

AN ESSAY BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA OPEN TO ALL

SGI culture centers and community centers are open to all people. 'From the beginning, Buddhist gatherings were open to people from "the four directions," that is, from the entire world,' President Ikeda explains in this essay. 'Our centers, too, are places of hospitality, pervaded by the warm fragrance of culture and friendship — and are open to all.'

At a recent meeting of the American Astronomical Society, it was announced that there may be approximately 125 billion galaxies in the universe. This estimate was based on observations made by NASA's Hubble Space Telescope.

From the Buddhist perspective on the cosmos, this is completely understandable. In fact, such findings validate the Buddhist view of life and the universe; the Lotus Sutra describes the universe as boundless, immeasurable, infinite and eternal.

The Earth is not the only planet on which life exists. Very likely, life can be found on millions of planets throughout the universe. Among that vast number, there are bound to be many where the process of Buddhist propagation is complete. And there are also sure to exist many perfect, ideal Buddha lands populated solely by living beings who are good and benign.

Even in this world where we dwell, a realm defiled by the five impurities, the sun of peace and hope of the Mystic Law is slowly but inevitably rising. This has been achieved through our noble, unprecedented struggle.

I hope that you, the SGI members, will take supreme pride in this fact. I fervently pray, with all my heart, for the good health of all of you — Bodhisattvas of the Earth dedicated to carrying out the Buddha's decree.

The dawn of worldwide kosen-rufu is approaching, gradually but steadily. And our SGI centers around the world are the driving force for the advancement of our global movement to widely spread Nichiren Daishonin's philosophy and ideals.

Among our centers are facilities such as the Brazil Nature Culture Center and India's Soka Bodhi Tree Garden, which, in addition to serving the members, are also dedicated to preserving and protecting the environment.

Also, in recent years, several venerable, historical buildings have been reborn as SGI community centers. For example, there is the stately manor house that is the centerpiece of SGI-UK's Taplow Court Grand Culture Centre, some distance outside London. Then there is the elegant Chateau Pré in the Paris suburb of Chartrettes, overlooking a forest that has been the inspiration for the works of countless artists. It now serves as the SGI-France Culture Center. One of the leaders of the French Revolution, Georges Danton, is said to have taken refuge at the chateau for a time.

The SGI-Germany Culture Center occupies the locally loved and renowned Villa Sachsen, just outside Frankfurt in Bingen am Rhein, a region praised for its beauty by Goethe and Hugo. SGI-Italy, meanwhile, has established its main culture center in Florence in the Villa di Bellagio, a building associated with the Medicis, the grand patrons of the Italian Renaissance.

These great historical buildings, which have survived the vicissitudes of so many cen-

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tures, have now been given new life as palaces of the people in our Soka Renaissance.

If we were to speak of the history that these great buildings have witnessed, we would find ourselves tapping into an inexhaustible font of poetry and drama. Taplow Court, for instance, was the setting of the book *Men Like Gods* by British science-fiction writer H. G. Wells. (Incidentally, another of Wells' famous novels, *The War of the Worlds*, depicts extraterrestrial beings.)

On the Taplow Court grounds is a pond that has been there for 2,000 years, and a burial mound dating back 1,400 years. Queen Elizabeth I was held under house arrest at Taplow Court for a time, it is said. And in more recent history, the estate served as the scene of many festive gatherings of high society, including members of British royalty.

There is also an avenue of cedars, where one will find plaques recording the visits of eminent men and women. Winston Churchill planted a cedar tree there in 1938.

The grandfathers of two modern-day monarchs whom I have had the honor to meet, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand and King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden, are also on record as having visited Taplow Court.

In May 1989, on the opening of the Taplow Court Grand Culture Centre, I proposed that we offer the facilities to the local community and make it a citadel of culture for all. The Taplow Court Grand Culture Centre this year celebrates its 10th anniversary. In that time, it has become well known to all in the area as just such a citadel of culture as well as a garden of peace.

In July last year, working together with a charitable organization dedicated to helping war orphans, the SGI-UK sponsored a festival on its grounds. It seems to have been very well received. Taplow Court has also served as a venue for many international conferences, symposiums and exhibitions.

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An elderly gentleman who visited the Villa Sachsen Culture Center reportedly said: "I used to work here more than 40 years ago. This is one of the memories of my youth. I am so glad to see the SGI lovingly restoring this building." How happy it makes me to hear such remarks!

I have heard that when SGI-Germany opened the villa to the public one day last fall, a record turnout of a thousand locals came. This is sure proof of the trust the German members have gained in the local community. I have also received a very gracious letter from the mayor of Bingen inviting me to visit the city.

Caring for historical buildings indicates a concern for culture in general and a concern for the human spirit. Such efforts, I am pleased to say, have earned the SGI a fine reputation all around the world.

SGI-USA's New York Culture Center is located in a building constructed in 1887 and is registered with the New York Landmarks Conservancy. SGI-USA's restoration of the building was recognized as an important cultural contribution and awarded the Lucy G. Moses Preservation Award in 1995.

The historic Villa di Bellagio has been known as a haven of beauty and pleasure for centuries.

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The Lotus Sutra says of the land in which the Buddha dwells: “The halls and pavilions in its gardens and groves / are adorned with various kinds of gems. / Jeweled trees abound in flowers and fruit / where living beings enjoy themselves at ease.” (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 230)

Today, these lines of the Lotus Sutra describe the SGI’s culture centers, palaces where people can “enjoy themselves at ease” while working toward the important goal of world peace.

The great Chinese poet Po Chü-I (also known as Bo Juyi) wrote, “Make diligent efforts / to associate with the wise and honest, / and always encourage each other.” The Analects of Confucius say, “A gentleman gathers friends through his culture; and with these friends, he develops his humanity.” Our culture centers around the world have been the starting points for many friendly dialogues in the pursuit of peace.

I remember fondly my dialogue with the world-renowned astronomers Sir Fred Hoyle and Dr. Chandra Wickramasinghe at Taplow Court. We spoke freely, without inhibition, of the great drama of the universe and humanity.

Our culture centers and community centers are the castles of global citizens — the SGI members.

In a letter to Toki Jonin, Nichiren Daishonin writes, “When you go to the Pure Land of Eagle Peak, you may declare that you have built the supreme Lotus Hall [a hall for practicing the Lotus Sutra] in all Jambudvipa [the entire world]” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 995). The significance of our culture centers, citadels of worldwide kosen-rufu, is profound indeed.

The Daishonin also says: “The Buddhas of the ten directions will all assemble in throngs and fill in the lands to the east, west, north and south, in the eight directions, the major world system and all the four hundred billion nayutas of lands. They will be seated side by side like the stars in the heavens or the rows of rice and hemp plants on the earth, and will guard and protect the votaries of the Lotus Sutra just as the various ministers and subjects guard and protect the heir of a great ruler. (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 7, p. 243)

The concept of a universe filled with billions of galaxies, something that was practically beyond human comprehension a few centuries ago, is now gradually being verified by scientific data.

In the same way, the validity of our pioneering movement — which has been unfolding from our community centers, castles of the Law, and spreading across the globe — will be demonstrated in the next 50 and next 100 years. Of this I am certain.

I firmly believe that an unending stream of capable young people, who will shoulder the new era, will emerge from these precious citadels of kosen-rufu and work to realize peace in the 21st century. I look forward to them taking their place in the world.