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A Positive Relationship Between Daisaku Ikeda's Environmental Thoughts and the Growth of Korea Soka Gakkai International (KSIG)

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Abstract

This paper examines the religious-sociological implications and characteristics of Buddhist environmentalism as articulated in the annual peace proposals of Daisaku Ikeda, founder of Soka Gakkai International (SGI). Leading the lay Buddhist organization established in Guam, USA, in 1975, Ikeda has emphasized the principle of dependent origination and promoted active civic engagement with environmental movements. In the Korean context, a key theoretical question from a religious-sociological perspective is how Ikeda's environmental ideas have influenced the religious identity of Korea SGI (KSIG) members and contributed to the organization's growth. Considering that it was not until the 1990s that Buddhist environmentalism in Korea began to move beyond its association with Marxist class struggle and incorporate ecological thought, it is noteworthy that KSIG had already been disseminating Ikeda's Buddhist environmentalism since the 1970s, fostering an understanding of humanity, nature, and the world from a holistic perspective. This paper concludes that Ikeda's ideas provided KSIG members with a new Buddhist philosophical and social framework through which to internalize the peaceful coexistence of human and non-human life, grounded in the Buddhist conceptualization of the greater self and global citizenship.

Keywords: Daisaku Ikeda; Soka Gakkai International (SGI); Buddhist environmentalism; global citizenship; greater self; Korea Soka Gakkai International (KSIG)



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1. Introduction

Today climate change is having a severe impact on both terrestrial and marine ecosystems by causing desertification, floods, wildfires, and sea level rise on both local and global scales (Barriopedro et al. 2023; Davies and Riddell 2017; Han et al. 2020b; Han et al. 2020a; Seymour 2016; Smith et al. 2023). This all-out disaster necessarily calls for a fundamental reflection on humanity's relationship with nature (Moran 2016; Seymour 2016). Above all, the fact that all environmental-ecological matters are not solved by technological advances and intergovernmental agreements is why religious-ecological perspectives are still significant.¹ Daisaku Ikeda, a Buddhist philosopher and founder of Soka Gakkai International (SGI), is one of the main religious leaders, like Pope Francis, well-known for environmental-ecological theology and practice. Since the 1970s (Park 2018), Ikeda began to indoctrinate an existential connection between humans and the environment in terms of the oneness

and connectedness of life (Ikeda 1983, 1984, 2022; Toynebee and Ikeda 2023). This supposes an interdependent nature of all life, including human animals and non-human animals, in the Buddhist context, ultimately expanding SGI's happiness discourse into a universal environmental-ecological existentialism. Central to Ikeda's Buddhism is that "Without life, there can be no environment; and the environment shapes life" (SGI 2024). As shown in his annual peace proposals, a shift in how humans perceive themselves and nature should be framed by an ethical and spiritual faith of interconnectedness (Goulah 2024; Goulah and Kartha 2024; Ikeda 2022). It is believed that everything is connected (Ikeda 2007) and the whole system feels it when one thing is affected (Petersen et al. 2019).

Methodologically, this paper closely examines Ikeda's peace proposals from 1983 to 2022 (Ikeda 1983, 2022) by means of textual analysis, considering the socio-historical context of these proposals, and connecting global environmental challenges to Ikeda's responses and recommendations. This offers a better understanding of the environmentalism conducted by SGI Buddhism in that the concept of the oneness and connectedness of all life represents clearly Ikeda's vision for environmental sustainability. Daisaku Ikeda's annual peace proposals have been publicly available through SGI archives and publications for 40 years (Ikeda 1983, 2022). Ikeda's proposals address many global challenges, including environmental concerns, peace, human rights, and sustainable development. For this study, we focus on his views about the environment, especially where he discusses the connection between people and nature and the moral duty to safeguard it.

Based on the analysis of Ikeda's peace proposals, this paper examines how his environmental-ecological thoughts have had an impact on Korea SGI (KSIG) members' ecological citizenship and on its own religious growth. First, to be specific, it is necessary to understand the oneness and interconnectedness of all life as suggested in his 2002 proposal and explain why it is significant in theory and practice. Second, this paper tries to make clear how KSIG members internalize religiously an inseparable connection between humans and the environment. The third is on how Ikeda's Buddhist environmentalism is related to the qualitative progress of the Korean environmental movement since the 1990s. Especially, SGI's emphasis on the role of the United Nations is very different in its method from Korean Buddhist environmentalism. Finally, this paper suggests a few theoretical and practical challenges that KSIG environmentalism faces in a rapidly changing Korean society.

2. Theoretical Implication of Ikeda's Buddhist Environmentalism

The oneness and interconnectedness of all life that runs through Daisaku Ikeda's environmentalism is not far from that of the Huayan School's (華嚴宗), Thich Nhat Hanh's, and Catholicism's which emerged in both the East and the West.

At the very heart of the values we seek must be a profound reverence for life itself. Such a sense of respect and reverence can awaken people to a sense of connection with all the forms of life with whom we presently share this Earth, as well as a sense of oneness with future generations. (Ikeda 2002)

First, as shown well in the proposal above, respect for life itself is a doctrinal foundation that props up the oneness and interconnectedness of all life. Here Ikeda uses the term of 'connection' and 'oneness' in both synchronic and diachronic ways. In other words, he argues that each life should share the Earth at present and in the future with other life. The idea of the oneness of all life is in the same line with religious-ecological discourse led by a group of scholars in the West (Hitzhusen and Tucker 2013; Jenkins et al. 2016; Williams and Tucker 1997; Wilson 2020). All of them pay heavy attention to Buddhist teachings on interdependence and compassion to overcome the current ecological crisis. In Buddhist

thoughts, the real environmental-ecological awakening results from realizing the fact that each life is necessarily dependent on the surrounding environment.

Second, Ikeda's proposals of sustainability and empowerment function as a practical instruction for how its members across the world should engage in various environmental-ecological discourses and education. Ikeda encourages SGI members to change how they think about their connection to the planet (Ikeda 2000) and how to act in their daily lives (O'Brien 2012; Wilson 2020). Even a spiritual enlightenment at the individual level can change his own life and the environment surrounding him, ultimately leading to true happiness (Ikeda 1996). In the 2023 survey of ecological religiosity by religion, 92.0% of KSGI respondents said that the practice of ecological ethics is a religious obligation, and 66.7% felt guilty about neglecting environmental ecological destruction (Yoo and Kim 2023, p. 5). The potential of an empowered individual provides SGI members with a unique faith-based ecological identity different from both the "world-rejecting" attitude of traditional Buddhist environmentalism and secular environmental radicalism.

Third, as the environmental crisis makes social inequality and conflict more remarkable and destructive across the world, people are losing confidence in the spectacular rhetoric, made by secular politicians and policymakers as well as fanatics, of groundless optimism. From the perspective of the sociology of religion, these difficulties and hopelessness tend to drive people to an eschatological or scientific skepticism. Ikeda's Buddhist insight, in the context of these times, can play the role of a promising ethos necessary to construct an environmental-ecological civil society. Given that Ikeda appreciates "The Limits to Growth", the monumental report released in 1972 by the Club of Rome, quoting a dialog with Aurelio Peccei, its co-founder (Ikeda 2002, 2012), it seems that he is sure of the unsustainability of the consumption-oriented economy. In his vision Buddhism environmentalism is not for religiously justifying an individualistic lifestyle and consumption culture, but for liberating the entire humanity from a materialistic bondage imposed by capitalistic civilization and ideology. Thus, SGI members are asked to take an ethical responsibility for the Earth based on the oneness and interconnectedness of all life. This is a progressive reinterpretation of the theory of dependent origination (緣起論) that existing Buddhist environmentalists have mainly relied on. Ikeda explained it as follows:

The concept of causation, known in Sanskrit as *pratitya-samutpada* or "dependent origination," explains the fundamental process whereby all phenomena in the universe (including sentient beings) come into being as a result of causes. All things in the universe are subject to this law of cause and effect, and consequently nothing can exist independently of other things or arise of its own accord. For this reason, the theory of causation is often explained as either dependent origination or conditioned co-arising. This web of causation that binds all things is temporal as well as spatial, so that not only are all things in existence at the present moment dependent upon one another but all things existing in the past and future as well. (Ikeda 2008b, p. 65)

Finally, it is noteworthy that Ikeda regards both the United Nations and traditional indigenous cultures as determinants to reach sustainable development goals (SDGs). As suggested in various studies on indigenous people (Cornassel 2014; Olupona 2009; UNDP 2011), they tend to guide how to maintain biodiversity and peaceful coexistence with nature. Likewise, for SGI members, the UN was and is still a central player for international environmental movements to recover the oneness and connectedness of life found in indigenous communities across the world (Ikeda 2002, 2012). This balance of globalism and localism is one of the most basic principles of socio-ecological justice announced repeatedly in the Rio + 20 Conference in 2012 and later during the Paris Agreement in 2015. In this context, Ikeda's Buddhist environmentalism, which professes socio-ecological justice, can be

more persuasive and appealing to both its members and non-members than mainstream Korean Buddhism, which focuses mainly on the doctrinal interpretation of non-human life and on the theory of causality (Fuchs 2024).

This analysis uses thematic coding to identify and organize major themes connected to environmental ethics, sustainability, and humanity's relationship with nature. It includes a detailed review of Ikeda's proposals to find recurring ideas like interdependence, humans' duty to safeguard the planet, and how such messages are related to faith-based SDGs discourse and the rapid growth of KSIG in the Korean context.

3. Main Themes in the Religious-Sociological Context

Daisaku Ikeda's peace proposals from 1983 to 2022 show a consistent emphasis on the holistic connection between environmental sustainability and global peace. Throughout the proposals, Ikeda advocates for a civilizational shift in global governance in terms of interdependence between all life forms and the natural world. Peace in this world is inseparable from the matter of environmental-ecological crisis because the true happiness of all people cannot be achieved without a peaceful coexistence with the Earth. The ancient Buddhist concept of *ahimsa*, non-killing, is not enough to overcome the current full-scale crisis that urgently requires humans to take on the spiritual and ethical responsibility to safeguard the Earth. Now the precept of *ahimsa* is interpreted not only as a passive and bystander obligation not to kill, but also as an active and participatory obligation to prevent killing. As for KSIG, not only is this precept not embodied as a religious lifestyle controlling eating, clothing, and housing, it is also not interpreted as vegetarianism or seclusion to nature, which is in contrast with mainstream Korean Buddhism. Instead, Ikeda consistently encourages SIG Buddhists to reach an ecological awakening, suggesting that the happiness of humanity and nature are intricately interconnected and that the ecological crisis comes from a deeper spiritual and moral degradation. These religious thoughts can be analyzed more concretely through main themes.

3.1. New Model of Global Governance

In his 1988 and 1989 proposals, Daisaku Ikeda criticizes the limitations of the existing human rights frameworks, particularly the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" and the "International Covenant on Human Rights". While acknowledging their historical significance, Ikeda argues that these frameworks fall short in addressing critical contemporary challenges, including the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the existential threats posed by nuclear weapons and environmental crisis (Ikeda 1988, 1989). That is because these global crises cannot be effectively resolved through the current state-dominated approach to human rights. Furthermore, he pays attention to a paradigm shift in global governance that transcends the traditional boundaries of national sovereignty and the inefficiencies of existing institutions such as the United Nations. For this reason, Ikeda finally proposes the creation of the "Environmental UN" (Ikeda 1991, 1992, 2008a).

Since the 1990s, recognizing the inadequacy of fragmented efforts led by nation states, Ikeda began to adopt a holistic and systemic approach to the environmental crisis. This change in his thoughts reached the establishment of the "Environmental United Nations," a specialized global agency dedicated to addressing environmental issues comprehensively as a platform for international cooperation, where governments, NGOs, scientists, and civil society could collaborate to tackle pressing challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. Central to his holistic and inclusive vision is the role of NGOs, citizens, and other non-state actors in carrying out international policies and holding governments accountable. By integrating diverse perspectives and fostering collaboration between state and non-state entities, he thought that the proposed "Environmental

UN” would embody a new model of global governance, capable of addressing the complexities of the modern world. Political conflicts and extreme disagreements between developed and developing countries over solving environmental-ecological problems like the climate crisis are difficult to overcome with the current national states. By fostering partnerships between international institutions and non-state actors, Ikeda envisions a more inclusive and effective approach to global governance through establishing a dedicated UN platform that would provide a space for diverse perspectives to be heard, ensuring that decision-making processes reflect the needs and aspirations of people from all walks of life. For this reason, SGI members across the world are encouraged to support and participate in establishing the new global governance individually and collectively.

This perspective traces back to Nichiren Buddhism which teaches the oneness and interconnectedness of life and its environment (Craig 2024). According to Nichiren Buddhism, harming the environment is tantamount to harming oneself, as all life is interconnected within the broader web of existence (Daishonin 1999, p. 24). The civic engagement of SGI emerged as a lay movement of Nichiren Buddhism, ranging from educational campaigns to community-based projects, aiming to foster a global civic culture of environmental awareness and responsibility. For instance, SGI’s participation in the 1992 Earth Summit, where it organized the “Environment and Development Exhibition”, was a way to urge collective action on a global level to promote the survival of all human beings (Ikeda 1992, 2019, 2022).

In terms of the sociology of religion, above all, its holistic, practical, and globalized approach is more significant to understanding the fact that SGI grew to be a much more influential worldwide organization than any other Nichiren Buddhist group, even though both share a Buddhist tradition which can be applied to reach an ecologically ideal society. This difference results from an organizational feature of SGI which was established by Ikeda in 1975 in Guam, USA, and departed from Nichiren Shōshū in 1991.

3.2. Global Citizenship and Buddhist Empowerment

In his 1987 proposal, Daisaku Ikeda introduced the idea of a “Decade of UN Global Citizenship Education,” a visionary initiative aimed at addressing critical global challenges, including environmental degradation, sustainable development, peace-building, and the advancement of humanity (Ikeda 1987). Recognizing the interconnected nature of these issues, Ikeda pays much attention to the educational framework as a means of cultivating a deep awareness of responsibility for the global eco-system across geographical, ethnic, and state boundaries. The integration of environmental-ecological ethics into educational curricula is designed to transform individuals into ‘global citizens’—people who are not only aware of their interconnectedness with others and the planet but also actively committed to safeguarding the Earth’s well-being. This approach applies main Buddhist values such as compassion and respect for all life to shaping an ecological identity necessary to global citizenship.

In other words, ecological identity in Ikeda’s vision is based on the belief in the dignity of human and non-human life in the micro dimension, which functions as an ethical foundation to recover a global eco-system in the macro dimension. To cultivate this ecological identity necessary to global citizenship, he proposes a full-scale transformation of personality education that enables individuals to see beyond national or cultural limitations, and to embrace their role as stewards of the planet and agents for the common good. Thus, it seems that Ikeda had a strong conviction in the transformative power of education in making a new ecological identity for achieving global peace and environmental harmony. This is why he announced the “Decade of UN Global Citizenship Education” to cope with

the globally destructive ecological crisis through Buddhist wisdom, empathy, and ideals (Ikeda 1998, 2020; O'Brien 2012; Wilson 2020).

In the religious-sociological context, the global citizenship here necessarily accompanies its civic ethics which can integrate humanitarian and environmental values into the decision-making process of global governance (Ikeda 2018, 2021). After all, global citizens armed with ecological civic ethics are asked to join political discussions and compromise to avoid violent conflicts and coercion surrounding environmental disputes and policy. By empowering such actors of the global civil society to make public discourses, like climate change, biodiversity loss, and sustainable development, Ikeda seeks to create a democratic controlling system of global governance based on voluntary participation.

Meanwhile, Ikeda's peace proposals in the early 2000s place more emphasis on the role of youth as critical players in overcoming the environmental crisis (Ikeda 2001, 2005). Ikeda's initiatives here, such as the "Youth Action Decade", are designed to mobilize younger generations to take a leadership role in confronting climate issues by means of energy, creativity, and commitment of the younger generations. In addition, it is also suggested that the "UN Youth Council" be established to enable young people to actively participate in global decision-making processes. According to his belief, youth empowerment is essential for achieving SDGs. Through these initiatives, Ikeda finally tries to show the transformative potential of young generations to engage in climate action because undoubtedly climate change is an inter-generational or transgenerational matter. Especially Ikeda regards educational institutions, particularly universities, as pivotal for fostering global citizenship and coming up with innovative solutions (Ikeda 2007, 2019). Here universities have a unique role in equipping young students with ecological identities and the technology necessary to comprehend various socio-politically complex issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequality. By cultivating a sense of shared responsibility and interconnectedness, universities enable young students to become active contributors to global sustainability. Both Soka University in Japan and Soka University of America founded by Ikeda are known to insert global citizenship and SDGs into their curricula; its SDGs curriculum, focuses on ethical leadership, cultural understanding, environmental stewardship, and ecological justice.

Finally, Ikeda's Buddhism emphasizes the role of urban leadership in tackling climate change, pointing out that cities are responsible for a substantial share of global carbon emissions and are uniquely positioned to implement impactful solutions (Ikeda 2022). Here the urban environment, as hubs of economic activity, innovation, and population density, offers resources and simultaneously takes on the responsibility to lead the global transition toward sustainability. For this reason, it is interesting that Ikeda suggests the Compact of Mayors or a global coalition of city leaders as a model for how urban areas can create localized strategies for a culture of sustainability, instead of slower-moving central governments.

3.3. Greater Self and Buddhist-Ecological Justice

According to Ikeda's 1993 Harvard University lecture, "Mahayana Buddhism and 21st Century Civilization", "The greater self ... is another way of expressing the openness and expansiveness of character that embraces the suffering of all people as one's own. This self always seeks out ways of alleviating the pain, and augmenting the happiness of others, here, amid the realities of everyday life." This concept of the 'greater self' derived from the idea of *Bodhisattva* in Mahayana Buddhism implies that the reformation or 'human revolution' at the individual level can lead to a profound universal awakening and practice. The greater self (大我) or *Bodhisattva* has its existential ground in helping all people to be liberated from suffering (苦) and obsession (執), in opposition to the lesser self (小我) who

is trapped in selfish self-satisfaction and self-delusion. This altruism inherent in *Bodhisattva* is one of the most fundamental behavioral ethics of SGI members toward the better world; although, the idea of *Bodhisattva* had spread for many reasons and in various forms in India and East Asia (Han 2024, pp. 142–46). The greater self is understood as an expanded Buddhist identity like *Bodhisattva*, as shown in the influence of the *bodhisattva* precepts on the establishment of Mahayana Buddhism (Groner 2018, p. 31; Han 2024). Ikeda describes this as follows (Ikeda 2002):

Through dialogue and engagement, we draw forth and inspire in ourselves and in the lives of others a profound sense of purpose and joy. We begin a process of fundamental change that awakens a vastly expanded sense of identity—our “greater self.” The ultimate objective of SGI’s activities is to bring about—starting with a reformation or “human revolution” in our individual lives—a universal flowering of the philosophy of reverence for life.

His message above underscores both the method and goal to be the greater self in accordance with the Buddhist philosophy of life, which he believes are essential for building a harmonious and resilient world. This logical expansion from individual ethics to an universal principle is also illustrated in the metaphor of the lotus flower blooming in muddy water when Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, the founder of Soka Gakkai, introduced the Buddhist concept of value creation, a central tenet of SGI (Ikeda 2021). The lotus flower in Buddhism usually symbolizes an existential empowerment, namely the internal potential of everyone to transform adversity into opportunity, as the lotus flower thrives beautifully in difficult conditions, and the Lotus Sutra (法華經) teaches the Buddhahood inherent in all people. In this context, Ikeda believes that this empowerment makes humans overcome global ecological crises by cultivating their inner strength, wisdom, and compassion.

In addition, this shows more clearly SGI’s attitudes towards ecological justice in that every individual is empowered to stop all destructive and exploitative practices and liberate all life from social inequality and bondage revealed or caused by the current ecological crisis. Since an individual within SGI environmentalism is understood as a powerful being who can change the world, he or she has a religious duty to correct the ecological injustices included in domestic or international conflicts or struggles between developed and developing countries, upper and lower classes, or the powerful and vulnerable. Thus, the greater self as an incarnation of SGI Buddhism exists to correct the established order of the world and ultimately build an ecologically ideal society where everyone enjoys ecological happiness fairly and equally. Nevertheless, in KSGI, this theory of ecological justice is still ideological and very limited in practice. It is also questionable how effective it will be to achieve ecological justice without the use of political means in KSGI, which does not consider any political intervention.

4. Its Relation to the Growth of KSGI

SGI environmentalism is supported by its teachings of the transformative potential of an individual through continuous learning, personal growth, and value creation. Given that SGI as a lay movement pursues to make this world a Buddhist ideal society, its worldview is distant doctrinally from the largest Korean Buddhism Order, *Jogye*, which is unwilling to engage in this secular world as it is the hotbed of anthropocentric greed and bondage, as explained insightfully in Max Weber’s classic book, *The Religion of India: the Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism* (Weber 1958). This difference between the two Buddhist worldviews triggers a religious-sociologically interesting question of how SGI grew so fast in Korea for a relatively short period.

Historically, KSGI has experienced a rapid growth in its membership since the 2000s, whereas mainstream Korean Buddhism has failed to increase its membership.

Figure 1 shows that the total number of KSGI centers across the country increased most rapidly during the 2000s (MCSTK 2002, 2008, 2011, 2018).² While there is still no systematic study of the growth of KSGI, a few western scholars have attempted to explain the growth of Soka Gakkai in USA, UK, and Australia since the 1990s (Dawson 2001; Dobbelaere 2001; Hammond and Machacek 1999; Machacek and Wilson 2000; Metraux 2004; Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994). These studies in the West are significant for the comparative analysis of growth factors of SGI across the world, but there are theoretical limitations when applying their results to KSGI or the entire SGI. Given that KSGI reportedly has more than one million members, which is the second biggest SGI by country except for Japan, it is natural that a more serious consideration in the Korean context is required to understand the growth pattern of KSGI exactly, as shown in Figure 1.

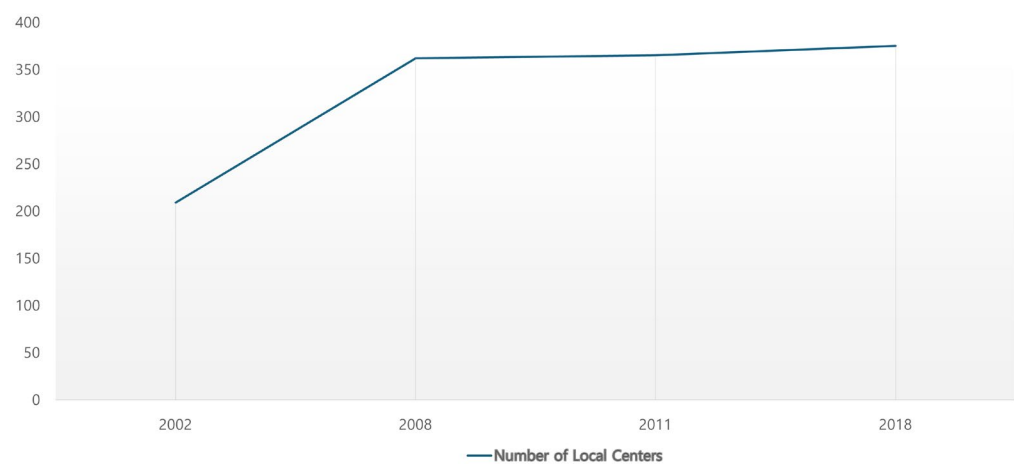


Figure 1. Growth pattern of KSGI.

Especially, this paper pays intensive attention to the positive relationship between SGI environmentalism and its growth in Korea, rather than dealing with too many political, economic, social, historical, and cultural factors in a limited length. It was not until the 1990s that Korean environmental groups began to introduce an ecological philosophy out of the Marxist social movement. The *Hansalim* movement, launched in 1989 by local Catholic farmers and priests, is considered the first ecological civic movement in Korea (Ku 1995, p. 355; Yoo 2022, p. 100). From then on Protestant-based YMCA and YWCA and progressive Buddhists also began to join environmental-ecological movements in earnest, claiming a shift in the civilizational paradigm, including an ecological awakening and a change in the worldview and lifestyle of all citizens (Ku 1995, p. 361; Yu 2020).

In this historical context, SGI environmentalism was unique and particular in that its leader, Daisaku Ikeda, has taught the oneness and interconnectedness of life and its environment as one of its Buddhist doctrines since the 1970s, whereas mainstream Korean Buddhists marginalized environmental-ecological activists and even criticized Marxist or socialist thought as incompatible with their Buddhism. Even within the Korean Buddhist community, there is still a strong tendency to regard Buddhist environmentalism as a political movement to resolve the contradictions of capitalism (Lee 2013; Yu 2020). It is easily deducible that this makes SGI appear more gradual and reliable in public as both a religious organization and a civic NGO. Especially, the success in registering KSGI as a non-profit corporation in Korea in 2000 became a decisive moment that improved public trust and institutionally quelled social prejudice and defamation against it. In addition, the cultural openness policy of Kim Dae-Jung's government provided a social environment where Japanese cultural contents could be imported in large quantities since the late 1990s (Jung

2021, pp. 272, 504). This means that the general Korean public is more familiar with SGI as Japanese lay Buddhism and even its musical activities (Kim 2025, p. 103).

Meanwhile, the rapid growth of KSGI since the 2000s is deeply related to the social progress of Korean civil democracy which places the highest value on the principle of equality and freedom. KSGI based on lay Buddhism fits well with the social trends of the times in that it teaches the oneness of mentor and disciple (師弟不二) and the equality between male and female (兩性平等), emphasizing individual responsibility and the ability to reach a Buddhist happiness as sociologically explained in the western context (Dawson 2001; Hammond and Machacek 1999; Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994). Without these civic ethics, there can be no civic identity like ‘environmental or ecological citizenship’ (Dobson 2006, 2007). This is in opposite to the conservative and authoritative tendency of Korean Mainstream Buddhism and Protestantism which have enjoyed a mutually supporting relationship with political leaders during the ruling of military regimes. Although this concept of equality is more innovative than Korean mainstream Buddhism, KSGI still has outdated aspects from a feminist or governance perspective. However, this is a product of masculinity that is commonly found in all historical religions, and it is not just a problem with KSGI.

In fact, a recent social survey implemented by the Institute for Religion and Civic Culture at Kyung Hee University in 2023 shows statistical findings that KSGI members have a much higher level of ecological identity and consciousness compared to other people belonging to the established religions (Yoo and Kim 2023, p. 4).³ A few KSGI respondents of this survey expressed clearly why ecological issues like the COVID-19 pandemic are religiously important to them:

All religions need to cooperate and practice environmental and ecological crises. KSGI also believes that we need to put more budget and manpower into overcoming these crises. That is the spirit of Mahayana Buddhism. (A male member in his 60s interviewed on 15 January 2023)

Since the 1970s, we have carried out environmental activities such as the clean-up movement of the national land. As Ikeda suggested, all members became more convinced of the importance of building peace through sustainable development through the COVID-19 crisis. (A female member in her 60s interviewed on 20 January 2023)

As a scientist, I am witnessing the scientific consequences of ecosystem destruction every day. I am convinced that practicing environmental ethics of SGI is the most important means for the human revolution. (A male member in his 40s interviewed on 3 February 2023)

Finally, KSGI has maintained its non-intervention in any political issues very consistently, while members of its Japanese partner, Soka Gakkai, established the Komeito party (公明黨) in 1964 and has collectively supported political candidates and policy objectives (Fisker-Nielsen 2022, p. 9). Given that, in the Korean context, KSGI has been stigmatized in public as ‘pseudo-Buddhism’ by both mainstream Korean Buddhists and the mass media since the 1960s (Cho 2020; Park 2007), its political non-intervention still functions as the most significant strategy for improving its public trust within the Korean religious market. Theoretically speaking, the relationship between religious growth and political neutrality can be supported by the religious market perspective which argues that a strict separation of religion and state makes the entire religious market more vital and more efficient by means of encouraging open and fair competition among religious suppliers (Chaves and Cann 1992; Finke and Grim 2011; Finke and Stark 1992; Iannaccone et al. 1997; Stark and Finke 2000). For KSGI, as one of the minority religions in Korea, this principle of separation of politics and religion guarantees an institutional and legal framework to protect

its own organization and activities from both major religions and politicians. Thus, KSIG environmentalism was and is still limited to the clean-up movements of local communities or picture exhibitions which never entail any political debates.

5. Conclusions

Through a textual analysis of Daisaku Ikeda's peace proposals from 1983 to 2022 this paper tries to make clear the socio-religious meaning and features of SGI environmentalism, and further how these are related to its rapid growth in the Korean context. Ikeda's thoughts underscore the mutual interdependence between humanity and nature, denying the conventional human–nature dichotomy and advocating for a holistic understanding of our place in the world. Based on the Buddhist concept of dependent origination, these holistic teachings aim to make an existential relationship between global peace and environmental-ecological sustainability. In particular, he applies individualistic religious ethics like human revolution and empowerment to the environmental-ecological crisis of the entire world and all life around us. For this reason, SGI environmentalism requires its members to identify themselves with a status of global and ecological citizenship that transcends the narrow scope of nationalistic citizenship. In addition, the idea of the 'greater self' derived from *Boddhisattva* serves adequately to justify its political or civic engagement in this world, even though there are obviously different levels of its practical applicability from country to country.

The unexpected success of KSIG since the 1990s keeps pace with the global expansion of SGI outside Japan because KSIG now has the second largest membership in the world. This paper does not argue that Ikeda's peace proposals are determinant enough to explain the rapid growth of KSIG. Rather, more contextual and comparative consideration of KSIG is necessary for a better understanding of its success. In this context, this paper also pays special attention to the socio-political specification of KSIG environmentalism differentiated from Korean mainstream Buddhism. Despite the political sensitivity of environmental issues, KSIG has maintained its political neutrality very consistently, avoiding its involvement in any political debates concerning ecological-environmental conflicts. Socio-historically speaking, its political non-intervention and pacifist activities have served to improve the public trust and image of KSIG which suffered seriously from social prejudice and stigmatization inflicted by mainstream Korean Buddhists and the mass media in the past.

Finally, it should be noted that KSIG is now trapped in a period of stagnation in growth, as shown in [Figure 1]. It faces new challenges caused not only by internal factors, like the hierarchical culture and gender imbalance inside the organization, but also external factors such as the sharp decline and aging of the population, an increase in single-person households, and indulgence in social media. In general, both factors are expected to have a negative impact on its organizational growth, which deserves more detailed research from various perspectives in the future. Above all, the anthropocentrism involved in KSIG ecological religiosity calls for reflection on the fundamental limitations of Ikeda's environmental thoughts. Its anthropocentric environmentalism is facing various criticisms from both ecologists and theorists of animal rights, which insist that the current environmental-ecological crisis cannot be solved without giving up anthropocentrism and acknowledging the value of non-human life and objects. At the same time, many of these critiques stem from insufficient awareness of SGI Buddhism and Ikeda's view that Buddha-nature is inherent not only in humans but also in all living beings and even in non-living phenomena. There is no doubt that the growth of KSIG in the future depends on its ability to respond to these doctrinal and practical limitations.

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Notes

- ¹ Although environmentalism and ecology are conceptually different terms, this paper uses them without strict distinction within the scope of acknowledging the continuity of the two in a Buddhist sense. Ikeda's ideology is situated somewhere between environmentalism and ecology, if the two are defined strictly separately.
- ² The reasons why this paper uses the number of local centers as a measure of religious growth instead of the number of believers are as follows: 1. The National Demographic Census of Korea does not provide KSGI as a response option. Thus, there are no census data of KSGI population. 2. The *Index of Religion in Korea* issued recently by MCSTK reports a total membership of KSGI of 1,595,192 (MCSTK 2018, p. 122). However, this number is not statistically reliable because it is arbitrarily reported by each religious group itself without statistical standards. 3. The total number of local centers across the country is relatively accurate as well as highly dependent on the quantitative growth of KSGI.
- ³ For more information on statistical analysis based on this survey, please see Yoo and Kim's article (Yoo and Kim 2023).

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