is not to transfer knowledge; it is to guide the learning process, to equip the learner with the methods of research. It is not the piecemeal merchandizing of information; it is to enable the acquisition of the methods for learning on one's own; it is the provision of keys to unlock the vault of knowledge. Empowerment is at the heart of successful ESD, and we see Makiguchi's approach to education as an important resource in this regard.

2. Human revolution While in some more extreme approaches to ecology, human beings are perceived as unwelcome parasites causing nothing but damage to the Earth and other forms of life, SGI's outlook is that responsible and awakened human beings committed to creating positive value are in fact the most promising protagonists of change.

In the Buddhist view, human beings have the potential to engage in self-aware compassionate action (the ideal of the bodhisattva) devoted to the well-being of others. In concrete terms this translates into developing a sense of solidarity and caring for all the inhabitants of Earth, as well as a responsibility to future generations of the broader community of life. For SGI Buddhists, the process of developing this kind of expanded awareness and commitment is integral to our spiritual and religious practice. Further, we are confident that the positive ripple effects of such inner change, a "human revolution" in a single individual, know no bounds.

It is the responsibility of humanity to make efforts toward sustainable living, as our own lives are supported by each other and myriad other forms of life. Without an attitude of appreciation, such as that found among the indigenous peoples of the world, it is impossible for human beings to live sustainably.

3. Optimism

Unfortunately, environmental education can induce a sense of disempowerment and despair because negative aspects are often emphasized and the scale of the topic is so huge and complex. In contrast, SGI's approach stresses our intimate connection to environmental issues, the possibility of initiating positive change and the message that one person can make a difference.

Mr. Ikeda expressed this in his 2002 proposal on ESD, "The Global Challenge of Empowerment":

Education should encourage understanding of the ways that environmental problems intimately connect to our daily lives. Education must also inspire the faith that each of us has both the power and the responsibility to effect positive change on a global scale.

4. Philosophy of dialogue

Shakyamuni Buddha, the historical founder of Buddhism, and Nichiren both used dialogue as a teaching method. Within SGI, dialogue is seen as the key to human transformation and learning. Dialogue requires respect for one's counterpart and opening oneself to new ideas and perspectives. Mr. Ikeda has modeled dialogue himself, and the basic activity of SGI around the world is a local level grassroots "discussion meeting," where people encounter others in their local community and encourage each other toward greater achievement and fulfillment.

Dialogue has also specifically been used as a framework for beginning to address issues of sustainability and related values. One SGI member in the US took the pioneering step of initiating "Earth Charter Dinner Dialogues," and another in Italy developed "Talk Shows" based on the framework of the Earth Charter where young people presented their concerns directly to local politicians.

Educating and Communicating about Sustainable Development in SGI

1. "Learn, Reflect, Empower" formula

In order to promote education for sustainable development, Mr. Ikeda advocated this three-point formula in his proposal launched on the occasion of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002:

Learn: Everything starts from grasping basic facts. In particular, in the context of sustainable development, we need to learn to empathetically

understand the realities of those who suffer, embracing their pain as our own and conscious of our interconnectedness.

Reflect: Together with the provision of accurate information, it's crucial that the ethical values we share are clarified. Information and knowledge alone can leave people wondering what this all means to them, and without a clear sense of what concrete steps they can take.

Empower: Thirdly, people must be empowered with courage and hope if they are to take those first concrete steps.

2. Commitment to education and awareness-raising

SGI has been engaged in a range of educational activities, often using the Earth Charter as a tool and following the "Learn, Reflect, Empower" formula. In all activities, dialogue - which provides opportunities for learning, reflection and empowerment - is encouraged.

One groundbreaking challenge by SGI was initiation of the proposal for the establishment of an international decade of education for sustainable development, in discussion with NGOs in Japan, on the occasion of WSSD in 2002. Our intention was that the issue of sustainable development be made accessible to ordinary people, particularly through informal education. The proposal was supported by other NGOs, and subsequently adopted by the Japanese government, eventually leading to its adoption by the UN General Assembly and the implementation of the Decade since 2005.

To promote the Decade, and to empower ordinary people, we created an awareness-raising exhibition together with the Earth Charter Initiative titled "Seeds of Change: The Earth Charter and Human Potential" and showed this in 26 countries. In 2010, on the 10th anniversary of the Earth Charter,

this was revised to create the "Seeds of Hope: Visions of sustainability, steps toward change" exhibition. Within a year, this had already been shown in more than 10 countries.

The exhibition aims to provide a positive message without glossing over difficult realities. It stresses how all religions have messages relating to interconnectedness, environmental protection and sustainability, featuring quotes from different traditions. It also stresses that sustainability is holistic, and not just about the environment.

Earlier, in 2002, we supported the creation of the educational film "A Quiet Revolution," featuring three dramatic case studies of how individuals have contributed to solving local environmental problems.

All these tools are designed to follow the "Learn, Reflect, Empower" formula described above, presenting not only problems but also inspiration, showing their connection with our daily lives, and giving inspirational examples of how one empowered and aware individual can initiate change.

3. Participation in the Earth Charter Initiative

In our awareness-raising activities, we have consistently been using the Earth Charter as a tool for dialogue, as it helps bridge gaps of religion or culture. It enables us to reach out to and communicate with other religious groups on common ground where the emphasis is on what concerns we share rather than what doctrinal differences might separate us.

Mr. Ikeda has consistently promoted the Charter, stating:

The Earth Charter is not limited in its concerns to environmental issues but contains important language related to social and economic justice, democracy, nonviolence and peace. In this sense, it is

a comprehensive statement of the norms and values required for effective global governance. It may be considered a guideline for humanity in the twenty-first century.

The Earth Charter matches SGI's values fully and helps people reflect on their lives in profound ways. We have had consistent experience of young people especially benefiting from using the Earth Charter in this way, from Singapore to Italy and Japan. As one youth participant in such a dialogue in Malaysia said recently, "We can no longer wait for the government to commit wholeheartedly in moving toward a sustainable lifestyle. The movement has to start from the individual. This issue transcends nations; it affects humanity. Hence, we as fellow human beings, should take heed of this exhibition and 'start with one.'"

4. Networking with ESD-Japan:

To promote ESD, we have been participating in a networking organization, the Japan Council on the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD-J). The 2011 general meeting was convened in Sendai, in the area devastated by the March 11 earthquake and tsunami, at the end of June. The key issues included reconstruction of communities which suffered heavily or were completely destroyed by the tsunami. The Japanese are painfully aware of the lesson that natural disasters cannot be avoided, and that we have to continue to find ways to live in such an environment. Several NGOs in Japan have become involved in ESD based on this experience.

5. Daily activities

In addition to these educational activities, our daily activities as a faith-based organization are also relevant. Bolstering local communities is also a part of sustainability. SGI's local Buddhist activities contribute to strengthening the bonds of people at this level, deepening their understanding of the area where they live and adding to their sense of

responsibility toward their own community. This was seen for example in relief activities after the earthquake in the Tohoku region. A number of SGI members have been playing leading roles, though some of them have lost homes and family members themselves. This can at least partly be attributed to the consistent emphasis on action for the sake of others in their regular Buddhist activities and study.

Conclusion

A wide range of educational and awareness-raising activities within SGI has helped cultivate individual members' activities for SD. There are countless examples throughout the SGI network of individuals contributing to sustainability by tackling issues and needs within their local area and workplaces.

Barbara Paterson, originally from Germany, is an environmental consultant working in Namibia. She comments:

For me, the Buddhist concept of the oneness of self and the environment and the notion that nothing can exist in isolation provide the philosophical basis for my research toward a holistic approach to fisheries management that can help bring human society back into harmony with nature.

Enid Trevett is the founder of Action for Change in Fife, Scotland, and the key Earth Charter contact person in Scotland:

The Earth Charter and Buddhist values are very similar in many ways; indeed the celebration slogan for the 10th anniversary of the Charter is "It starts with one." This focus on taking personal responsibility and changing ourselves from the inside as the starting point for change in the wider external environment is a basic tenet of Buddhism.