

**THE EARTH CHARTER:  
A NICHIREN BUDDHIST VIEW  
BY YOICHI KAWADA**

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The thirteenth-century Japanese priest Nichiren (1222–82) established a unique interpretation of Buddhism based on the Mahayana tradition, especially the teaching of T’ien-t’ai (538–97). Nichiren’s goal was to rescue people from their suffering and to promote both individual happiness and the prosperity of society as a whole. His philosophy is best represented by the “Risshō Ankoku Ron” (On Securing the Peace of the Land Through the Propagation of True Buddhism), his major treatise, presented to the country’s ruling authorities in 1260. In this work, Nichiren maintains that by establishing and spreading the correct teaching of Buddhism it becomes possible to create a Buddha Land and a Treasure Land. Put simply, the Buddha Land means a peaceful world of humanity, while the Treasure Land is synonymous with a wholesome, well-balanced ecosystem.

From the standpoint of Nichiren Buddhism, I believe it is possible to define the Earth Charter as a set of basic principles and behavioral guidelines necessary for the realization of *risshō ankoku* (world peace and human security founded in the establishment and propagation of the true Law) in our time. With that assumption, I would like to comment first on the guiding principles and then on the preamble and concluding paragraphs of the draft charter.

### **Guiding Principles of Action**

In examining the principles of action, I will approach my discussion in two parts: The first relates to the Treasure Land and the second to the Buddha Land.

#### **1. Treasure Land—Symbiosis With the Earth’s Ecosystem**

The Buddhist concept expressed by the term *Treasure Land* relates directly to the harmony between human beings and the Earth’s ecological system, which is the basic premise of a healthy environment. In Nichiren Buddhism, we also encounter such concepts as “insentient beings and sentient beings,” “the enlightenment of plants,” and “oneness of life and its environment,” all derived from the worldview known as dependent origination or dependent causation.

Generally, sentient and insentient beings are distinguished according to whether they have emotions and consciousness. Plants and inorganic matter such as rock are insentient beings, while humans and animals are sentient beings. The expression “enlightenment of plants” refers to the Buddhist principle that insentient beings, too, can attain Buddhahood. However, sentient and insentient beings are part of a single continuum, and as such are

indivisible. In modern biology, this particular distinction is not necessarily meaningful.

In Indian Buddhism, only human beings, by virtue of their wisdom, are believed to be capable of attaining enlightenment and the Buddha nature is reserved exclusively for sentient beings. In China and Japan, on the other hand, grass and trees and other nonliving entities such as mountains and rivers can potentially become enlightened. The East Asian view of nature thus recognizes the sanctity of life in all living beings and in their environment.

Miao-lo (711–82), of the T'ien-t'ai school in China, asserted that in a single flower blooming in a field or a forest filling the air with fragrance, there is the Buddha nature. Very much part of this East Asian tradition, Nichiren held firmly to the view of nature that considers the entire ecosystem to be intrinsically sacred, including the natural landscape.

The reverence for all forms of life expressed by Miao-lo and Nichiren are congruent with the concept of ecology that even nature itself has rights. The idea that even grass and trees can attain enlightenment provides the basis for biospheric egalitarianism.

While Buddhism recognizes the equality of all living beings, it also supports the singularity of humans among all forms of life. What sets people apart from other creatures is their ability to practice the bodhisattva way. Human beings alone can perceive the reality of an interdependent world based on dependent causation. That perception makes it possible for humans to act for the benefit of the ecosystem and to protect other life forms. In short, they are endowed with the capacity to act with mercy and practice nonviolence in their relation not only to other people but to all living beings and their environment.

To be sure, living human beings, like any other biological entities, are sustained by the ecosystem. But humans alone can comprehend the sources of their being and, in gratitude, can act for the benefit of those that support their existence. The bodhisattva way is crystallized in this merciful human action.

To practice the bodhisattva way, first we must appreciate that our very existence is sustained by the interdependent world of nature. Then, with deep gratitude, we must strive to control our desires and adjust our lifestyles.

That means, for one thing, that we should observe the Buddhist precept against needlessly killing animal life. That is to say, we must practice nonviolence and mercy and live in such a way that we can coexist in a healthy ecosystem.

Explaining the precept against killing animal life, the Sutra of the Brahma's Net teaches: "No form of life should be killed on purpose. The bodhisattva must always have compassion and piety and use every means to protect all living entities."

"On purpose" here implies without necessity. We should not destroy or kill animals without good reason. Killing out of wrath, greed or ignorance is absolutely forbidden. On the other hand, it is permissible to kill for food to ensure our survival. To save ourselves from starvation, we need to kill animals at times, but it is incumbent upon us to feel gratitude to them for providing sustenance and also to exert ourselves to act as protector of the ecosystem.

Our existence depends on and is sustained by other living beings, so we must learn to live in harmony, without over-indulgence. The Sutra of the Buddha's Last Instruction reads: "The principle of contentment is precisely the way to peace and comfort," and "Those who cannot be content with the way things are, in fact, are poor, even though they may be wealthy."

On theft, the Sutra of the Brahma's Net states, "Do not steal on purpose any of another's property, not even a needle or a blade of grass." The same sutra also admonishes, "A bodhisattva must always evoke from the Buddha nature compassion and devotion to help any

and every kind of person, to bring about good fortune, and to provide comfort.”

Underlying these teachings are the basic ethical principles of Buddhism: that you should never seek your happiness at the expense of someone else’s happiness; and you should treat others as you wish them to treat you. In today’s world, these principles mean that we as a country or as individuals should never seek our prosperity at the expense of people in less-developed countries. Rather, we must practice the bodhisattva way through our willingness to share the suffering of the impoverished and by making every effort to help bring them out of their predicament.

“Oneness of life and its environment” (Jpn *esho funi*) is viable only when it is based on compassion, nonviolence and control of earthly desires, as described above. Miao-lo writes: “Both subjective and objective realities are already present in a single mind. How could a single mind be divisible? Even then, the presence of those realities is the truth.” Nichiren developed this idea as follows:

The ten directions are “environment” and sentient beings are “life.” Environment is like the shadow and life, the body. Without the body there can be no shadow. Similarly, without life, environment cannot exist, even though life is supported by its environment. (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 4, p. 146)

In other words, human beings and the environment influence each other in a series of actions and reactions, beginning with human activities and their formative impact on and subsequent changes to the environment. These in turn create human reactions which adapt to the changing environment. Human beings and their environment are both historical entities that keep changing in biological and cultural ways, as well as in the dimension of life. For precisely that reason, how humans act upon the environment is of crucial importance.

Thus, the concept of oneness of life and its environment highlights our subjective role to protect the ecosystem. While human life (as the subject) and the environment (as object) are to be understood as one, humans must take the environment into consideration not only for physical survival, but for spiritual and cultural existence as well. For our own sake, human beings must take responsibility for a healthy environment using keen perception, wisdom and compassion. We must mobilize all our resources to restore the Earth’s ecosystem where it has been destroyed or damaged by human acts. For this we will have to apply the best that science and technology have to offer.

## 2. Buddha Land—A Peaceful World of Humanity

What do the Buddhist teachings say about how to build a Buddha Land? Essentially, they focus on a human society of bodhisattvas. For purposes of this discussion, the injunction against killing is of particular relevance, for what it actually represents is the right to survival and the right to peace. We have the right to prevent war and to demand arms reduction to make “non-war” a reality.

The Sutra of the Brahma’s Net contains a prohibition against possession of any weapons for the purpose of killing: “Do not store any swords, bows, axes, or other instruments of warfare.” This passage immediately follows the precept against harboring grudges against others. Together, they provide a Buddhist rationale to build a world without war.

What this demands of us is not just the abolition of nuclear weapons, but the reduction of

conventional weapons to a level where aggression is impossible or at least highly unfeasible. And, if we honor the Buddhist precept that forbids giving, lending or selling harmful instruments to others, we are required not to export weapons. To be faithful to these Buddhist ideals, we must build a system of human security on a global level, a system that needs no recourse to military might or weapons, and consolidate the system by strengthening its moral and spiritual foundations of compassion, control of desires and mutual trust.

In September 1957, Josei Toda, second president of the Soka Gakkai, made a historic declaration urging youth to dedicate themselves to the final and total abolition of nuclear and all other weapons of mass destruction. “Those who would use nuclear weapons are satanic,” he proclaimed, “and we must tear out their devilish claws.” Behind his categorical rejection of nuclear weapons, of course, were the Buddhist ideals of the sanctity of life and the right of all living beings to exist.

“Devilish claws” refers to the devil innate in human life. According to the Buddhist view of the world, a formidable and powerful devil resides in the Sixth Heaven, which is the highest realm in the world of desire. The Devil of the Sixth Heaven symbolizes lust for power. T’ien-t’ai interpreted this as the internal human condition, developing it into a theory of human desire. At the top of all desires, including desire for power, prestige and wealth, T’ien-t’ai listed the devil—that which delights in controlling the lives of others and manipulating them freely to do his bidding.

Nichiren put his life at risk to fight against the rulers of his time, who were possessed by the Devil of the Sixth Heaven. Both Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, the founding president of the Soka Gakkai, and his successor, Josei Toda, saw the devil in Japanese militarism during World War II and condemned it for invading the lives and violating the rights of people. Both were imprisoned for their uncompromising opposition to this devilish function.

After the war, Toda spoke out against the devil of nuclear weapons, and he warned that the power that controlled such weapons could end up annihilating the whole human species. His 1957 declaration censuring atomic and hydrogen bombs was a cry from the heart to act, before the Earth’s ecosystem was destroyed. And it was much more. It reminded us that human beings have the potential to degenerate into devils—humanity can deteriorate until we are no longer human.

The bodhisattva practice concerns a lifestyle devoid of over-indulgence. This is a lifestyle that necessitates a revolutionary change in the kind of desires we tolerate and nurture. We are required to turn from the quest for material and physical satisfaction and toward spiritual, emotional fulfillment. As we apply science and technology to utilize natural resources, it is imperative that we take every possible measure to stay in harmony with the ecosystem. More specifically, we must shift the balance in the way our economies work from wastemaking to recycling; we must minimize the consumption of resources that are not renewable and maximize dependence on clean, renewable sources of energy like solar and geothermal power.

We can draw on the egalitarianism of the Lotus Sutra’s theoretical teaching. In the “Introduction” chapter, there appear numerous tribes and races of people as well as non-human creatures, and they are all treated as equals. The message is unmistakable: equality must encompass all racial and ethnic groups, including, of course, indigenous peoples.

A controversial point in the Buddhist concept of equality is the attainment of Buddhahood by the dragon king’s eight-year-old daughter through her transformation into a male. The prevailing idea at the time of the Lotus Sutra was that women could never attain that state. Thus the dragon princess’s instant enlightenment without aeons of austere prac-

tice shows the power of the Lotus Sutra to enable all people equally to attain Buddhahood in their present form. In the story, her gender changes simply because society at that time could not accept a girl being depicted as attaining Buddhahood without first becoming a male.

Nichiren, however, taught that we should never discriminate on the basis of gender, and that women can attain enlightenment as women, just as men can attain enlightenment as men. This was the first time in Buddhist history that genuine equality of the sexes was expounded.

Let us consider eternity as it is conveyed by the concept of the true, eternal Buddha depicted in the essential teaching, which is the second half of the Lotus Sutra. The first ethical principle we can derive is that future generations must not be sacrificed for the sake of the present. This is a question of intergenerational ethics.

The second principle relates to respect for the spiritual heritage that has been transmitted to us over many generations. The Lotus Sutra describes how, since time immemorial, the eternal Buddha has revealed himself in many different forms to save the people. Our ancestors have built a great diversity of cultures, religious beliefs and customs in the long course of history. We must treasure these as an invaluable spiritual legacy, and respect and learn from other cultures and customs. Religions, too, are the common reservoir of spirituality for all humankind to share. We must preserve the large number of historic and prehistoric sites, monuments and relics so that posterity can benefit from their spiritual power and historical value.

## **Preamble and Concluding Paragraphs**

In commenting on the preamble and the concluding paragraphs of the Earth Charter, I would like to focus on global civilization and the United Nations.

In the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra, a grand drama is played out in which the true, eternal Buddha reveals himself. Unfolding before us is a Buddhist cosmology which, in modern terms, might be captured in the phrase “creative evolution of the cosmic life.” At the apex of this evolutionary process is human life on planet Earth. At the threshold of the twenty-first century, humankind is now developing self-awareness as members of an interdependent community of life, and an identity as one humanity and one Earth family.

That global sense of unity will form the spiritual core of a new global civilization, bringing together the civilizations of East and West, the diverse cultures of different national and ethnic groups, into peaceful but dynamic harmony. In Nichiren Buddhist philosophy, global civilization is born out of the harmonious unity of the Buddha Land and the Treasure Land within the framework of the Buddhist cosmology.

The new global civilization will encompass great diversity in cultures, science and technology, races and ethnic groups. It will be nourished and strengthened by the harmony of matter and spirit, of the inner self and the external world and of human life and the environment, all united into a dynamic whole.

In the political realm, great expectations are placed on the United Nations and the central role it should play in the new global civilization. The world body provides an international forum for consultation and cooperation among sovereign states, local governments and various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Such a forum fully accords with the spirit of conference that Shakyamuni advocated and can be considered a manifestation of the Buddhist law of dependent causation.

The Lotus Sutra describes great assemblies at Eagle Peak and the Ceremony in the Air, to

which Shakyamuni summoned the Buddhas and bodhisattvas and the masses of people. The bodhisattvas and sentient beings who gathered there to hear Shakyamuni expound his teaching evoke an image of the common people. This is the image that prompts us, who follow Nichiren's teachings, to demand that the United Nations adjust to the new era and represent the common people as represented by the NGOs and local activists, in addition to the sovereign states.

It should be clear that I fully support the intent and principles of the Earth Charter. In elucidating even partially the perspective of Nichiren's Buddhist philosophy, I hope I have provided some ethical, moral and practical justification to support the assertions presented in the Benchmark Draft. I have also made several points that were not noted in the draft. I hope that the drafting committee will take them into consideration as they draw up the final version. □

## **Topics for Discussion**

**How can we change our view of nature from something outside ourselves to be exploited into something which we are a part of—an extension of our self? How does the practice and understanding of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism help in this regard?**

**In light of the recent shootings, how can we stem violence in society? What attitude underlies the Buddhist precept that forbids giving, lending, or selling harmful instruments to others?**

**Makiguchi and Toda saw "the Devil of the Sixth Heaven"—a Buddhist symbol for the destructive nature of power—in Japan's militarism during World War II. After the war, Toda also saw the same devil in nuclear weapons. How does this insidious human condition manifest in today's world? What can we do to stem this "devil" within all of us?**

THE EARTH CHARTER  
Benchmark Draft II,  
April 1999  
Abbreviated Version

### **PREAMBLE:**

In our diverse yet increasingly interdependent world, it is imperative that we, the people of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations. We are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.

Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe. Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life. The well-being of people and the biosphere depends upon preserving clean air, pure waters, fertile soils, and a rich variety of plants, animals and

ecosystems. The global environment with its finite resources is a primary common concern of all humanity. The protection of Earth's vitality, diversity, and beauty is a sacred trust.

The Earth community stands at a defining moment. With science and technology have come great benefits and also great harm. The dominant patterns of production and consumption are altering climate, degrading the environment, depleting resources, and causing a massive extinction of species. A dramatic rise in population has increased the pressures on ecological systems and has overburdened social systems. Injustice, poverty, ignorance, corruption, crime and violence, and armed conflict deepen the world's suffering. Fundamental changes in our attitudes, values, and ways of living are necessary.

The choice is ours: to care for Earth and one another or to participate in the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life.

As a global civilization comes into being, we can choose to build a truly democratic world, securing the rule of law and the human rights of all women, men, and children. We can respect the integrity of different cultures. We can treat Earth with respect, rejecting the idea that nature is merely a collection of resources to be used. We can realize that our social, economic, environmental, and spiritual problems are interconnected and cooperate in developing integrated strategies to address them. We can resolve to balance and harmonize individual interests with the common good, freedom with responsibility, diversity with unity, short term objectives with long term goals, economic progress with the flourishing of ecological systems.

To fulfill these aspirations, we must recognize that human development is not just about having more, but also about being more. The challenges humanity faces can only be met if people everywhere acquire an awareness of global interdependence, identify themselves with the larger world, and decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility. The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life will be strengthened if we live with reverence for the sources of our being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in the larger scheme of things.

Having reflected on these considerations, we recognize the urgent need for a shared vision of basic values that will provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community. We, therefore, affirm the following principles for sustainable development. We commit ourselves as individuals, organizations, business enterprises, communities, and nations to implement these interrelated principles and to create a global partnership in support of their fulfillment.

## **PRINCIPLES:**

Together in hope, we pledge to:

Respect Earth and all life.

Care for the community of life in all its diversity.

Strive to build free, just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful societies.

Secure Earth's abundance and beauty for present and future generations.

In pursuit of these goals, we will:

Protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain and renew life.

Prevent harm to the environment as the best method of ecological protection and, when knowledge is limited, take the path of caution.

Treat all living beings with compassion, and protect them from cruelty and wanton destruction.

Adopt patterns of consumption, production, and reproduction that respect and safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.

Ensure that economic activities support and promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.

Eradicate poverty, as an ethical, social, economic, and ecological imperative.

Honor and defend the right of all persons, without discrimination, to an environment supportive of their dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being.

Advance worldwide the cooperative study of ecological systems, the dissemination and application of knowledge, and the development, adoption, and transfer of clean technologies.

Establish access to information, inclusive democratic participation in decision making, and transparency, truthfulness, and accountability in governance.

Affirm and promote gender equality as a prerequisite to sustainable development.

Make the knowledge, values, and skills needed to build just and sustainable communities an integral part of formal education and lifelong learning for all.

Create a culture of peace and cooperation.

As never before in human history, common destiny beckons us to seek a new beginning. Such renewal is the promise of these Earth Charter principles. Fulfillment of this promise requires an inner change—a change of mind and heart. It requires that we take decisive action to adopt, apply, and develop the vision of the Earth Charter. Every individual, family, organization, and government has a critical role to play. Youth are fundamental actors for change. We can, if we will, take advantage of the creative possibilities before us and inaugurate an era of fresh hope.

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Title: The Earth Charter: A Nichiren Buddhist View

Subject: Living Buddhism 09/99 v.99 n.9 p.16 LB9909p16

Author: Yoichi Kawada

Keywords: Buddhist Charter Earth Environment Kawada Nichiren View Yoichi