

THE EARTH CHARTER— CAN WE FREE MOTHER EARTH?

That we can destroy the planet doesn't seem to be in question. The question in many people's minds is when.

When the United Nations was created in 1945, the health of the environment was not one of its chief concerns. But since 1972 and the United Nations Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, the environment has emerged as a very big concern.

Since the Stockholm meeting, many groups and coalitions around the world have made valuable contributions toward the development of an Earth Charter, an expression of principles and values needed to help us sustain human life on this planet. But it has been difficult to achieve consensus. After governments failed to reach agreement on a charter at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the Earth Charter movement picked up steam when two international NGOs (non-governmental organizations affiliated with the UN)—the Earth Council and Green Cross International—with the support of the Dutch government, joined forces with other groups. Their efforts led to two years of consultation worldwide among international organizations, and in 1997 the formation of an Earth Charter Commission, composed of 23 individuals from every continent. The commission has proposed an Earth Charter Benchmark Draft that it plans to submit to the United Nations General Assembly in 2000.

In his 1997 peace proposal, SGI President Daisaku Ikeda proposed "a grass-roots endeavor that lays down a new set of principles, what can be called an 'Earth Charter,' that will provide a clear vision for the third millennium." He also proposed that the SGI devote itself to an Earth Charter centering on such organizations as the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century (BRC). In February 1997, Professor Steven Rockefeller, then teaching at Middlebury College in Vermont, presented the Earth Charter Benchmark Draft from the Earth Charter Commission during a BRC conference on "Religion and Ecology". In the Spring, SGI-USA decided to become involved, holding its first Earth Charter meeting in August 1997, at the Florida Nature and Culture Center during a Culture Department conference.

Rockefeller, who is coordinating the drafting of the charter explains:

"The Earth Charter initiative reflects the conviction that a radical change in humanity's attitudes and values is essential to achieve social, economic, and ecological well-being in the twenty-first century. The Earth Charter project is part of an international movement to clarify humanity's shared values and to develop a new global ethics, ensuring effective human cooperation in an interdependent world."¹

The SGI-USA has been an ardent supporter of the Earth Charter movement. "I believe that holding dialogues on the Earth Charter is one of the most important contributions our members can make to society," said Al Albergate, SGI-USA Director of Community Relations and our representative on the Earth Charter USA Network. "That's because the Earth Charter reflects the Buddhist view of life and deals with issues affecting everybody, such as peace, ecology, economics, human rights, poverty, justice, equality,

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diversity, education and democracy. It presents a vision of the world I would like to live in."

To educate people about the Earth Charter and provide input to the international drafting committee, the SGI-USA has held more meetings than any other organization in the United States: twenty-seven meetings or consultations from August 1997 through July 1999, involving close to 1400 people across the continental US. As a result of these gatherings, the suggestions and comments of hundreds of individuals have been forwarded to the drafting committee for their consideration. The Earth Charter is still in draft form as it circulates throughout the world. The objective of the Earth Charter USA Network is to gain as much exposure as possible for the document through Earth Day, April 2000.

1. "The Earth Charter An Overview," *Buddhist Perspectives on the Earth Charter*, 1997, published by Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, p. 17.

The following articles include a foreword by the SGI president from *Buddhist Perspectives on the Earth Charter* and "The Earth Charter: A Nichiren Buddhist View" by Yoichi Kawada. Also included is the latest draft of the charter as of April 1999: Be nice to Mother Earth, she's the only one we have!

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