

# Nichiren Shoshu/ Soka Gakkai Buddhism

By David J. Hesselgrave

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**Founders:** Nichiren, Tsunesaburoo Makiguchi

**Locations:** World headquarters: Tokyo, Japan; U.S. headquarters: Santa Monica, California

**Official Publications:** *The World Tribune, Seikyoo Times, NSA Quarterly*

**Organizational Structure:** Nichiren Shoshu: ultimate authority vested in the High Priest and, under him the priesthood. Soka Gakkai: authority vested in the president and, under him, various officers and division heads.

**Unique Terms:** *Daimoku, Dharma, Ichinen Sanzen, Gohonzon, Mandala, Mappoo, Kaidan, Ri, San Daihioo, Shakubuku, Trikaya, Taisekiji, Koosen Rufu*

## HISTORY

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The Nichiren tradition within Japanese Buddhism began as one of several new Buddhist movements during the Kamakura period (1185-1333). Recently Nichiren and Nichirenism have attracted international attention due in large part to the prominence of Nichiren Shoshu (Nichiren Orthodox Sect) and the lay movement Soka Gakkai (Value-Creation Society).

The son of a fisherman, Nichiren was born in what is now Japan's Chiba Prefecture in 1222. After years of study he concluded that Dengyoo Daishi, the Chinese monk who introduced Tendai Buddhism to Japan in the eighth century, was correct in holding to the superiority of the Lotus Sutra over all other sutras. In 1253 he gave his first sermon and assumed the name Nichiren (means "Sun-lotus" and symbolizes the Shinto ideal of the light and life of the sun and the Buddhist ideal of the purity and perfection of the lotus). His times were some of the most troubled in Japanese history. Political instability, religious rivalries, devastating earthquakes, ferocious storms, widespread famine, the appearance of comets and the persistent threat of a Mongol invasion—Nichiren took all of these as signs of the advent of *Mappoo* (Age of Deterioration of the Law). He denounced other religions and Buddhist sects and issued warnings of disaster if Japan's rulers did not renounce all false faiths and embrace the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. For his efforts he was banished on two occasions and was sentenced to be executed on another. However, he survived to bequeath to Japan and the world hundreds of writings, a worship object (the *Gohonzon*—a piece of wood inscribed with the Sacred Title referred to below); a place of worship (*Taisekiji*—the temple area at the foot of Mt. Fuji); and a missionary faith. He succumbed to illness in 1282.

Currently, almost forty traditional Buddhist sects and new religious movements lay claim to the legacy of Nichiren. Most of them have but limited significance outside of Japan. Three exceptions are Nichiren Shu (Nichiren Sect) and Nichiren Shoshu (Nichiren Orthodox Sect), and the lay organization Soka Gakkai (Value-Creation Society). The first two of these stem from an early struggle for leadership after the demise of Nichiren. The Soka Gakkai represents a modern development and is of special importance because of its influence in the United States and around the world.

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The Soka Gakkai began in 1937 as a pedagogical society (initially called Soka Kyooiku Gakkai or Value-Creation Study Society) under the leadership of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and his protege, Joosei Toda. They initiated it as a protest against the authoritarian approach of the Japanese Ministry of Education. In 1943 along with 21 adherents, Makiguchi and Toda were accused of disloyalty to the government and incarcerated. Makiguchi died in prison but the younger Toda was released in 1945 and immediately set out to reorganize and reinvigorate the Society. Two years after Toda's death in 1958 one of this lieutenants, Daisaku Ikeda became president. Under Ikeda's leadership the organization undertook a mission to the entire world. It pursued a program of building and beautification at *Taisekiji* that culminated in 1972 with the dedication of the *Shohondo* or Grand Worship Hall (deemed to be the center of the world faith of the future). In 1964 Ikeda and the Society also launched the political party called Komeito (Clean Government Party, subsequently reorganized as the New Komeito) which has had the support of as many as eight million Japanese voters and has gained representation in the Japanese cabinet. In 1975 Ikeda also took the lead in forming Soka Gakkai International, an organization that now boasts 76 constituent organizations, members in 120 countries and territories, and various institutions in some of them. Statistics vary, but world membership may approach the 15,000,000 mark.

In 1979 Daisaku Ikeda was succeeded by the current president of Soka Gakkai, Einosuke Akiya. However, Ikeda remained as honorary president and a dominant influence. So, if Ikeda is to be credited with successes, he must also share blame for various antagonisms and schisms over the years. For one thing, there has been a continuing friction between the Society and the New Komeito. But the ultimate schism occurred in 1991 when Nichiren Shoshu High Priest Nikken Abe excommunicated Ikeda and all his followers, immediately closed the Grand Worship Hall at *Taisekiji* and, later, ordered its demolition. The Society, therefore, has become a lay movement without a priest. Nevertheless it continues on, sometimes referring to itself as the "first Protestant movement in Buddhism," and always presenting itself as a liberation movement and upholder of human rights. Though currently at swords' points, both the priestly movement Nichiren Shoshu and the lay movement Soka Gakkai consider themselves to be justified in claiming the mantle of Nichiren.

As would be expected, the schism in Japan has been extended to the United States where the two groups compete for the loyalty of believers. In June 14, 1998 the *Washington Post* indicated that their membership was 300,000 for Soka Gakkai International—USA and 5,500 for Nichiren Shoshu. Far and away the greatest concentration of members for both groups is in the Washington, D.C and, especially, the Los Angeles, California areas. In 2001 Soka Gakkai International—USA began a complete renovation of its headquarters in Santa Monica, and dedicated the \$200,000,000 Soka University of America in Aliso Viejo, California.

## TEACHINGS

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Nichirenist and Soka Gakkai teachings can only be understood in the context of the much larger thought-world in which they are nested. The basic worldview involved is that of Samkhya Hinduism as interpreted and modified by Gautama Buddha and subsequently by a number of saints and teachers down to Nichiren and his more contemporary interpreters.

**Samkhya Hinduism:** Nondualist Hinduism concluded that there is only one Reality (Brahman) in the universe and everything is that One including what we call the individual self. Neither the myriads of personal gods of popular Hinduism nor the phenomenal world are "really real." Samkhya Hinduism did allow for a distinction between the material and the soul, but held that this duality had to be transcended. The way to emancipation is an enlightenment experience. That experience constitutes primary knowledge. All other knowledge, whether scientific or religious, is secondary.

**Mahayana Buddhism:** Hinduism taught that the self and Reality are actually the same, but bad karma (action, deed, work) keeps them apart in the phenomenal world and binds the self to a series of births and rebirths until its ultimate emancipation and reabsorption into the “really Real.” Gautama Buddha accepted this basic Hindu worldview including the notion of karma, but replaced Brahman with Nirvana and also denied that the self either exists or is reborn. The so-called self is no more than an aggregate of bodily, psychological and other factors that dissolves upon death. Nothing remains except a new aggregate, the configuration of which is determined by the accumulation of good and bad karma. The awareness of this sad state of affairs is a kind of “suffering” which can only be overcome by enlightenment. And enlightenment must be achieved by walking an arduous path that leads to it. Later on, Mahayana Buddhism introduced a variety of manifestations of the Buddha as well as a number of bodhisattvas or savior-beings who assist mankind in achieving enlightenment and buddhahood.

**Nichiren Buddhism:** Nichiren accepted the basic worldview of Hinduism and Mahayana, but held that the Tendai interpretation of the Chinese scholar, Dengyoo Daishi, constitutes “true Buddhism.” Nichiren’s main contribution was to take esoteric Tendai teachings and press them into the molds of pragmatism, exclusivism and iconoclasm. Accordingly, the Lotus Sutra was not only held to be superior, it was the only means of enlightenment and the only sutra relevant to this present age of Mappoo. At the heart of this sutra is the idea that all have a buddha nature and the doctrine of *Ichinen Sanzen* (Three Thousand Realms in One Thought Moment).

According to these doctrines, all of the *Dharma* (Truth, Law) worlds of Buddhism exist simultaneously in an instantaneous act of meditation. Everyone, then, has the potential of achieving enlightenment in the present moment. Supporting these central teachings are the *San Daihoo* (Three Great Secret Laws) which turn out to be method as much as doctrine. The first law is the veneration of a *Mandala* (lit., circular; i.e., concentric circles basic to certain Hindu and Buddhist rituals and meditation) that symbolizes the *Trikaya* (Three Bodies of Buddha), the various other buddhas and bodhisattvas, and also the buddha nature found in all creatures.

The second law is constant repetition of the *Daimoku* or Sacred Title (“Hail, Glorious Sutra of the Wonderful Law”) as inscribed on the *Gohonzon* (Grand Worship Object)—an utterance that constitutes recognition of the Lotus Sutra as the embodiment of Truth, the achievement of Buddhahood, and identification with the Cosmic Soul. The third law is the establishment of a *Kaidan* (Altar, Ordination Platform), a sacred place dedicated to the training of believers. Nichiren identified himself as the “Pillar” (i.e., Supporter or Lord), “Eyes” (i.e., Teacher, Revealer of Truth), and “Great Vessel” (i.e., Life Source, Savior, Father) of Japan. He prophesied that Vulture Peak, the mythical mountain where Sakyamuni (i.e., the Teacher of the Sakya Clan, another name for Gautama Buddha) supposedly delivered the Lotus Sutra, would eventually have its earthly manifestation in Japan.

The Nichiren Shu teaching is that Nichiren selected six disciples who were to share responsibility for disseminating the faith, caring for his grave, and serving as custodians of a temple he established at Mt. Minobu. Nichiren Shoshu, however, claims to have documents proving that Nichiren transmitted the secrets of his “true Buddhism” to Nikkoo, his finest disciple. Since the feudal lord of Minobu refused to submit to his religious authority, Nikkoo packed up the *Gohonzon* and other sacred relics and went to Mt. Fuji where he established a rival temple, *Taisekiji*. Accordingly, priestly succession is held to have passed from the temple at Mt. Minobu to the one at Mt. Fuji and that temple now qualifies as the *Kaidan* of Japan, and, indeed, of the world.

**Soka Gakkai:** It is important at this point to remember that the original designation of the Society founded by Makiguchi contained the word *kyooiku* (study, education) because initially the Society was philosophical and pedagogical, not religious, in its orientation. Makiguchi and his disciple, Toda, believed that Kant had made a mistake in categorizing truth along with good and beauty. They replaced truth with *Ri* (value, advantage, benefit,

profit) and held that these three—value, good and beauty—are purely subjective and are produced by man in accordance with his understandings and needs. In a short time, however, both Makiguchi and Toda were converted to Nichirenism. At that point they accepted the Lotus Sutra and Orthodox Sect teaching as objective truth, and began chanting the *Daimoku* and worshiping the *Gohonzon*. The word *kyooiku* was dropped from its name and the Society became primarily concerned with the propagation of the “true Buddhism” and the creation of *Ri*. They agreed that widespread propagation (*Koosen Rufu*) is to be accomplished by means of *Shakubuku* (lit., “break and subdue”), a coercive conversion method deemed necessary by many followers of Nichiren in this age of *Mappoo* (but moderated through the years by Soka Gakkai leadership). *Ri* is to be created by “scientifically” controlling relationships between the external world and individuals in society in such a way as to benefit both individuals and the larger society. Peace, good fortune, prosperity, health, productive relationships—all are involved. But to begin the process one must first chant the *Daimoku* before the *Gohonzon*. For that reason the *Gohonzon* is sometimes called the “happiness machine.”

Subsequent to the schism with the Orthodox Sect, Soka Gakkai leaders have increasingly emphasized their humanitarian mission in promoting both personal enlightenment and happiness, and also international understanding, peace and prosperity. In the tumultuous times in which we live, and especially in our postmodern world with its emphasis on subjectivity, feelings and relationships, this has its appeal. But it is important to realize that, from beginning to end, all of this is diametrically opposed to biblical teaching.

## BIBLICAL RESPONSE

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On careful analysis, any similarities between Nichirenist/Soka Gakkai teachings and practices on the one hand, and the doctrines and practices of biblical Christianity on the other turn out to be superficial and misleading. It is a profound mistake to single out one or another Bible doctrine; search out the English translation of some Nichiren doctrine that seems to be more or less parallel; and on that basis proceed to make a comparison. Limitations of space forbid adequate analysis here, but several examples may at least serve as suggestive of what is involved.

One could compare teachings of revelation and spiritual knowledge; the person and attributes of God; soul and no-soul; sin and karma; salvation and enlightenment; incarnation in Christianity and “manifestations” in Buddhism; grace in the Bible and mercy in Buddhism; Christ as Savior-King and Nichiren as Pillar; the good as understood by Christ and the good as understood by Makiguchi; and much, much more. To proceed in this fashion, however, might easily become frustrating to all but the most devoted scholar. Why? Because sooner or later, it will become clear that the comparison has little or nothing to do with this or that specific teaching, or even with this or that religious book. It has to do with entirely different systems. The Christian and the Buddhist are conceptually “worlds apart”! Rather, one must determine the meaning and significance of doctrines or concepts *as understood within the contexts of their respective languages and worldviews* and then undertake a comparative study. When this is done, contrasts will almost inevitably overshadow similarities.



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