



Lotus Sutra Social Activism in Contemporary Japan

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The *Lotus Sutra*, Nichiren & Social Action

- Written at the beginning of the Common Era, a text of myths and parables promoting the way of the bodhisattva over that of “selfish” practitioners focused on individual enlightenment
- In ancient China & Japan, it is felt to have magical powers to bring about healing and ensure good fortune in this life
- Saicho 最澄 (767-822), the founder of Tendai 天台宗, promoted it as a “nation protecting sutra”
- Nichiren 日蓮 (1222-1282) was a Tendai monk from a small village in remote Chiba who tried to bring the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra* to the common people by advocating recitation in homage of it:
Namu Myo-ho Renge-kyo 南無妙法蓮華經

The *Lotus Sutra*, Nichiren & Social Action

- He lived in Kamakura and had a confrontational relationship with the military government, offering unsolicited advice on political affairs, and eventually being sent into exile.
- Nichiren interpreted the *Lotus Sutra* as the unifying and single universal truth or single vehicle (*ichijo* 一乗) of Buddhism and all reality. As such, he came to see the emperor as the ruler of Japan in name only and that Buddhism is not in the service of the ruler but, rather, the ruler is obligated to protect the Buddha Dharma.
- Belief in its teachings would save Japan from calamity (the Mongol invasion) and bring prosperity by manifesting the Buddha's Pure Land in this world.
- His teachings and life led to both an understanding of making society a better place for the people now and also sometimes to sectarian hatred of other schools and fundamentalism.

“admonishing and enlightening the state” (国家諫曉 *kokka kangyo*)

- Nichiren engaged in *kokka kangyo* three times during his life, the first in 1260 when he compiled his most well-known text the *Rissho Ankoku-ron* 立正安国論 (*Establishing the Right Teaching and Bringing Peace to the Country*) and submitted it to the head of the Kamakura military government Hojo Tokiyori. In doing so, he remarked, “I did this solely to repay the debt I owe to the country.”
- This type of protest was subsequently carried out by at least five of Nichiren’s six leading disciples, generally in the form of submitting “letters of admonition” (申状 *moshi-jo*) to the shogun or his local representatives but in some cases even to the emperor.
- The content of these admonitions reflects Nichiren’s radical approach to authority based in the primacy of the *Lotus Sutra* as the object of highest loyalty. In this way, even before the development and institutionalization of Neo-Confucian ethics in Tokugawa and modern Japan, Nichiren claimed one’s obligations to one’s parents are subordinate or rather mediated by the higher truths of the *Lotus Sutra*.
- *Kokka kangyo* provided one of the important means by which the *Lotus Sutra* would transform the world, specifically the Japanese nation, into a buddha-land.

3 Contemporary Strands of
Lotus Sutra Based Engaged
Buddhism

The *Lotus Sutra* in Service of Nationalism

- *Lotus Sutra* and Nichiren based groups developed a particular form of right wing nationalism in the early 1900s called Nichirenism
- It conflated the universal teachings of the *Lotus Sutra* with the idea of Japan's divine role in bringing this universalism to the world
- Emphasizing Nichiren's controversial teachings: 1) converting people by any means (折伏 *shakubuku*) because they cannot see the real truth of the *Lotus Sutra* in this Final Age of Buddhism (末法 *mappo*); 2) non-cooperation (不受不施 *fuju-fuse*) with other "deluded" religions, especially Pure Land Buddhists.

From the Right:

Sokka Gakkai 創価学会



- Soka Gakkai was created by Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944), an educational reformer who clashed with the centralized education system and promoted “rural educators to take the lead in developing educational initiatives attuned to their own communities.” But this was promoted for the foundation for a stronger Japanese imperial state under the Emperor
- In 1928 converted to Nichiren Sho-shu 日蓮正宗, a small and extreme sub-sect of the Nichiren sect. Arrested in 1943 for denying State Shinto over Buddhism & the *Lotus Sutra* and died the following year in prison from malnutrition.

From the Right:

Sokka Gakkai 創価学会

- Sokka Gakkai claims he was anti-war & anti-emperor, but arrested for refusing to keep Shinto altar venerating the Sun Goddess & the Emperor in their homes. Like Nichiren, he was very nationalist but not on the basis of Shinto teachings but rather the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra*.
- After the war, under the leadership of his disciple, Josei Toda, and then Daisaku Ikeda, it developed “cultish” qualities by engaging in a national campaign of conversion (折伏 *shakubuku*) and telling people to leave their traditional family temples (不受不施 *fuju-fuse*).
- Became one of the largest Buddhist groups in Japan. Has worked internationally on various progressive social agendas, such as anti-nuclear weapons, bringing in big name international figures
- Formed a major political party called the Komeito 公明党 which has been a coalition partner with the right leaning Liberal Democratic Party since 1999 and their agenda to change Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution.

In the Center: Rissho Koseikai

- Rissho Koseikai 立正佼成会 Formed in 1938 as lay Buddhist denomination emphasizing study and practice over the priest-centered ritualism of traditional Japanese Buddhism.
- Similar to many other smaller such groups, such as Reiyukai 霊友会 and Kodosan 孝道山, which have provided new urban community to many rural immigrants in the post-war boom. These groups have also had charismatic female shamans who did faith healing. Like Soka Gakkai became a very large organization.
- They also developed progressive international peace campaigns and have generally supported progressive to center-left political candidates in Japan



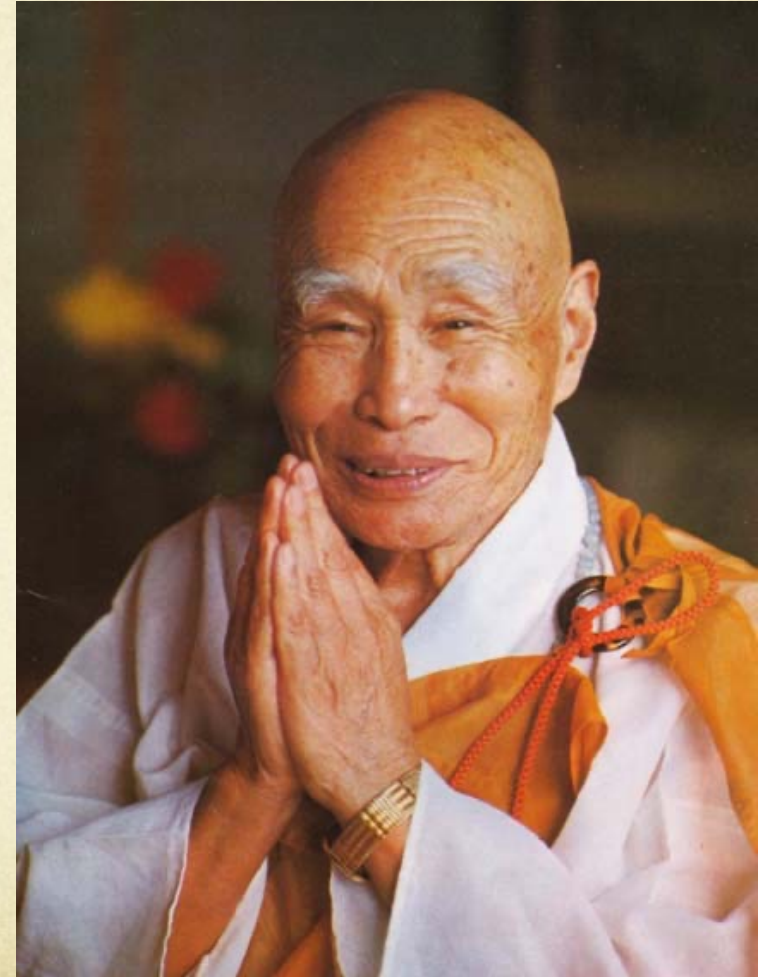
Nikkyo Niwano
Leading founder

Peace Activities of Soka Gakkai and Rissho Koseikai

- Their positions towards international peace are clearly built upon the values and concepts of the popular peace movement of the 1950s: 1) Japan must atone for the suffering inflicted through its imperialism; 2) As the only victim of nuclear war, Japan has a unique position to work for nuclear disarmament, an especially critical issue during the Cold War; 3) With the Article 9 of their post-war constitution renouncing war and an aggressive military, Japan is in a unique position to lead the rest of the world to similar renunciation.
- Soka Gakkai's registering as a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1981 really marks the beginning of its activities and promotion "as a movement for world peace and nuclear disarmament". McLaughlin. "Soka Gakkai in Japan". p. 300.
- Rissho Koseikai is the long-time leader in the World Council for Religion and Peace (WCRP-now known as Religions for Peace) founded in 1970 and headquartered at the United Nations in New York.
- Its Niwano Peace Foundation has brought to the attention of the Japanese public a wide variety of Socially Engaged Buddhist figures in Asia through its annual peace prize, the kind of international alliance with progressive Buddhist leaders in Asia in which Soka Gakkai seems uninterested.
- Finally, it regularly works with not only other new Buddhist groups from the Nichiren tradition but also develops alliances with traditional Buddhist groups, including serving as integral player in the Buddhist NGO Network that focuses on international aid work.
- *It seems rather ironic that Japan's two largest new Buddhist groups, Rissho Kosei-kai and Soka Gakkai, have been portrayed as the standard bearers of Socially Engaged Buddhism in Japan in the post-war era as they did not become fully engaged in international peace activities until the popular peace movement was collapsing amidst student violence.*

From the Left: Nipponzan Myohoji 日本山妙法寺

- Nipponzan Myohoji 日本山妙法寺 (Left) founded in 1917 by Rev. Nichidatsu Fujii 藤井日達 (1885–1985) who had become an itinerant pilgrimaging monk of the Nichiren sect.
- He journeyed into Korea and China to spread the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra* and eventually to spiritually support Japanese troops in these areas.



Encounter with Gandhi

- “Out of the tradition of Hinduism, *there emerged Buddhism which embodies the idea of non-violence in its most complete form*. It was indeed an important development. Buddhism is not only necessary for promoting a peaceful revolution in today’s India but also is a tool of spiritual guidance with which to save all the human race who are involved in acts of violence and wars; it encourages abolition of all means of violence ... My wish for the compassionate return of buddhas and bodhisattva to this world (還来帰家 *genrai kike*) and the non-violent revolution which Gandhi advocated came from the same origin, the doctrine of Buddhism ... This concept cannot be fully expressed in the term “revolution”, and in Buddhism it is referred to as “attainment of Buddhahood”. The ultimate revolutionary aim of Buddhism consists in having both man and the world attain Buddhahood. *Completely detached from things like political power, the human race should leap above all such conflicts. This is the true essence of Buddhist revolution.*”

Final Change of Heart

- “What led me to assert non-resistance, disarmament, and the abolition of war was *not my encounter with Mr. Gandhi*. When the atom bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and I saw hundreds of thousands of innocent women and children die as though burned at the stake and poisoned, victims of a tragedy unprecedented in human history; *when I saw Japan forced to accept unconditional surrender, then I understood the madness, folly, and barbarousness of modern war.*”

Unique Aspects of Nipponzan Myohoji in Post-War Period

- Ascetic lifestyle of monks and nuns, a small order uninterested in social prestige
- a complete dedication to civil protest, specifically on issues surrounding militarism such as U.S. military bases in Japan and nuclear weapons.
- First anti-nuclear protests after the exposure of Japanese fishermen to American nuclear testing on Bikini Atoll in 1954.
- protests against American military bases in Japan—one of the most memorable being their solidarity with farmers and local citizens in facing police brutality at sit-ins opposing the Sunagawa Airforce Base in 1957
- One of its monks was a leading founder of the Interfaith Forum for the Review of National Nuclear Policy 原子力行政を問い直す宗教者の会

International Outreach

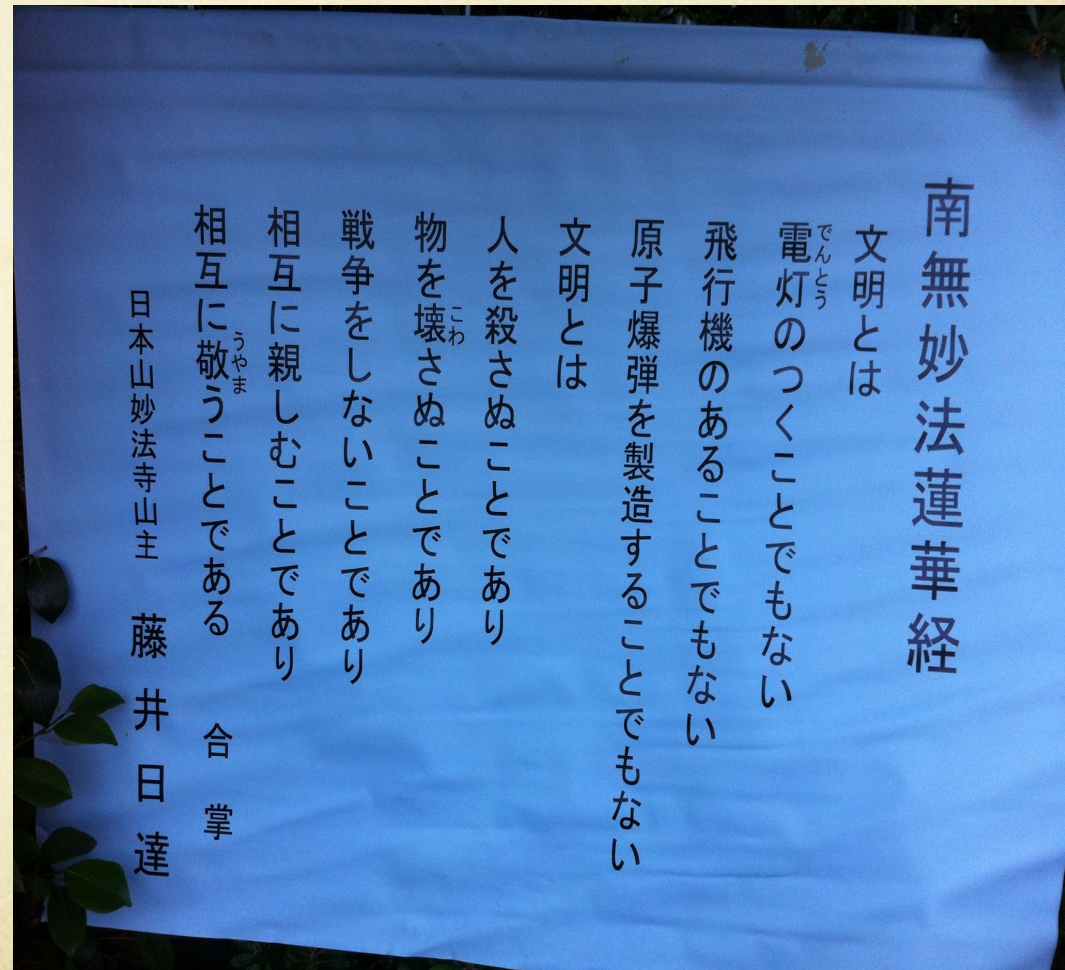
- Like Soka Gakkai and Rissho Koseikai, they have also been active in international activities
- anti-nuclear arms protests in the United States in the 1980s
- peace witness during the civil war in Sri Lanka that led to the murder of one of its monks in 1984.
- peace walks with Maha Ghosananda in Cambodia in the 1990s
- a peace walk through Central and North America in 1992 to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the New World and the subsequent oppression of indigenous peoples
- A peace walk from Auschwitz to Hiroshima in 1995 on the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II
- protest of nuclear **energy** and its perception as an alternative green energy to CO2 generating fossil fuels in the USA at the site of the Exelon's Limerick Nuclear Generating Station in 2010

Engagement in Anti-Nuclear Energy since 3/11

Civilization
is not the development of
electricity,
nor the building of airplanes,
nor the production of nuclear
bombs.

Civilization is rather
not taking the life of others,
not destroying things,
not engaging in warfare,
and creating mutual intimacy
and friendship
as well as mutual respect.

-Nichidatsu Fujii



Engagement in Anti-Nuclear *Energy* since 3/11

- The first Buddhist group to make a public appeal to end nukes after 3/11 on March 20, 2011
- Started leading national pilgrimages to nuclear power plants for fasting and vigil in 2012
- Have joined the larger civil society movement to combine the nuclear issue with the preservation of Article 9 & Japan's pacifist constitution, the existence of U.S. military bases in Japan, and the Abe government's various bills to limit civil rights



Abolish All Nuclear Reactors

全ての

原発

廃絶

を

!





原発はいらない
芝工大
全学

平和憲法

キリスト者平和ネット

つらぬけ
平和憲法

原発なくせ
ear Plants
More





Marching and Chanting

- Japanese Lotus Sutra & Pure Land Buddhist monks in Anti-Nuclear March June 6, 2012
- Japanese Buddhists at Historic No Nuke Rally in Tokyo June 29, 2012
- Nipponzan Myohoji Anti-Nuclear Fasting and Prayer Vigil May 6, 2013
- Nipponzan Myohoji Peace Walk 2014 Day 1 TEPCO Headquarters June 7, 2014

Critical Conclusions

- Inability to get other Buddhist groups to join their activities
- Lack of systematic community building during their pilgrimages
- Naïve faith in the power of reciting the *Lotus Sutra* to create social change?

From Anti-Nuclear Activism to Peace & Democracy Activism

- Like the ANPO protests of the 1950s, this anti-nuclear movement grew and expanded in response to various conservative legislations brought forth by the first and second Abe Shinzo administrations, such as:
 - 1) In 2007, the first amendment to the Fundamental Law of Education since its creation in 1947, now directly stipulating that children be taught respect for their national traditions and culture. McCullough. “Moral and Social Education in Japanese Schools”. p. 32.
 - 2) In 2013, the Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets (SDS) (特定秘密の保護に関する法律 *Tokutei Himitsu-no Hogo-ni kansuru Horitsu*), which can put normal citizens in prison for up to five years for publishing any information deemed important to national security.
 - 3) In 2014, a reinterpretation of the 1947 Constitution to allow for the “right of collective self-defense” (集団的自衛権 *shudan-teki ji-ei-ken*) to allow Japan’s military to come to the aid of the United States and other allies under armed attack, even if Japan itself is not attacked directly. This policy was put into law in September 2015 when the Diet passed “security-related legislation” (安全保障関連法案 *anzen hogai kanren ho-an*), most commonly called the “national security legislation” (安法法案 *anpo ho-an*) or the “war legislation” (戦争法案 *senso ho-an*) by upset opponents.

Better Late than Never: SGI grassroots faithful join protests



- ◆ August 30, 2015 some 120,000 protestors gathered in front of the National Diet while tens of thousands demonstrated simultaneously at more than 300 other locations across the country to protest against this new plan of “collective self-defense”.
- ◆ Soka Gakkai’s Office of Public Affairs has stated that while these individual members have the right to express themselves, the organization itself remains “absolutely unconcerned / unconnected” (全く感知がない *mattaku kanchi ga nai*) to them. Further, the protestors should not oppose the democratic processes going on in the Diet and that, “It is deplorable that the three-color flag of our Gakkai is being used in a political manner.”

McLaughlin, Levi. “Komeito’s Soka Gakkai Protesters and Supporters: Religious Motivations for Political Activism in Contemporary Japan”. In *The Asia-Pacific Journal*. Vol. 13, No. 41:1, October 12, 2015.

“Komeito
parliamentarians,
please re-read
President Ikeda’s
*Human
Revolution*”

