

Daisaku Ikeda, Buddhist Leader

“A person who cannot genuinely empathize with others can never excel as a leader. It is in enduring pain and struggles that the earth of our humanity is cultivated. And it is from this earth that a capacity to be genuinely concerned for the welfare of others blossoms.” In these words, Daisaku Ikeda reveals his personal history as a world-respected Buddhist leader, peace-builder, writer, educator, and founder of cultural, educational, and research institutions around the world.

Born in 1928 to a family of seaweed farmers, Ikeda struggled with ill health as a youth. The devastation and horror he witnessed as a teenager during World War II (the family home was twice destroyed in air raids) engendered a lifelong passion to work for peace. At 19 he met Josei Toda, an early leader of the Soka Gakkai (“value-creating society”), a lay Buddhist community based on 750-year-old Nichiren Buddhism. Toda, as his mentor and teacher, would come to have the most formative influence on Ikeda’s life.

In 1960, two years after Toda’s death, he became president of the Soka Gakkai, launching an era of innovation, expansion, and worldwide engagement in cultural and educational pursuits. He also founded—and continues to lead—Soka Gakkai International (SGI), a global network linking over 12 million members in some 190 countries and territories.

A prolific writer, Ikeda has published more than 100 works on Buddhist philosophy as well as biographical essays, poetry, children’s stories and photographic collections. Since 1983, he has also written peace proposals that include recommendations for strengthening civil society involvement, which he regards as essential to peace. But in his view, global peace relies as much on self-directed transformation within an individual as on societal or structural reforms. “A great inner revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation and, further, will enable a change in the destiny of all humankind,” he writes.

Calling education the culminating endeavor of his life, Ikeda continues to develop networks of educational exchange and collaboration. His writings are currently used in university course materials in several countries, and more than 20 research institutes worldwide are dedicated to the study of his philosophy. To date, he has received more than 250 honorary doctorates and professorships from universities around the world.

Ikeda’s message to young people is this: “The thing is to paint this vision of your life in your heart as specifically as possible. That ‘painting’ itself becomes the design of your future. The power of the heart enables us to actually create with our lives a wonderful masterpiece in accordance with that design.” For his unflagging commitment to Buddhist ideals, and for making his own life and vision a source of inspiration to others, UMass Boston would like to confer an honorary degree upon Daisaku Ikeda.

[Note: Dr. Ikeda was too ill to attend the May 2010 commencement. His honorary degree was conferred by Chancellor Keith Motley in a special ceremony in Tokyo in November 2010.]