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## **Make a World of Difference : Hearing Each Other, Healing the Earth**

Hiro Sakurai

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# Make a World of Difference

## Hearing Each Other, Healing the Earth

HIRO SAKURAI

### Abstract

This article is the edited text of the presentation made by the author at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Melbourne, Australia, 3–9 December 2009. The session was titled 'Healing the Earth with Care and Concern: Religious Responses to the Earth Charter'. The article highlights some of the efforts that the Soka Gakkai International (SGI) has organised in promoting the Earth Charter over the years. It also sheds light on how the inspiration and determination by one individual has led many of SGI's activities to success while discussing the resonance between the Earth Charter and Buddhist principles as well as the ideals of SGI. Lastly, the article provides some thoughts on how the Earth Charter can increase its contribution to the UN.

**Keywords:** Earth Charter principles, interconnection, making a difference, hope for the future, learn, reflect and empower

**S**oka Gakkai International (SGI), a lay Buddhist network with member organisations in 82 countries, has been involved in the promotion of the Earth Charter for more than a decade.

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**Hiro Sakurai** has been the Representative of the Soka Gakkai International to the United Nations in New York since 1997. He served as President of the Committee of Religious NGOs at the UN from 2004 to 2007 and helped coordinate various UN interreligious initiatives including the first-ever high-level Dialogue of the General Assembly on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace in 2007. Email: sgiunny@gmail.com

We became involved in the consultation process before the text for the Charter was finalised. This involved many small discussions throughout the United States and later widespread engagement of the SGI network in Asia. From 1997, our international president Daisaku Ikeda began to highlight the importance of the Earth Charter in his annual peace proposals. This raised awareness among SGI members around the world, who responded with much enthusiasm.

In his 2001 proposal,<sup>1</sup> for instance, Mr. Ikeda said, 'It is my firm conviction that the principles of the Earth Charter, the crystallization of a process of global dialogue, can serve as the foundation for a century of life. It is crucial that the Earth Charter principles take root in each person's life as fundamental ethical guidelines...'

Over the years we have seen SGI groups in countries from New Zealand to the UK, Uruguay to Iceland, developing activities related to the Charter. We have used it as a tool for education, for discussion and for reflection, partnering with universities, with other NGOs and with other religious groups.

One of the educational tools we have developed is an exhibition called 'Seeds of Change: The Earth Charter and Human Potential'. This has now been displayed in 28 countries and in 13 languages including Chinese, Arabic and Hindi. This exhibition introduces the Charter and showcases particular initiatives where the Charter has been a catalyst for action, including the Earth Charter Summits held in cities in the US and across the world once a year. In the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, for example, the Summits have caused a ripple effect, making the university campus greener and increasing interaction with the local community.

As with all the educational resources that SGI produces, we emphasise that although 'we stand at a critical moment in Earth's history', there is hope and even one person's actions can make a difference. The formula we use for education for sustainability is 'Learn, Reflect, Empower' and the Earth Charter can be a useful tool in all three stages of this process.

What is remarkable about the Earth Charter is that we find that certain individuals are not just impressed by it; they are bowled over—their lives are transformed by encountering such a holistic and inspirational document that articulates all the things they want to see in this world. Some of our members have set up their own NGOs specifically to promote the Earth Charter, or established innovative ventures such as 'Earth Charter Dinner Dialogues' which have been used to bring together diverse groups. In Vancouver, we have seen the growth of the SGI-Canada Youth Earth Charter Committee which has introduced the Earth Charter to schools, as well as demonstrated its commitment in litter-clean-ups, in interfaith ceremonies to bless migrating salmon and many other initiatives.

In fact, many of the activities that we have conducted have started from the inspiration and determination of one individual. They encountered the Earth Charter and were deeply inspired and decided to dedicate themselves to sharing it further. They were indeed the catalyst for these activities. I think this process, this very internal process of being inspired, which we might tend to forget or neglect, needs to take place in order to maximise the fullest potential of the people who take part in activities related to the Charter.

The Earth Charter deeply resonates with the Buddhist principles and the ideals of SGI. There is a Buddhist concept known as 'dependent origination'. In short, dependent origination is the coexistence and interdependence of humanity, the natural world and the cosmos. This cosmic interdependence is not static, but is filled with the creative dynamism of life. Another Buddhist concept, that of the oneness of self and environment, further describes this dynamism.

In the religious sense, we base ourselves on the Lotus Sutra, which implies many things to us about respect for the dignity of life, valuing diversity, living responsibly and a fundamental commitment to peace. But it is hard to communicate all that in a simple conversation with someone of a different background. So by identifying ourselves with the Earth Charter we can easily share who we are in commonly understood language and find common ground to build on together.

Lastly, I would like to share with you my thoughts on what we can do as the way forward.

First of all, within SGI, we are planning to update the Seeds of Change exhibition, which was first produced in 2002 for the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. We hope to demonstrate how people inspired by the Earth Charter are addressing the critical issues of today in both philosophical and practical ways.

Also, since I work in the UN/NGO community, I would like to share a few thoughts about what we can do at the UN.

As you know the Earth Charter has been recognised by UNESCO in the resolution adopted in 2003, which reads: 'recognizing the Earth Charter as an important ethical framework of sustainable development'. The resolution affirms member states' intention to 'utilize the Earth Charter as an educational instrument, particularly in the framework of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development' (UNESCO 2003: Resolution Reference 32C/Resolution 17).<sup>2</sup>

I am thinking how we can apply this to other areas of the work of the UN. For instance, the UN offices and agencies like the Commission on Sustainable Development and UN Environment Programme (UNEP) would seem to have a natural fit with the Earth Charter.

But because of the holistic and inclusive characteristic of the Charter, we may explore other potential areas of cooperation further. For example, the concepts of a culture of peace and human security and the Alliance of Civilizations initiative could find great complementarity with the Earth Charter.

To consider complementarity with a culture of peace is especially timely as the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World is ending next year, and governments and NGOs are already discussing how to follow up on this Decade.

The UN tends to prefer to work with organisations which represent coordinated groups or work on ideas and projects supported by groups of organisations. So, in this regard, the Earth Charter has a huge head start as it involved a wide range of groups and individuals around the world in its drafting process and has already been promoted by a large number of organisations.

It would be even more effective if we continue striving to involve more organisations and facilitate more initiatives worldwide. Perhaps one key element to keep in

mind in order to gain further momentum in the Earth Charter movement would be to seriously think about how to widen the sense of ownership among Earth Charter supporters as well as future supporters and endorsers; those who were not actually involved in baking the cake, as it were.

To conclude, I think the time is really ripe for the message of hope contained in the Earth Charter. At a time of global crisis, both environmental and economic, humanity is perhaps more aware than ever of our interconnections and that the 6 billion of us do indeed share a common destiny on our beautiful and fragile common home. The recent financial crisis has brought a renewed focus on the need for an ethical basis for decision making in all aspects of human society.

If we of the religious communities of the world can 'hear each other', working together to communicate the core message of compassion contained in the Charter, that 'when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more', then we can truly contribute to 'healing the earth' and ourselves.

## Notes

- 1 Available at [www.sgi-usa.org/newsandevents/docs/peace2001.pdf](http://www.sgi-usa.org/newsandevents/docs/peace2001.pdf) (accessed 24 June 2010).
- 2 UNESCO's support for the Earth Charter. Available at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001318/131885e.pdf> (accessed 24 June 2010).