

Soka Education as a Philosophy of Life: The SUA Experience

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First of all, let me say what a great honor and pleasure it is to be here today at the Soka Education Research Institute, surrounded by so many dedicated scholars and educators, men and women whom I look up to as my seniors. I first visited Soka University nearly thirty years ago when I was a mere 27 years old, and when I still had some hair on my head to show for it. I came here as though to Mecca seeking the heart and soul of soka education, which honestly was a mystery to me. How was it possible to translate such lofty ideals into something so relatively mundane as a teaching method or pedagogy? I didn't take away any answers from that first trip but I did take away a feeling about Soka University that has stayed with me all this time and now finds new reinforcement as I stand here today. This feeling is the same feeling I have about the University's founder – his inexhaustible dynamism, wisdom, perseverance, and compassion.

But what really *is* Soka education and how, in particular, is it understood and practiced at Soka University of America? I am often asked this question by students, by colleagues both within and outside the University, by people in the community, even by my own children. While I'm tempted at such times to launch into a theoretical discussion of Soka education (and there's plenty of material for such a discussion), I much prefer to share my own experience in the classroom, an experience unlike anything else I have had in my twenty plus years of teaching.

This is not to say that Soka education can be boiled down to one individual's experience! Still, there are, I think, some generalizable truths of Soka education. Let me start with these and then reflect a bit on my own experience. Maybe I could begin by putting to rest what in my view are the popular misconceptions of Soka education and in doing so try to describe some of its basic features.

(1) Contrary to popular belief, Soka education is not simply another euphemism for student-centeredness. I prefer to think of Soka education as *people-centered*, founded on respect for the unlimited potential within all human beings. At SUA, staff, faculty, and students are all treated with equal respect, or they should be if we are truly to practice Soka education.

(2) Soka education is not a philosophy of education; it is a philosophy of life, one in which the creation of value (Soka) in any and all circumstances forms the central premise. As the founder of the Soka system of education, Dr. Ikeda, has written: “The ultimate goal of Soka, or value-creating, education is to foster people of character who continuously strive for the ‘greatest good’ of peace, who are committed to protecting the sanctity of life, and who are capable of creating value under even the most difficult circumstances.”¹ How this works itself out in the classroom, in residence life, and in one’s daily contacts with other members of the University community constitutes the real meaning of Soka education.

(3) Soka education is not, nor need it be, exclusive to SUA. Soka education exists wherever students, faculty, and administrators are united in their efforts to create an environment conducive to humanistic learning, that is, learning geared toward human betterment. We ourselves at SUA sometimes fall short of this ideal, but I believe we are unique as a place where everyone is conscious of and pursuing daily this very thing.

In my personal experience both as a faculty member and as an administrator, it is the single-mindedness, the earnestness with which people here tackle these ideals that impresses me the most and that, of course, inspires me to do the same. Our University’s mission – to foster a steady stream of global citizens committed to living a contributive life – is taken very seriously by everyone and as such reinforces certain behaviors in the classroom. Students cannot take a back seat to their own learning, passively listening to the professor. Nor can professors get away with simply depositing unexamined facts in student’s minds or for that matter using the classroom as their own bully pulpit, marshalling words and language in defense of a particular point of view. In small dialogical settings students and faculty alike grope for the appropriate words to describe learning experiences that are in the first place shared. Learning at SUA is a collaborative activity involving the widespread participation and cooperation of a variety of forces – not only students and faculty but a large support system involving staff members in residential life, student activities, health and recreation, financial services and so on.

With rare exception, SUA students come to class motivated to learn and to contribute something to the learning process itself. What makes them so motivated -- and what for me as a teacher spells the difference between SUA and other colleges at which I’ve taught – is their orientation, their direction in life. Students come here with a desire to live a life of service to others and to use their college experience to develop the capacity for such service. This is absolutely unique in my experience.

At SUA we offer a non-sectarian living and learning environment, one imbued nevertheless with the spirit of Buddhist humanism, a philosophy that seeks to empower people and to awaken their inner wisdom. It is through education that we are liberated from powerlessness, awakening untapped strengths and abilities and arousing and extending the soul’s aspiration to become full and complete. “Man is born free,” wrote the Enlightenment philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “and everywhere he is in chains.”² The role of education in general and Soka education in particular is to break those chains and make and keep us free. But free from what? Free from prejudice, free from ignorance and delusion, free from hatred and mistrust.

These are the real restrictions that bind us and prevent us from seeing our own and others limitless potential for wisdom, courage, and compassion, hallmarks of a Soka Education.

“Human life is a process of creating value, and education should guide us toward that end.”³ In this one short sentence, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, the first president of the Soka Gakkai and the father of Soka education, sums up the essence of his educational philosophy: its terminus in the human being, whose happiness was foremost among the various purposes of education. For Makiguchi, these purposes included the priority of process over product, active over passive learning; the importance of creativity; and the central role of values in the construction of some notion of the good life, in Makiguchi’s terms, “the contributive life.” We see in Makiguchi’s statement his stress on the role of education, and the teacher in particular, as a “guide,” not as some figure of unquestioned authority in the learning process. Finally, the sentence draws attention to the necessity for clearly defined ends and purposes, ideals toward which all educators must aim. For all these reasons, Makiguchi encouraged educators to awaken to the importance of values and value creation at each stage of the human learning cycle.

Makiguchi departed significantly from the traditional western interpretation of the end-goal of human learning as the pursuit of universal, timeless truths. What made human beings human was their relationship not to the truth, over which ultimately they could exercise little or no control, but with the people and things in their immediate environment over which they did have control, not in any domineering sense of the term but as an enabling power to achieve personal as well as interpersonal value and meaning. It was in the interaction of people with their environment that, Makiguchi believed, values were created. The truth that the earth rotates around the sun once every twenty-four hours, while an important fact, was unproductive for Makiguchi. More important than this truth itself or any truth was what human beings were able to make of it, what they were able to extract from it in the way of enduring personal and social value or utility. Unlike the discovery of truth, the production of values was an act of invention, origination, and creation. As Makiguchi explains:

When we speak of creation, we refer to the process of bringing to light whatever has bearing on human life from among elements already existing in nature, evaluating these discoveries, and through the addition of human effort further enhancing that relevancy. In other words, creation reworks the ‘found order’ of nature into an order with special benefits for humanity. Strictly speaking, then, *creation* applies only to value and not to truth, for truth stops at the point of discovery.⁴

The distinction between truth and value was an important one for Makiguchi, and not simply for philosophical reasons but for sound educational ones. If one of the goals of education is the actualization of human potential, defined here as the ability of people to make sense of and contribute constructively to their environment, then it only stands to reason that a better understanding of values and how they are created should animate our best educational efforts. Soka education in this sense may be understood as

both process and product: the process of creating value and the resulting value of this process itself for human happiness and development, the ultimate goal of a Soka education.

Fostering global citizens committed to “the creative coexistence of nature and humanity” is a fundamental principle at Soka University of America (SUA) enshrined in mottoes given to it by the university’s founder, Daisaku Ikeda. This principle was earlier elaborated by Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, the father of *soka* pedagogy, in one of his most innovative books, *A Geography of Human Life* (1903, 1st ed; 2003). It was Makiguchi’s firm belief that cultural and environmental phenomena were not separate but profoundly interconnected. We should, he wrote, “regard people, animals, trees, rivers, rocks, or stones in the same light as ourselves and realize that we have much in common with all of them.” The secrets of the macrocosm, Makiguchi believed, lay hidden within the microcosm of our “native cultural community, our homeland.” Nothing is so universal that it cannot be discovered in the particulars of our own individual experience, our own home community.⁵

Makiguchi felt that a question and its answers had to become an essential part of the school’s curriculum. For Makiguchi the most fundamental question was how can we as human beings live together in harmony with one another and with the environment. A young, 19 year old Daisaku Ikeda asked a similar question in his first encounter with his mentor, Josei Toda: “Sir, what is the correct way of life?” To which Mr. Toda replied: “Well now, that is the most difficult question of all.”⁶ The first course taken by all freshmen, at the very beginning of their learning journey, is “Core I: The Enduring Questions of Humanity.” Core I looks at central inquiries that Eastern and Western cultures have developed about what makes for a meaningful and successful life. These inquiries include: What does it mean to be virtuous, to live a virtuous life? How do we perceive ourselves and others? What should be our relations with the community and with various forms of governance? What is the value of life? What is the nature of evil? How do we interact with nature? With Core I, students gain a deeper awareness of the difficulties and nuances of cross-cultural attainments, that is to say: a broader consciousness of their role as citizens of the world. Its objectives parallel the ones expressed in the 2001 Report of the United Nations Secretary-General on education and public awareness for sustainable development, namely to “prepare people for life” and “to develop values and lifestyles that reflect an understanding of global realities.”⁷

These and related concerns are also the special focus of a required sophomore seminar at the university, “Core II: Enduring Questions in Contemporary Context.” Interlocking cultural and environmental concerns – the loss of a sense of community with the earth and its inhabitants, the simultaneous fragmentation and homogenization of global cultures, the retreat into survivalism and naked self-interest, whether of nations or of individuals – take up discussions in classes that attempt to incorporate the outlook of people and cultures from around the world. Students and faculty read and critique together such basic primary materials and documents as the “International Bill of Human Rights,” “Agenda 21,” “The Earth Charter,” and “A New Pacific Peace Resolution,” a resolution signed in 2000 by Pacific Island leaders calling for new forms of international statecraft based on a “Pacific Way” of harmony,

justice, and tolerance.⁸ Core II looks at opportunities for influencing globalization in new and positive directions, and for “creating value,” a Soka tradition.

The lectures and seminars offered as part of SUA’s liberal arts degree are complemented with field-based research classes called Learning Clusters (LC), which give students the opportunity to explore a particular problem or question through direct engagement and experience in the surrounding community, both social and natural. The purpose of these LC is to allow a full achievement of human potential that, according to Makiguchi, cannot be had through books alone; it must also come from “direct, active, [personal] communication” with ones immediate geographical life-space.⁹

According to a recent UN study, education for sustainable development can be fully understood only through a critical reevaluation of the historical forms and practices of education: “Traditionally, education was designed to pass on existing knowledge, skills and values. The new vision reorients it in terms of how to prepare people for life.”¹⁰ Certainly, the effort to grasp life in all its complexity, while searching for lasting peace, has been an essential component of SUA’s curriculum since the opening of the university, in August 2001. Our rich and diverse course offerings, including a General Education program that introduces students to all the liberal arts – science and mathematics, history and literature, philosophy and the rhetorical arts, music, painting and sculpture – prepare students not simply for a life of inquiry but for one of intelligent action for the sake of others and for the peace of the world. Understood as a philosophy of life, soka education does not end, we believe, with our students’ graduation. It lives on in their behavior as human beings and in how they treat the people and things in their environment. As our founder, Daisaku Ikeda, has said: “Friendship and peace are not abstractions. They are a matter of how we treat those in our immediate environment. This is the road to real peace.”¹¹

¹ Quoted in Daisaku Ikeda, “Makiguchi’s Lifelong Pursuit of Lifelong Justice and Humane Values,” A Lecture Delivered at the Simon Wiesenthal Center, Los Angeles, CA, June 4, 1996.

² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses* (London: Everyman, 1993): 181.

³ Dayle Bethel (ed.), *Education for Creative Living: Ideas and Proposals of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press): 54.

⁴ *IBID*, 56-57.

⁵ Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, *A Geography of Human Life*, edited by Dayle Bethel (San Francisco, CA: Caddo Gap Press): 29, 14.

⁶ Daisaku Ikeda, *Human Revolution*, Book One: Volumes 1-6 (Santa Monica, CA: World Tribune Press, 2004): 227.

⁷ United Nations, “E/CN.17/2001/PC/7”, 10 & 12.

⁸ Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, the former president of Fiji, coined the phrase “The Pacific Way” in 1972 at a speech at the United Nations commemorating Fijian independence. See Mara’s *The Pacific Way: A Memoir* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1997). See also “A New Pacific Peace Resolution,” First Pacific Island Leaders New Millennium Peace Conference, January 21, 2000.

⁹ Makiguchi, *Geography of Human Life*, xviii.

¹⁰ United Nations, “E/CN.17/2001/PC/7”, p. 12.

¹¹ Daisaku Ikeda, *Daily Guidance*, April 11, 2008. Accessed at http://evervictorious.blogspot.com/2008_04_01_archive.html