

# The Buddhist Concept of the Human Being: From the Viewpoint of the Philosophy of the Soka Gakkai

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## *Introduction*

**D**AISAKU Ikeda, president of the Soka Gakkai International, in a dialogue with world-renowned sociologist of religion Bryan Wilson, points out that modern social thought originating in the West retains vestiges of a Christian worldview. Ikeda asserts that even today, when belief in a Christian God has waned, national and ideological causes have taken the place of God, with mass slaughter often being justified and glorified in the names of those causes. Insisting that no cause takes precedence over the principle of the sanctity of human life, he underscores the important role Buddhism can play in creating a new civilizational framework.<sup>1</sup> The tendency in modern Western thought to place absolute value on such things as reason, freedom, equality, human rights, and the environment can lead to the value of human life being depreciated. In events ranging from violent revolutionary movements such as the French and Russian revolutions to the curious recent phenomena of human rights fascism, eco-fascism, and peace fascism, we can discern thinking that gives priority over human beings to tenets similar to those used to justify attacks on heretics during the Christian Inquisition in the Middle Ages. President Ikeda calls for a reversal of the trend where people serve the ends of religion, and instead have religion serve people. The significance of this appeal extends beyond simple religious debate, and challenges the monotheistic paradigm regarding the human being that prevails, albeit largely unconsciously, in our modern world.

That said, however, a fundamental theoretical question remains. Does the Buddhist view of the human being contain a philosophy that can sublate this civilizational paradigm? In particular, can the Buddhist philosophy of the Soka Gakkai—Soka philosophy—fulfill this mission? This is the purpose of this paper. It is my wish to propose some stepping-stones from which a foundation for further research concerning Soka philosophy can be established. Specifically, I will focus on the view of the human being in Buddhism from a social thought per-

spective, re-examining the words of the Buddha found in early Buddhist scriptures. I will also explore the relationship between early Buddhism and Soka philosophy and the significance of the Soka view of the human being in the context of contemporary thought.

Further, it should be noted that the term “subjectivity,” which forms a keyword in this paper, is employed by the author in a different sense from the concept of subjectivity in modern philosophy and existentialist doctrine. It is employed in the Buddhist sense of human subjectivity, where the individual actively embodies the fundamental power of the Law that gives rise to the world in a web of mutually interconnected and interdependent relationships.

## 1. Buddhism as a human-centered religion

### 1.1 The path to human-centered social reform

Shakyamuni left home to set out on a journey to solve the questions of human existence. First he studied under Brahman teachers who had achieved a high level of awareness, and then he underwent a long period of austere practices, before abandoning that course as well. Finally, through intense meditation, he was able to grasp the ultimate truth and attain enlightenment. The truth that he discovered could be defined as the Law of non-self and dependent origination. He traveled throughout India preaching the Law, telling people that by becoming aware of this Law within their own lives, they could free themselves from the shackles of suffering. In other words, he taught that the fundamental cause of suffering in the world must not be sought in the external environment, but within the human heart. Opposite of being escapist, this approach naturally leads to tangible social reform. In such early Buddhist texts as the *Sutta-nipata* (The Group of Discourses), the Buddha repeatedly instructs both monks and laity to take rational, self-restrained, yet compassionate action. Based on such teaching, he endorses a moderate amount of economic gain for members of society, and recommends that rulers govern with compassion based on the Law. He also endeavors to organize his disciples in a way that promotes equality and eliminates discrimination among practitioners, exerting a positive influence on Indian society, which was strictly bound by the caste system.

The above is an explanation of how Shakyamuni Buddha’s religious movement attempted to realize a moralistic revolution of society by reforming the hearts and minds of the individuals in that society. After Shakyamuni’s passing, however, trends toward doctrinal scholarship and deification of the Buddha in Nikaya and Mahayana Buddhism served to minimize the role of the Buddha as a moral leader. In contrast, Nichiren,

the thirteenth-century Japanese Buddhist priest, viewed Shakyamuni in one respect as a moral teacher based the teachings the Lotus Sutra, saying: “The heart of the Buddha’s lifetime of teachings is the Lotus Sutra, and the heart of the practice of the Lotus Sutra is found in the ‘Never Disparaging’ chapter. What does Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s profound respect for people signify? The purpose of the appearance in this world of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, lies in his behavior as a human being.”<sup>2</sup> Today, members of the Soka Gakkai International, embracing the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism, believe that human revolution—a profound inner transformation in the life of each individual—will lead to world peace, echoing the Buddha’s original teachings and his desire to change society spiritually through reforming the individuals that comprise it.

If we look at the approach of modern Western social thinkers, we see that they have continued to make efforts to realize human happiness and fulfillment through establishing ideal social systems. As a result, social systems that guarantee much greater freedom and equality compared to feudal times have been achieved. However, although this pursuit of ideal social systems does place importance on human subjectivity, it does not transcend environmental determinism, owing to the belief that human happiness is dependent on environmental factors, namely the social system itself. Therefore, if we seek to realize social reform that is initiated by human beings who possess true subjectivity, it must be reform in which human beings are not controlled by environmental factors. In this respect, Shakyamuni placed highest priority on people’s inner transformation and sought to change the social environment through moral reform, aspiring to achieve an ideal human-centered society. Shakyamuni’s social reform only extended to the realm of morality, and did not result in actual reform in the social system. Moral reform, however, may in time lead to reform in the social system as well. Indeed, this can be seen in King Ashoka’s rule in accord with the Law and in Nagarjuna’s treatise concerning social policy, *Ratnavali*. From spiritual transformation to reconstructing human morality, and then from moral reconstruction to social system reform—this gradual path of progressive change, I submit, is the only way to bring about genuine, lasting human-centered social reform.

## 1.2 The Law and compassion

So the next question is then, What is the relationship between human subjectivity and the Law expounded in Buddhism? First of all, the Law can be interpreted in many different ways, but generally it is explained

in terms of three basic concepts: non-self, dependent origination, and non-substantiality. These concepts deny the existence of the individual, and view the phenomenal world in terms of relationships and relativity. Therefore, the truth of existence lies in a realm of negation, and the true nature of all things is grounded in nothingness. Accordingly, if attainment of a higher state of life that is not governed or influenced by ceaselessly changing phenomena is desired, then there is no choice but for human beings to rid themselves of all substantialistic attachments. This is the reasoning that lies at the heart of early Buddhism, which concerns itself mostly with emancipation from the various sources of desire that give rise to illusion. Furthermore, in early Buddhism the Buddha taught the rejection of a life of illusion, but at the same time he also taught compassion for all living things—protecting and helping them grow—and regarded respect for life a fundamental rule of behavior. Consequently, the Law, while a principle of negation, also possesses a life-affirming aspect.

The Soka Gakkai's second president, Josei Toda, was persecuted by the military government of Japan during World War II and imprisoned. During his time in confinement, he read the "Virtuous Practices" chapter of the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra, which is considered a prelude to the Lotus Sutra. In the course of his study, he came upon the section that is sometimes called "the thirty-four negations," which describes what the life of the Buddha is by listing what it is not. For days, Toda pondered the meaning of this section in prayer and intellectual contemplation, until he suddenly came to the realization that the one thing that can remain in a world of absolute non-existence is nothing other than life itself and that this is the reality of the Buddha. He concluded that life is a reality of negation itself. Toda takes a huge leap in logic reaching this conclusion, but it is not illogical; it is merely intuitive logic. In early Buddhism, the Law expounded by Shakyamuni for human salvation is both a principle of negation and a law of respect for life. Toda expressed the Buddha (who is one with the Law in Soka philosophy) as "life." This view does not contradict early Buddhist thinking regarding the Law. This is because, though life is substantively negated, it is an undeniable reality, which itself says yes to life.

Thus, the Soka Gakkai today also refers to the Law as the life of the universe, or cosmic life. It has been promoting a new Buddhist movement based on humanism and the dignity of life. The belief that the Law instinctively works to nurture life is its underlying religious tenet, which Ikeda expresses in a dialogue with historian Arnold Toynbee as: "This Law [that is inherent in the universe] is the cause of all phenomena and

is the reality that becomes the basic principle maintaining strict harmony among all phenomena. I believe that the movement of the universe, which is based on the Law, is compassion (*jihī* in Japanese Buddhist terminology)—or to use your word, love—which strives to build and preserve harmony among all things.”<sup>3</sup> According to this, the universal Law has two aspects: one of cold, mechanical precision as the law that governs the workings of the cosmos, and the other of compassion as it strives to maintain a balance and harmony between all living and non-living things in the cosmos. This compassion originates not from the will of the Absolute, but is a function of the Law, which is an impersonal reality. This being so, from the viewpoint of Soka philosophy, the human being as an individual in Buddhism is not negated by the Absolute, but instead is connected with the Law that governs the cosmos. Through this connection, the individual can attain fundamental subjectivity. In addition, since one aspect of the Law is compassion, Buddhist practitioners are led to take compassionate action on their own initiative. Although the Soka Gakkai’s view of the Law does not lend itself to proof by logical reasoning, it can no doubt be regarded as a valid modern interpretation of early Buddhist thinking.

### 1.3 The individual’s own power (*jiriki*) and external power (*tariki*)

Here, I would like to explore the Buddhist approach to salvation in order to clarify some of the characteristics of Buddhism as a human-centered religion. Whereas Christianity and Islam preach salvation through the grace of an absolute deity, in Buddhism we find two approaches to salvation. One is salvation through emancipation from worldly desires by means of the individual’s own power (*jiriki*), and the other is salvation by means of the external power of a transcendent Buddha (*tariki*). If we consider Buddhism a human-centered religion, the basic component of the religion should include aiming for emancipation exclusively through the individual’s own power, but as the Law itself is compassionate, it becomes necessary to bring in a component of external power. In other words, as a human-centered religion, Buddhism teaches practitioners to save themselves, but as they progress in their practice, their own individual power and external power fuse.

In his book, *The Living Buddha*, Ikeda narrates the Buddha’s moment of enlightenment under the bodhi tree in the following way: “In Shakyamuni’s case, as the darkness of night began to give way to the first light of dawn, the state of Buddhahood existing in the universe and the state of Buddhahood inherent in Shakyamuni’s own life merged in harmonious communion and blossomed forth.”<sup>4</sup>

The term “communion” used in the above quote refers to the relationship between people’s capacity to comprehend the teachings and the function of the Buddha to lead people to understand the teaching. It is explained as the “mystic principle of responsive communion” in T’ient’ai’s *Hokke gengi* (Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra). Therefore, Ikeda’s narrative of Shakyamuni’s enlightenment can also be understood in terms of a fusion between the human being, representing the individual’s own power, and the cosmic life, representing external power. This concept of a fusing of inner and external power originates from Nichiren’s writings concerning his views of Buddhist practice. He writes, “One’s own power is actually not one’s own power. . . . External power is actually not external power,”<sup>55</sup> indicating that the individual’s own power and external power are essentially one. Nichiren views external power as a function that aids the individual’s own power. Also, Nichiren was extremely committed to the heart of both the Lotus Sutra and its teacher Shakyamuni,<sup>6</sup> often making statements such as: “I am certain that this is all because the [written] characters of the Lotus Sutra have entered into your bodies in order to give us aid,”<sup>7</sup> and “I wonder if Shakyamuni Buddha has entered your body to help me.”<sup>8</sup> In all cases, he regards the power of the Lotus Sutra and Shakyamuni Buddha as support for the individual’s efforts for self-salvation. So external power functions to bring out the individual’s own power to the fullest. This view of practice is characteristic of a human-centered religion. In a Harvard speech on Mahayana Buddhism, Ikeda refers to this fusion of internal and external powers as the ideal needed for “the restoration and rejuvenation of humanity.”<sup>9</sup>

#### 1.4 Mentor and disciple

Buddhist practice is usually carried out based on a relationship of mentor and disciple. Is it possible for this hierarchical relationship to interfere with the goal of realizing a humanistic approach to religion? In order to answer this question, it is essential to investigate why a mentor is needed and whether there is any disparity in religious dignity between mentor and disciple. These two points are of vital importance.

I would like to focus on the fact that Shakyamuni instructed his disciples just before his demise to make the Law their teacher. Generally, faith in an impersonal Law, due to its very impersonality, makes it difficult for people feel a sense of reverence toward the Law and often results in diminished religious zeal. To overcome this difficulty to revere the Law as the teacher, the need arises for a human teacher who can show people the Law through their teaching and behavior. This

allows individuals to sense the compassionate workings of the Law as an indivisible part of the teacher's life. In this way, respect for the Law as the fundamental teacher begins to blossom in people's hearts. Bergson asserted that Buddhism lacks zeal, but I believe that Buddhists who persevere on the path of mentor and disciple, living a life of compassion based on the Law, can also obtain a level of apostolic passion evidenced by believers of monotheistic religions. In addition, because their lives are actively engaged with the ultimate Law of the cosmos, they do not lose sight of their fundamental subjectivity. By maintaining steadfast faith in the Law, Buddhist mentors and disciples keep their passion as practitioners fresh and strive to pursue a human-centered practice.

Unlike Christian love, which derives from an external higher power, Buddhist compassion is equally endowed in the lives of all human beings. Therefore, mentors and disciples who base themselves on the Law share the same fundamental capacity for compassion and live their lives based on a shared vow for the salvation of all humankind. There is total equality in terms of religious dignity between mentor and disciple in Buddhism.

Christianity has fostered individual independence of a kind that transcends secular authority through devotion to God, forming the philosophical basis for the modern ideal of individualism espoused in the West. In this model, however, human subjectivity and dignity are not necessarily guaranteed because of the limiting factor of God's rule. On the other hand, it is said that pantheistic teachings such as Mahayana Buddhism recognize the inherent subjectivity of the human being, but as the ethics of this type of thinking are difficult to put into active practice, believers tend to passively follow along with prevailing secular values. Pantheistic teachings try to find the transcendental within, but to do so without knowing the transcendental without is ultimately a futile endeavor. What is needed is a humanistic religion that expounds transcendence that returns toward immanence. The Soka Gakkai espouses a faith in the Law based on a mentor-disciple relationship. This faith reveres the Law that is the cosmic source of human life—namely, the life of the universe. From this approach of religious philosophy, the absolute dignity of the human being can be attained, thereby providing modern civilization with a possible model for the solution of ethical issues.

## 2. A Buddhist view of humanity

### 2.1 Cosmic subjectivity—the rationale for human dignity

Now that some basis for understanding has been established, I would

like to begin discussion on the main topic of this paper, which is the Buddhist view of humanity. First, I will explore the rationale for human dignity.

When discussing the Buddhist view of human dignity, the Mahayana Buddhist concept that all living beings alike possess the Buddha nature is often cited. However, when Buddha nature is viewed as something substantive, all phenomena are absolutely affirmed as positive, and the significance of the Law as a principle of negation is diminished. Therefore, some regard the concept of Buddha nature as a non-Buddhist teaching. However, if we go beyond the Law as a principle of negation and recognize its life-affirming aspect, we can see this positive aspect itself as the source that gives rise to all life. Carrying the logic one step further, the altruistic behavior of human beings as well as symbiosis in nature—for example, the relationship between the nourishing earth and a plant—are an expression of the life-affirming Law, resulting in an implication that all life possesses supreme dignity.

With that established, the next question to pose would be whether or not human beings possess a kind of dignity that sets them apart from other living things. Although a question of degrees remains, both humans and other living beings express the life-affirming Law; consequently, there is no essential difference in their dignity. However, unlike other living things, which only manifest the Law instinctively in nature, human beings are endowed with the unique ability to manifest the Law actively through their own subjectivity. It is this unique ability that serves as a basis for establishing the dignity of human beings. Buddhism defines the human body as a “vessel of the Law,” an insight that no doubt recognizes the unique dignity of human beings based on their potential to give active expression to the Law.

Also, if, as in Soka philosophy, the life-affirming Law is regarded as the life of the cosmos itself, then by definition the Law also possesses subjectivity. Using this principle, the subjectivity of human beings, who give expression to the Law, may be defined as a manifestation of the more fundamental subjectivity of the life of the cosmos. All life is an expression of the cosmic life, but only human beings have the potential to become its subjective agents. Ikeda proposes an ideal for the human being, in which each individual manifests the subjectivity of the life of the cosmos in their own life and cares for and protects all other life, thereby establishing the subjectivity of the cosmic life. He calls this the “cosmic human being” and the “greater self.” The true dignity of human beings derives not from the fact that each individual’s life is a natural expression of the cosmic life, but from the fact that human life can pos-



ness cosmic subjectivity. Ikeda states: “Compassionate action—nurturing and leading all forms of life toward happiness and creative evolution—is the mission with which we have been entrusted by the cosmos. It is by becoming aware of and working to fulfill this mission that we can enjoy the experience of genuine meaning.”<sup>10</sup> In this way, Ikeda explains Soka philosophy in simple terms, stating that the rationale for the dignity of human beings lies in their practice of compassion as an expression of cosmic subjectivity. Based on this view of human dignity, he posits the concept of “cosmic humanism,” the philosophical foundation of which is the Buddhist doctrine of *ichinen sanzen* (three thousand realms in a single moment of life) set forth by T’ien-t’ai.

As is generally known, modern Western humanism views reason as the basis for human dignity. For example, Kant distinguishes between persons and things, the latter including plants and animals. In Kantian thought, a person is a rational being and has absolute value as an end in itself. A thing, on the other hand, is a non-rational being, so it only has relative value as a means to an end. Kantian humanism does not recognize the rights and intrinsic value of plants and animals, which are today central issues in the field of environmental ethics. In contrast, Mahayana Buddhism, which teaches that even plants and animals possess the Buddha nature, regards both human beings and non-human beings as having equal religious dignity. However, recognizing the absolute equality of the dignity of all life based on the concept of the equality of Buddha nature could possibly lead to a rejection of anthropocentric ethics and an undermining of human dignity. The biocentricism found in such modern environmental thought as deep ecology faces the same problem; it treats as an exception the social reality that human beings take precedence over other living beings in terms of the right to survive. This position seems to contain an unresolvable antinomy. Another stream of environmental thought known as process theology, meanwhile, espouses a hierarchy of intrinsic value with human beings at the top, and attempts to develop a theory of anthropocentrism that respects nature. However, process theology is also problematic, because it justifies things of low intrinsic value being sacrificed for the survival of those higher on the intrinsic value scale. This cold, pragmatic approach threatens to undermine the spirit to protect nature.

The concept of the equality of Buddha nature and the realm of modern environmental ethics and thought are riddled with ethical contradictions, but the cosmic humanism of Soka philosophy may offer a solution. According to this concept, all life shares a basic equality in terms of dignity, but in light of humanity’s unique capacity to manifest

cosmic subjectivity, their right to exist should be given priority. In return, human beings have an obligation to demonstrate cosmic subjectivity, have compassion for all living things, and act as creative managers of the ecosystem and builders of symbiosis. That is to say, humans should base themselves on a spirit of respect for all life deriving from active compassion. For example, one expression of this way of thinking may be that, as Ikeda notes with regard to the slaughter of animals for food to sustain our lives: “We human beings must always be aware of the dignity and value of life and be deeply grateful for the lives we take for the sake of our own sustenance.”<sup>11</sup> He also adds that since our lives are sustained by such sacrifice, we should endeavor to lead them in the most valuable way. Cosmic humanism does not blindly discredit theories of modern civilization such as the anthropocentric approach; it attempts to infuse those theories with a characteristic of benevolence and with a respect for all things on this planet.

In this connection, the original Buddhist approach of seeking the Law has much in common with the modern way of rational thinking. The teachings expounded in early Buddhism contain truths that are key to human salvation. Attempts like those of Ikeda to actively incorporate modern rationalism into a spiritual framework of human salvation do so in the best spirit of Buddhism. In *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra*, Ikeda comments on the convergence of Mahayana Buddhist insights and the worldview of modern physics painted by the interrelationship between different kinds of matter, and stresses the need to “direct this tendency toward a recognition of the infinite worth and nobility of the individual.”<sup>12</sup>

To summarize, Buddhism of the kind that posits cosmic subjectivity as the rationale for human dignity is seeking to build on from modern Western humanism with a Buddhist perspective by combining modern reason with Buddhist compassion.

## 2.2 The self-discipline of compassion and active morality—the ethics of the subjective human being

Next, I would like to turn to the question of whether the basic nature of the human being is essentially good or evil. From the position of a belief in the life-affirming Law, compassionate action that nurtures or fosters life is naturally deemed as good, and the opposite as evil. Also, since all phenomena are an expression of this compassionate Law, human beings are regarded as being fundamentally good. However, when surveying human dignity from the perspective of cosmic subjectivity, it becomes apparent that a sphere in which good and evil struggle for dominance is

a necessary backdrop for human beings to take subjective action to put into practice the benevolent Law of compassion.

The Buddhist principle of dependent origination is a concept of interconnectivity that negates all dichotomies. Therefore, the Law's definition as good indicates absolute good, not good as opposed to evil. But if the Law of absolute good only passively enveloped all life, human existence would be enfolded in absolute good, and there would consequently be no need for human beings to actively manifest the Law. The fact that human beings have the potential to actively manifest this Law, therefore, means that human existence is a realm where good and evil do battle, and it is only through taking on this struggle that they can give active expression to the Law.

In addition, Soka philosophy, based on its concept of the identity of the Law and the life of the cosmos, holds that the Law itself possesses an active dynamism functioning continuously to destroy evil and manifest good. Ikeda describes the Mahayana idea of non-substantiality as a ceaselessly pulsating dynamism, which he terms "creative life."<sup>13</sup> By viewing the Law as the dynamic rhythm of the subjectivity of cosmic life, the directly affirmative view that all phenomena are agents of the Law is negated. This is because the Law as "creative life" represents dynamic—not static—absolute good that functions ceaselessly to destroy evil and manifest good. All phenomena that act as the agents of this Law must accordingly be the battleground for good and evil. One of the reasons that the Tendai concept of original enlightenment (*hongaku*) has come to directly affirm actual evil may be its tendency to view the Law contemplatively as a static absolute good, ignoring the active dynamism that the Law possesses.

In any case, it is because human beings have both the capacity for good and evil that we are able to become active agents of the Law, and if asked whether our nature is basically good or basically evil, Buddhism, which places importance on subjectivity, would no doubt reply that we are indeed both. Here, the ethics of subjective human beings neither employs strict external rules—as would be deemed necessary in the theory of inherent human evil, nor does it succumb to a permissive optimism that would tend to arise in the theory of inherent good. It features a self-disciplined approach of suppressing evil and realizing good within our own lives. Impressing upon his followers the importance of self-restraint, Shakyamuni stated, "Only within himself would he be at peace. A bhikkhu would not seek peace from another," and "Dispel greed for sensual pleasures."<sup>14</sup> He suggests that the master of the self should be the self, and that the entity which restricts one's desires

should be none other than one's self. The self mentioned here transcends the Enlightenment ideal of rational self to comprise a self that has realized cosmic subjectivity within itself and is filled with benevolence. Ikeda calls this the "greater self." The concept of rational self-discipline dating back to Plato may be said to include a component of humanity's ability to connect with the cosmic subjectivity, but history has shown us that an overreliance on reason leads to such phenomena as elitism, Eurocentrism, and environmentally destructive anthropocentrism. To cure the ills caused by the rational self, we need a concept of the self that is not restricted by distinctions between self and other and that takes a more holistic approach. Here, the benevolent self-discipline of Buddhism comes into play. This form of self-discipline will not be disengaged from ordinary people, and will be accessible at the most grassroots level, unlike rational self-discipline. Chinese scholar Cai Delin concludes that Ikeda's Buddhist humanism "makes humankind the protagonist."<sup>15</sup>

In this way, self-discipline is one cornerstone of the ethics of subjective human beings in Buddhism, but another ethical cornerstone from the perspective of human beings establishing cosmic subjectivity is the concept of "active morality." Human beings, embodying the subjectivity of the living Law that combats evil and manifests good, must cease to be passive spectators of evil and become active practitioners of good. Both Soka Gakkai founding president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi's statement, "To not do good is the same as doing evil," and the teaching of the bodhisattva spirit in Mahayana Buddhism offer a model of an active morality that human beings rooted in cosmic subjectivity ought to strive for. In *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra*, Ikeda defines a good person as "someone who struggles against evil."<sup>16</sup> A thoroughgoing ethics of subjective human beings does not objectify good but views the dynamic process of fighting evil itself as good.

### 2.3 Interdependence and the oneness of good and evil—the formation of human beings who live in symbiosis

In this final section, I would like to discuss the Buddhist view of the human being as it relates to dependent origination. At present, there are two opposing camps with regard to the assessment of this concept. One is a positive evaluation recognizing that dependent origination, a teaching of the interdependence of all phenomena, provides a basis for symbiotic relationships between human beings and with nature, which is not found in modern Western individualism. The other is a negative evaluation pointing out specifically that in modern Japanese history this concept has been employed as a theoretical underpinning for totalitarianism

and to suppress the rights of the individual. This divergence of opinion makes us question whether or not Buddhism in fact places importance on human subjectivity. That is, the view that subjective individuals come into existence through interdependent relationships gives rise to the idea of symbiosis between disparate beings and things. In contrast, if dependent origination is viewed as a relationship of interdependence that negates individual subjectivity, it becomes a concept that gives rise to totalitarianism.

From the perspective that subjective compassionate action is the goal of a Buddhist, the concept of dependent origination could offer a philosophical foundation for the creation of a truly symbiotic society in which the respective subjectivity of individuals interpermeates. Generally speaking, Christian love, which originates from God, is first received by the individual believer, then directed vertically toward others in a top-down fashion. In this framework, the individual receives part of God's subjectivity, but those who are the object of the individual's salvation efforts tend to be extremely passive and may even feel resentful of the charity being directed toward them. In contrast, in Buddhism, which is based on an impersonal Law, the individual's own subjective compassion is conveyed to others horizontally in a spirit of equality. In the *Sutta-nipata*, Shakyamuni says, "As I (am), so (are) these; as (are) these, so (am) I.' Comparing himself (with others), he should not kill or cause to kill."<sup>17</sup> This can be interpreted to mean that the concept of dependent origination, stressing the empathy arising from compassion that is horizontal and subjective, fosters symbiotic individuals who respect one another's subjectivity.

Again, from the perspective of forming symbiotic human beings, I would like to touch on how Buddhism that emphasizes human subjectivity both actively opposes those who commit evil, while at the same time striving for their ultimate salvation. As discussed earlier, the Law of compassion constitutes dynamic absolute good that continually functions to destroy evil and realize good. The good that appears after defeating evil is an absolute good engendered in a realm of relativity. The triumph of good in Buddhism is the emergence of absolute good, which is the oneness of good and evil. Thus, when those who commit evil are defeated, they can be enveloped by the realm of absolute good and led to salvation. In *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra*, Ikeda explains, "Only when evil is thoroughly challenged and conquered does it become an entity of the oneness of good and evil."<sup>18</sup>

Monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam sharply divide good and evil into two distinct entities. While these reli-

gions are uncompromising in their ideals, they cling to a dualistic view of good and evil, which can encourage attitudes of violence and intolerance toward those they regard as enemies. Christian and Islamic fundamentalism are cases in point. Dualistic concepts of good and evil in monotheistic religions have been known to be obstacles to the peaceful coexistence of communities whose inhabitants hold a variety of religious beliefs. Does this mean that pantheistic religions such as Buddhism, Shinto, and Hinduism fare better in fostering symbiosis between people of differing religions? Unfortunately, history tell us the answer is no. The armed priests of feudal Japan or, more recently, the Sinhala Urumaya of Sri Lanka are but two examples of numerous militaristic and extremist Buddhist movements in history. Also in the modern era, Shinto, through its practice of ancestor worship, helped strengthen the cause of imperial nationalism in Japan. In addition, Hindu nationalism, which has steadily gained in momentum in India from the 1980s, seeks to oust Christianity and Islam from Indian society. While pantheistic religions are essentially incompatible with a dualistic view of good and evil, they are easily influenced by the values of secular society. Pantheistic religions sometimes copy the tenets of monotheistic religions and create their own intolerant dogma. In the end, both the intolerance of monotheism and the compromising tolerance of pantheism prevent the creation of a society for peaceful coexistence, pointing to the need for a new religious framework that overcomes these limitations. Soka philosophy seeks to realize a philosophical principle of absolute tolerance based on the view of oneness of good and evil, and further seeks to do so with the non-compromising spirit of the dualistic view of good and evil. As exemplified by Bodhisattva Never Disparaging in the Lotus Sutra and Nichiren in Japan, Buddhism, which places importance on human subjectivity, can foster symbiotic human beings of unwavering commitment to their beliefs, and the Soka Gakkai is in the process of proving the great potential that human-centered Buddhism has to contribute to humankind.

#### CONCLUSION

The Law in early Buddhism encompasses the dual aspects of a principle of negation and a principle of affirmation and respect for life. This gives rise to two positions or standpoints in Buddhist practice—that of seeking the Law as a principle of negation and that of emphasizing the pursuit of altruistic action based compassion. Since the former tends to promote renunciation of the world, the Buddhist view of the human

being from a social thought perspective can only be explained from the latter stance. When we view Shakyamuni's Buddhism centering primarily on his teachings of compassion, his attempts to reform society by means of a human-centered religion becomes apparent. Furthermore, Shakyamuni placed utmost trust in his fellow human beings, with their potential for actively putting the Law of compassion into practice, and devoted his entire life to encouraging people throughout India to engage themselves in a similar fashion through self-discipline and respect for life. The ideal of the human being as an active agent of compassion can be found in the early Buddhist view of humanity seen from a social thought perspective.

According to Soka philosophy, the Buddhist Law is the life of the cosmos that, with its dynamic subjectivity, enfolds all living and non-living things in compassion. It maintains that human dignity derives from human beings' unique ability to become an active subjective part of the compassionate life of the cosmos. This Buddhist philosophy, which espouses a cosmic humanism, is a natural extension of the respect for life and the ethics of subjective human beings found in early Buddhism.

Why is it that the Soka Gakkai is able to succeed early Buddhism? In the Lotus Sutra, the Law is transmitted and entrusted from mentor to disciple for the salvation of living beings after the Buddha's passing. Cherishing this Buddhist tradition of mentor and disciple, Nichiren made a vow to save all humankind as an emissary of Shakyamuni Buddha and the Lotus Sutra. As outlined earlier, the Law, which is transmitted and embraced through the mentor-disciple relationship, is revered as the fundamental teacher. Within the framework of this relationship, believers can recognize the compassionate power of the Law and devote themselves with passion as emissaries of the Law, thereby attaining practical subjectivity. Soka philosophy is grounded in the Buddhism of Nichiren, who championed the teaching of the Lotus Sutra and discovered therein the significance of the mentor-disciple relationship. Inheriting the tradition and spirit of Nichiren, the Soka Gakkai has come to embrace faith that is based on revering the Law as the teacher through a commitment to the mentor-disciple relationship, like that found in early Buddhism.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bryan Wilson and Daisaku Ikeda, *Human Values in a Changing World: A Dialogue on the Social Role of Religion* (Secaucus, NJ: Lyle Stuart Inc., 1987), p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Nichiren, "The Three Kinds of Treasure," *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, trans. and ed. by Gosho Translation Committee (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 1999), pp. 851-52.

<sup>3</sup> Arnold Toynbee and Daisaku Ikeda, *Choose Life: A Dialogue*, ed. Richard Gage (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 346.

<sup>4</sup> Daisaku Ikeda, *The Living Buddha: An Interpretive Biography*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Weatherhill, 1976), p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> Nichiren, "Ichidai shokyo taii" (The Substance of the Buddha's Lifetime Teachings), *Nichiren Daishonin goshu zenshu* (The Collected Writings of Nichiren Daishonin), ed. Nichiko Hori (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 1952), p. 403. (Translated from the Japanese)

<sup>6</sup> In "Letter to the Brothers," Nichiren states, "The Lotus Sutra is the eye of all the Buddhas. It is the original teacher of Shakyamuni Buddha himself, the lord of teachings" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 494), indicating that although it was Shakyamuni who preached the Lotus Sutra, the sutra was also the source of enlightenment from the distant past, even before the appearance of Shakyamuni. This view was not held solely by Nichiren, as evidenced in the "Introduction" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, where it states: "At this time the Buddha Sun Moon Bright arose from his samadhi and, because of the bodhisattva Wonderfully Bright, preached the Great Vehicle sutra called the Lotus of the Wonderful Law [the Lotus Sutra], a Law to instruct the bodhisattvas, one that is guarded and kept in mind by the Buddhas" (*The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson, p. 16). This implies that the Lotus Sutra is timeless and transcendent, propagated throughout the universe across past, present, and future.

<sup>7</sup> Nichiren, "On Rebuking the Slander of the Law and Eradicating Sin," *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 444.

<sup>8</sup> Nichiren, "The Two Kinds of Illness," *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 920.

<sup>9</sup> Daisaku Ikeda, "Mahayana Buddhism and Twenty-first-Century Civilization" (Address at Harvard University, Cambridge, Sept. 24, 1993), *A New Humanism: The University Addresses of Daisaku Ikeda* (Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1996), pp. 157–59.

<sup>10</sup> Daisaku Ikeda, "Homage to the Sagarmatha of Humanism: The Living Lessons of Gautama Buddha" (Address at Tribhuvan University, Nepal, on Nov. 2, 1995), *Monthly SGI Newsletter* (No. 152, November 1995 Issue), pp. 16–17.

<sup>11</sup> Wilson and Ikeda, *Human Values in a Changing World*, p. 74

<sup>12</sup> Daisaku Ikeda, et al., *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra: A Discussion* (Santa Monica, CA: World Tribune Press, 2000), vol. 1, p. 208.

<sup>13</sup> Daisaku Ikeda, "Creative Life" (Address at Institut de France, Paris, June 14, 1989), *A New Humanism*, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> K. R. Norman, tr., *The Group of Discourses (Sutta-nipata)* (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1995), vol. 2, pp. 105, 124.

<sup>15</sup> Cai Delin, *Toyo no chie no hikari: Ikeda Daisaku kenkyu* (The Light of Eastern Wisdom: Collection of Research on Daisaku Ikeda) (Tokyo: Otorisyoin, 2003), p. 182. (Translated from the Japanese)

<sup>16</sup> Ikeda, et al., *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra*, vol. 3, p. 76.

<sup>17</sup> Norman, tr., *The Group of Discourses (Sutta-nipata)*, vol. 2, p. 80.

<sup>18</sup> Ikeda, et al., *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra*, vol. 3, p. 83.



One's life and the environment are often viewed as being completely distinct, but from the comprehensive viewpoint of Buddhist philosophy, they are one and inseparable. It is a common human tendency to blame our problems and sufferings on things outside ourselves—other people, circumstances beyond our control. The principle of the oneness of life and its environment, however, demonstrates that the causes of our joy and sorrow originate within us. When we base ourselves on this principle, seeing our environment as a reflection of our inner life, we are able to take full responsibility for our Buddhist philosophy is a system of thought which started with the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, or "awakened one". From its inception, Buddhism has had a strong philosophical component. Buddhism is founded on elements of the shramana movement which flowered around 500 BCE, and has had a very strong influence on Hinduism. The Buddha criticised all concepts of metaphysical being and non-being as misleading views caused by reification, and this critique is inextricable from the founding of Buddhism. Buddhism shares many philosophical views with other Indian systems, such as Jainism. Buddhism is a large religious-philosophical system that has profound impacts on the spiritual life in many Asian countries, including Vietnam. In the eyes of the Buddha, human life is full of suffering. The birth of Buddhism has opened a path for liberating human and expressing people's aspiration for a happiness, freedom and equality. This is considered a thorough content of Buddhist philosophy. In this article, the author analyzes the concept of Buddhist philosophy about people and human life, which is profoundly expressed in the following aspects: Impermanence, egolessness as the nature of Humanistic Buddhism (Chinese: 人间佛教; pinyin: rĀnjiĀn fĀjiĀo) is a modern philosophy practiced by Buddhist groups originating from Chinese Buddhism which places an emphasis on integrating Buddhist practices into everyday life and shifting the focus of ritual from the dead to the living. Taixu, a Buddhist modernist activist and thinker who advocated the reform and renewal of Chinese Buddhism, used the term Buddhism for Human Life (Chinese: 人间佛教; pinyin: rĀnshĀng fĀjiĀo). The first two characters, "human