

RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

The practice of Nichiren Daishonin Buddhism at the time of the pandemic

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Soka Gakkai Buddhism

All Buddhist traditions, including that of the Soka Gakkai, derive from the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni. After enlightening himself to the Mystic Law, Shakyamuni decided to share this wisdom with all people. The central message of his teachings - set forth definitively in the Lotus Sutra - can be summarized in the principle that Buddhahood is a condition of absolute happiness inherent in every living being. Soka Gakkai Buddhism is based on the teachings of The Buddha Nichiren Daishonin (1222-1282), and consists of the daily recitation of "Nam-myoho-renge- kyo" (the Mystic Law) and the reading of the Hoben and Juryo chapters of the Lotus Sutra. The Lotus Sutra states that human beings - regardless of gender, individual abilities and social condition - are all potentially Buddha, endowed with compassion, wisdom and courage and therefore worthy of the utmost respect.

The Buddhist practice in the Soka Gakkai Sangha (the community of believers) is based on the compassion for every living being: only through this attitude is it possible to achieve individual happiness.

The Soka Gakkai International (SGI), of which the Istituto Buddista Italiano Soka Gakkai (IBISG) is a member, is a secular organization spread over 192 countries and territories that promotes peace, culture and education based on the Buddhist humanism of Nichiren Daishonin. The individual members of the SGI are committed, as citizens of the world, to the improvement of their local communities.

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The SGI is active in building a culture of peace through dialogue based on the principle that individual happiness and the realisation of a peaceful world are inextricably linked.

The SGI organizations present in the various nations with the common goal of contributing to peace, culture and education promote inter-religious dialogues, exhibitions and conferences suited for the cultural contexts of each country.

Every year, since 1983, Daisaku Ikeda, the third President of the SGI, has written Peace Proposals addressed to the international community in which, starting from an analysis of the global situation, it suggests concrete solutions rooted in the philosophy of Buddhist humanism.

The life of the Italian Sangha

In 2016 the IBISG obtained an agreement with the Italian State (Law 130, G.U. 164 of 15/07/2016).

Buddhist "practice" has a strong component of "physicality" and relationship: the voice is used to "chant" Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and the Lotus Sutra individually or together with other practitioners; we meet weekly in small groups in private homes for study meetings, discussion meetings and the sharing of experiences. In the 17 Italian cultural centres, larger meetings are regularly organised, such as seminars for the study and the deepening of Buddhism. Personal meetings are also at the centre of the Sangha's activities. A "frontal" ritual with a celebrant in front of fellow members does not belong to our religion: all our activities are based on meeting, sharing and above all on daily Buddhist practice.

The Pandemic

On 23rd February 2020, unexpectedly in just one day, all fellow members were not able to continue their daily activities with one another. With the public notice issued

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by the IBISG on that date it was decided, in agreement with the headquarters in Tokyo, to stop all activities "in presence".

This measure was taken in advance of the Prime Ministerial Decrees, in line with the protection of the Sanctity of Life, which is the foundation of our religious DNA. In a writing by the founder Nichiren Daishonin, who lived in 1200, it is written that "Life is the most precious of all treasures. Even one extra day of life is worth more than ten million ryō of gold"¹.

The interruption of the usual activities generated a lot of suffering in people, who found themselves without the direct support and encouragement to which they were used to, at such a crucial time. A sense of bewilderment and disorientation spread in the Sangha, as it did throughout society, in Italy and elsewhere.

It was precisely at that very moment that the encouragement by Daisaku Ikeda, who over all these decades has taught us (first of all by example and actual proof) to "transform every poison into medicine", arrived, promptly: he has encouraged us repeatedly not to lose hope and to look at technology as a way to continue to develop relationships in the community at this time. The Buddha Nichiren Daishonin states in one of his letters: "There are not two lands, pure or impure in themselves. The difference lies solely in the good or evil of our minds"².. This means that - not only hatred - but above all compassion can be carried out through the Internet. With this spirit, the IBISG has reinvented its activities. The Soka Gakkai Sangha consists of around 94,000 fellow members, there are relatively few employees (around 35 as well as some collaborators) and all our activity is based on volunteering.

Resilience phase 1

The IBISG is committed to making that desire for happiness and global peace, that Buddhism has enabled us to discover, re-emerge in everyone's hearts. In this way, gradually, a resilience has manifested that we have never had an opportunity to bring out before. It was perceived that only in the greatest difficulties is it possible to

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¹ *On Prolonging One's Life Span*, The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, vol. 1, p. 955, Soka Gakkai

² *On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime*, The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, vol. 1 p. 3, Soka Gakkai.

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measure the real strength of the community and develop further capacities. The Sangha's response was not long in coming: the youth launched the "1, 2, 3 be the light" campaign, which consists of doing 1 hour of individual Buddhist practice each day, 20 minutes of Buddhist study and three phone calls to as many friends, not necessarily practitioners, to convey courage and resilience. The spirit of this activity is also summarized in this principle of Nichiren Daishonin: "If you light a lantern for another, it will also brighten your own way" (Gosho Zenshu, p. 1598). On March 9th the editorial staff of our fortnightly newspaper "Il Nuovo Rinascimento" (*The New Renaissance*), started to publish free Newsletters in pdf format, distributed by mail, facebook and whatsapp, in order to reach everyone. The Newsletters contain encouragements, almost in real time, from Daisaku Ikeda, news of the IBISG, and many experiences of fellow members who tell how they have faced and won over their personal difficulties. This joyful experience has been so successful that it has led us to study a radical reform of the editorial project, which will profoundly change from next year. Without this "crisis" it would not have been possible. We also started to organize, thanks to the youth, who patiently paved the way, virtual meetings using online platforms, and in this moment we managed to reestablish contacts with a good percentage of members, creating group meetings, individual meetings and real virtual home visits. Aware that many people do not have the possibility or the will to use these tools, we are determined to reach everyone by phone, and not to leave anyone behind. Going forward along this road, more and more courageous and ambitious projects have been developed: exciting online meetings, full of experiences, enabled members to be close together again also on a national level. The members of Bergamo, in the eye of the storm of the pandemic in Italy, encouraged everyone by sharing the spirit with which they faced their tragedy! In March, at the most difficult moment, and precisely on the 17th, our Institute (which in June 2020, following the agreement with the Italian State, would have received the proceeds of the *eight per thousand tax* for the first time) through its decision-making body (the National Council) decided to allocate the entire amount to the coronavirus emergency, and in addition, from our funds, the sum of 500,000 euros (which corresponds to a substantial part of the offerings of the members) to the coordination of the emergency through the Civil Protection. Nichiren Daishonin, the founder of our Buddhist School, says: "More valuable than treasures in a storehouse are the treasures of the body, and the treasures of the heart are the most

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valuable of all. From the time you read this letter on, strive to accumulate the treasures of the heart!"³. All this has been done, with a pure heart, exactly with the spirit of the sentence just mentioned, in which "the treasures of the heart" are the most important. At that moment there was a need for the cohesion of everyone and the IBISG has rightly done its part. The vast majority of members felt proud of being part of the Soka Gakkai, and this gesture finally brought courage into the hearts of the people who were isolated at that time. On 13 May the IBISG firmly joined the World Day of Prayer promoted by Pope Francis.

Resilience phase 2

On 17 May, following the Prime Ministerial Decree on "Phase 2", the Protocol for religious bodies with the Presidency of the Council of Ministers was signed (the IBISG is in Group No. 4), for the safe resumption of religious activities. We have studied it thoroughly and have endeavoured to combine this protocol with our real way of practising and our usual prudence, drawing up an Internal Protocol formula, inspired by the utmost attention and consistent with the Buddhist principle of protection of life: no one should in any way risk being infected because of religious commitments.

³ *The Three Kinds of Treasure*, The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, vol. 1 p. 851, Soka Gakkai

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The activity that more than any other that was blocked was that of the Ceremony for becoming member and the relative conferral of the Object of worship: these ceremonies take place in the places of worship present in the Soka Cultural Centres. A protocol was therefore studied to make these ceremonies happen and, just to give one parameter a distance of two metres was set between people inside the centres. However, in agreement with the Soka Gakkai International, we have chosen, for further prudence, not to cultivate this path because, besides the ministers of worship and the new members, there would be other people involved: those volunteers who carry out the service of reception, protection and support, of which friends and family of those who receive the Object of worship normally participate. We therefore studied and adopted in mid- June, a new internal protocol, with further restrictions, again in agreement with the one signed on 17 May with the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, which provides for the performance of individual ceremonies. What we used to do for fifty or one hundred people with friends and relatives in tow, with rooms often brought to the limit of capacity, we did with one person at a time and with only one companion. We welcome each person individually into the IBISG to whom we give our Object of worship for their personal practice, maintaining the meaning and solemnity of the ceremony itself. Great prudence and maximum attention; every gesture is studied, planned and tested in detail, each Cultural Centre or place of worship has its own internal implementation plan of the National Protocol approved by the Anticovid Committee of the Institute.

Conclusions

Surely all fellow members have suffered for these situations that prevent our collective practice from taking place, but the pandemic has been and will also be a unique opportunity to get even more to the heart of the deep meaning of Buddhist practice, which is to support and encourage each person to believe in the infinite potential that exists in his or her life: the same present in the infinite universe.

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Buddhist activity has been totally challenged, and an even greater challenge has arisen: to encourage all people individually. Thanks to this difficulty it has been possible to deepen the care of each individual person as the basis of our practice through a direct heart-to-heart relationship. The spirit of the Soka Community is, and will always remain, that of Buddhism and Daisaku Ikeda: to contribute individually, through their own personal human revolution, to the progress and prosperity of our social and natural environment as good citizens and good citizens inspired by the values of peace, culture and human rights education.

As Daisaku Ikeda teaches us: "In life there is suffering and pain. In nature there are mountains, rivers and valleys to cross. The deeper the river of sadness and the higher the mountain of suffering, the greater the joy and happiness of overcoming them"⁴.

⁴ See the tentative translation from Daisaku Ikeda, 22 settembre La Mappa della Felicità, Esperia.