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“Hope is a decision”

Decision as the primary cause of individual and global transformation

Abstract

This article examines how, in Mahayana Buddhist philosophy – and particularly in its 20th-century reinterpretation by Japanese philosopher Daisaku Ikeda – the concept of decision, understood in a multi-perspective and holistic manner, holds fundamental importance. Decision plays a crucial role in the process of awakening or spiritual enlightenment, and it does not involve only passive, mystical, or unconscious elements; it is also, and above all, an active and rational action. Since, from Ikeda’s perspective, what we should choose is hope, this article will demonstrate how such an assumption can have revolutionary implications both on an individual level and social plane.

Keywords

Spiritual Enlightenment; Mahayana Buddhism; Human Revolution; Daisaku Ikeda

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1. *The decision and the exercise of the mind as crucial elements in any emancipatory process*

In recent decades, across many fields of knowledge, there has been growing awareness of the connection between emotion and cognition. As a result, numerous scientific studies have confirmed certain philosophical intuitions long present in Eastern anthropology and religions (Damasio 1994, Goleman 1995). Focusing on the theme of this paper – decision – recent research has demonstrated the inseparability of a conscious exercise of rational abilities from the important role played by often unconscious emotional processes (Forza-Menegon-Rumiati 2017).

Indeed, as we shall see, in Mahayana Buddhist philosophy one finds deep and meaningful reflections on the central role of decision in the process of personal awakening. These show that decision is not generated solely by unconscious meditative practices, but rather – above all – by a conscious exercise of cognition and volition. In this regard, the valuable insights of G. Pasqualotto are particularly helpful. In a brief yet densely argued essay, he highlights the analogies (not only etymological) between the Buddhist concept of enlightenment and the European Enlightenment of the 18th century (Pasqualotto 1998). These reflections, among other things, help implicitly to dispel some lingering prejudices about this religion – such as the idea that it is based on ascetic and nihilistic mysticism incompatible with logical-rational (or even “experimental”) foundations, or the notion that its atheism contradicts an authentic concept of religion. In fact, the author highlights the connection between Bacon’s experimental method and the need for direct experience expressed by the Buddha and his followers, as well as the analogy between Hume’s concept of the non-substantial nature of the human psyche and the Buddhist notion of *anātman*, or the co-presence of aggregates. According to Pasqualotto, both the Enlightenment and Buddhism share the development of a concept of “practical reason” which, as such, engages with all modes of human knowledge and, unlike mere intellect, grasps the relationships between different aspects of reality (Pasqualotto 1998).

Indeed, building on these insights, we can observe that the consistent, active, and conscious exercise of decision is an essential component of any emancipatory process grounded in reason, including the one envisioned by the Enlightenment – beginning with Kant’s famous and paradigmatic definition:

Enlightenment is mankind’s exit from its self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. Self-incurred is this inability if its cause lies not in the lack of understanding but rather in the lack of the resolution and the courage to use it without the guidance of another. *Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your own understanding! Is thus the motto of enlightenment. (Kant 1996: 58)¹

If we look further back, other Western philosophical traditions that emphasized the importance of thoughtful decision in the pursuit of personal emancipation include the Hellenistic schools, whose heuristic methods and ethical aims have often, and not by chance, been compared to those of Buddhism, and which, for a time, were even historically intertwined with it (cf. e.g., Gowans 2010, Kubica 2023). In attributing wrong conduct and the resulting unhappiness to a form of ignorance, Buddhism also reveals certain affinities with Socratic ethical intellectualism, although the latter’s exclusive focus on the cognitive dimension sets it apart from the broader anthropological vision found in Buddhism, as we will explore. Decision, understood as the result of becoming aware and of a broadly conceived process of understanding, thus appears to be an essential element in philosophical systems that aim to encourage individuals to pragmatically and rationally transform their present adverse conditions – whether inner or material².

Classical Buddhist texts likewise emphasise the importance of mental cultivation and attentiveness in comprehending reality and in deciding to undertake the path of spiritual emancipation. In the theory of the five aggregates, the mind plays a fundamental role: both in the first, physical and material aggregate, *rūpa* (where it is seen as a “sixth sense” whose object is ideas), and in the fourth aggregate, that of mental formations, *saṅkhāra* (where the mind assigns meaning and develops corresponding responses, showing a close connection with volition). When understood in a broader sense, the mind also plays a central role in the fifth aggregate, *viññāṇa*, which attributes awareness to all the others (Bhikkhu Bodhi 2005: 164–87). Within the Japanese language and its Buddhist traditions, the multiplicity of functions ascribed to the mind is clearly demonstrated by the

¹ In this regard, it is interesting to note that Kant, in referring to the concept of resolution or decision, does not use the German term *Entscheidung* but rather *Entschließung*, which, unlike the former, is less tied to a purely cognitive dimension and instead refers to an inner disposition, potentially encompassing emotional and volitional aspects as well.

² For further insight into the points of contact between Buddhism and Pragmatism, see Ghimire 2021.

use of a single kanji character (心), which is read and understood in two distinct ways: *shin* and *kokoro*. The former refers to the psychic or mental aspects of existence, while the latter points to the innermost essence of life – hence its frequent translation in Western languages as “heart”. In order for the mind to fully carry out its function, however, it must first be purified, together with all the sense organs – through meditation (as prescribed, for example, by the principle of the “purification of the six sense organs”) – and there must also be a continuous practice of attentiveness (in Sanskrit *smṛti*), to prevent the mind from falling prey to illusions or becoming overwhelmed by external events (Watson 2023). As stated in the *Dhammapada*: “The vigilant do not die; the negligent are as if already dead” (Fronsdal 2006: 6).

2. An interdependent vision: some key concepts of Mahayana Buddhism and their dissemination in the West through the writings of Daisaku Ikeda

To fully grasp the concept of decision in the Buddhist thought, it is first necessary to recall some key principles of its anthropological view. Without these, one might run a double risk: first, that of considering decision as a purely cognitive act, whereas it is actually the result of a plurality of dimensions – even though it can be expressed consciously and rationally; and second, that of assuming that individual decision can affect the external environment only when accompanied by material actions.

To avoid the first risk, we can refer to a series of concepts found either in traditional Indian Buddhism or in its later reinterpretations within Chinese and Japanese thought. The first such concept, already mentioned, is *anātman* (which in Sanskrit means “non-self” or, more broadly, the insubstantiality of any phenomenon) — a notion already present in the earliest canonical texts (Bhikkhu Bodhi 2005). Denying the substantiality of what exists means denying its self-sufficiency, and therefore the possibility that it might exist or be understood independently of other phenomena. Another related concept, in which the importance of relationality appears more explicitly, is *pratītyasamutpāda* (Sanskrit term translatable as “dependent origination”) that underwent significant development with the Indian philosopher Nagarjuna (2nd-3rd century CE) (Siderits-Katsura 2013). As has been observed: “The truth of non-substantiality does not state that ‘nothing really exists’, but that since all things come into existence only through their relationships with other things (what Buddhism calls ‘dependent origination’), nothing exists independently. Thus, the essential

nature of even physical phenomena lies outside the words and concepts of existence and non-existence” (Causton 1995: 116). It is, upon closer inspection, one of the many expressions of the concept of the “Middle Way”, which appears in Buddhist texts with various meanings – all of which, however, point to the impossibility of understanding a phenomenon by reducing it to a single domain of reality (Keown 2004: 162-3; Siderits-Katsura 2013). In our case, the concept of “dependent origination” can help us transcend the traditional dichotomies in psychology – between physical and mental phenomena, or between conscious and unconscious processes – since decision, in Buddhist philosophy, is the outcome of a shift in perspective of the entire individual. Another notion that can help us grasp the non-dual and interdependent nature of decision-making in this philosophy is the Japanese concept of *funi* (a shortened form of *nini-funi*, 二而不二), meaning “two but not two”, or “two (in appearance) but not two (in essence)”, a concept originally developed within the Chinese Buddhist *Tiantai* school (Swanson 2018, Shen 2005). In the Japanese Buddhist tradition to which we will refer, this suffix is used to form a series of compound expressions, all of which indicate the inseparability of the aspects they denote: *shikishin-funi* (“oneness of body and mind”); *esho-funi* (“oneness of life and its environment”); *meigo-funi* (“oneness of illusion and enlightenment”); *shobutsu-funi* (“oneness of living beings and Buddhas”); *zen’aku-funi* (“oneness of good and evil”); and *shitei-funi* (“oneness of mentor and disciple”) (SGI 2002).

To avoid the second risk – that of reducing the agency of individual decision to its mere association with material actions, without which it would be deemed powerless – we can turn to another principle as well, this time developed entirely within the Chinese and Japanese context. This is the principle of *ichinen-sanzen* (“three thousand realms in a single thought”), first formulated by the Chinese philosopher T’ien-t’ai (538–597 CE). According to this concept, the state of mind that characterizes our inner life both contains and influences the entire universe at every single moment, and conversely, the entire universe permeates our life. The number three thousand is derived from the multiplication of: the ten possible life conditions an individual may experience (hell, hunger, animality, anger, humanity, heaven, learning, realization, bodhisattva, buddhahood); by the “ten factors of life” (the various ways in which a given phenomenon can appear or relate to another: appearance, nature, entity, power, influence, internal cause, relation, latent effect, manifest effect, consistency from beginning to end); and the three realms of existence (self, society, and natural environment) (Swanson 2018, Nichiren 1999:

354-82, Causton 1995: 197-212). The principle of causality, central to all schools of Buddhist philosophy, fully reveals its scope in this context: it applies not only to sentient beings but also to insentient ones, and is activated both by concrete actions (such as words or deeds) and by inner changes in the subject's state of mind. In this regard, it is also useful to refer to the principle of the "simultaneity of cause and effect", first presented in the *Lotus Sutra* and particularly emphasized in the Japanese school which draws upon it (Watson 1994, Nichiren 1999: 417-34). From this perspective, even a single shift in an individual's state of mind – an inner decision – can trigger simultaneous effects, even if still latent, for oneself, the surrounding environment, and others³. Therefore, even without material actions, a change in perspective or an internal decision can have powerful and far-reaching effects.

Buddhist philosophy thus reveals itself, on the various levels analysed, as a profoundly interdependent perspective. Among practitioners of this religion one can observe the interpenetration and equal importance of all the aforementioned aspects: the decision about which actions to take in response to certain problems or impasses in one's life arises as much from rational reasoning and a deep knowledge of the philosophical principles underlying Buddhist doctrine as it is prepared by a consistent meditative practice. As we will see, this practice contributes – at a non-conscious and mystical level (i.e., not rationally explainable) – to preparing that shift in perspective that will later give rise to conscious, deliberate, and "enlightened" decisions⁴.

The concepts we have just referred to have gained widespread attention in the West in recent decades thanks to the popular writings of the Japanese philosopher Daisaku Ikeda (Tokyo 1928- Tokyo 2023)⁵. He was

³ The will of Buddhist thought to adhere to a "middle way" is manifested in this case by continuously oscillating between the latent and the manifest, between the visible and the invisible.

⁴ For an examination of this aspect, we refer to the materials published in the weekly and monthly magazines of SGI USA "World Tribune" and "Living Buddhism" (<https://www.worldtribune.org/issues/> accessed: 20 June 2025) and of SGI UK "Art of Living" (<https://artofliving.sgi-uk.org/previous-issues/> accessed: 20 June 2025). In this case, these are experiences of practitioners of the Nichiren school of Buddhism.

⁵ Ikeda experienced firsthand the trauma of World War II as a child, losing a brother on the Burmese front, as well as the poverty of post-war Japan. At the age of 19, he met the Buddhist mentor Josei Toda (who had been imprisoned for refusing to collaborate with the militarist government and to accept Shintoism as the state religion), who converted him to this religion and gave a decisive turn to his life. In 1960, Ikeda succeeded Toda as the third president of the "Soka Gakkai", the Japanese lay organization promoting the principles of

also the Buddhist philosopher who placed the notion of decision most centrally in his reflections, developing it precisely on the basis of these assumptions. As we will see, the originality of his position also lies in linking the concept of decision to that of hope. It is no coincidence, then, that a collection of his writings produced between the mid-1960s and the early 2000s, translated into English in 2017, was titled by its editors *"Hope is a Decision"* (Ikeda 2017).

3. Decision as an essential element of individual "human revolution"

As mentioned, Daisaku Ikeda was, above all, a great populariser. Thanks to the countless journeys he undertook around the world starting in the 1960s, and to his vast literary output, he had the merit of making the philosophical principles articulated by the Japanese monk Nichiren Daishonin (1222–1282) accessible and applicable to the contemporary world. Nichiren was the founder of one of the most important Japanese schools of Mahayana Buddhism. This doctrinal school has today gained a large following in the West for several reasons, the most important of which is its ability to harmoniously reconcile two tendencies: on the one hand, those passive dispositions typical of a devotional approach (and even more so of a religious tradition rooted in meditative practice); on the other, the voluntaristic dispositions that, as we noted at the outset, are deeply embedded in much of Western culture and ultimately ineliminable in the human condition. These voluntaristic elements can be identified in at least three aspects: 1) the presence of a meditative practice to be performed in a wakeful state, with open eyes; 2) the transformative importance attributed to personal desires, which – in a perspective truer to a Buddhist view free of ascetic, Schopenhauerian-inspired interpretations

Nichiren Daishonin's Japanese Buddhism, which later split from the Buddhist clergy due to ethical and doctrinal divergences. A prolific writer and man of dialogue despite a life marked by hardships (he lost a son; he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and was initially expected to have a short life, contrary to what actually happened), in 1975 Ikeda founded the "Soka Gakkai International" (an extension of the original association), as well as "Soka" schools and universities worldwide, the IOP "Institute of Oriental Philosophy" (1962), and two important peace research centres (the "Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research" in Tokyo and the "Ikeda Center for Peace, Learning and Dialogue" in Massachusetts). In addition to receiving numerous honorary doctorates and citizenships, Ikeda was awarded the United Nations Peace Prize in 1983 (for further reading in English on these aspects, see Urbain 2010).

– are to be harnessed or enlightened rather than eradicated; 3) the emphasis placed on social and political engagement⁶. Given these premises, it is nevertheless undeniable that Ikeda did not merely make an existing philosophy more accessible, but rather developed an original perspective – one that, among other things, led his followers to honour him with the title of “mentor” (*Sensei*). While the element of decision – both individual and collective – is implicitly present and significant in Nichiren’s writings, it is Ikeda who, through his exegetical work, brings it to the forefront with even greater clarity.

Let us begin, then, by exploring in which moments of the daily practice of this form of Buddhism the element of decision comes into play, to see subsequently more precisely how it is particularly emphasized in Ikeda’s writings. To do this, we must return to the principle of *ichinen-sanzen* – as previously introduced in our reference to T’ien-t’ai, and later developed by Nichiren – and, more specifically, to the principle of the “mutual possession of the ten worlds”. According to this, each person potentially possesses and can experience ten life conditions, ranging from the lowest – dominated by selfishness, animality, or, even worse, despair stemming from the belief of being separate from the rest of the environment and thus incapable of having any decisive influence over one’s own condition – to intermediate, still illusory states – characterized by tranquillity or intense joy upon having obtained something – and finally to the highest states. These latter are marked by the desire to learn, realization, or altruistic drive towards others, culminating in buddhahood, a state that, in a sense, in addition to encompassing the last three conditions, brings an absolute joy that is independent of external circumstances. The principle of “mutual possession”, however, clarifies that each “world” is contained within the others (meaning that one can instantly move from one to another without necessarily passing through a linear progression), or more precisely, that each world can be experienced from the standpoint of another, depending on the condition one has stabilized in their life (Ikeda 1982: 91-139). A person trained to manifest the state of buddhahood will, for example, still experience the world of anger triggered by an

⁶ “A person of wisdom is not one who practices Buddhism apart from worldly affairs but, rather, one who thoroughly understands the principles by which the world is governed” (Nichiren 1999: 1121); “When the skies are clear, the ground is illuminated. Similarly, when one knows the *Lotus Sutra*, one understands the meaning of all worldly affairs (Nichiren 1999: 376); “If you care anything about your personal security, you should first of all pray for order and tranquillity throughout the four quarters of the land, should you not?” (Nichiren 1999: 24). See also: *Earthly Desires Are Enlightenment* (Nichiren 1999: 317-20).

unexpected event, but they will do so being able to understand and make use of the positive aspects of that negative state – for example, its propulsive force capable of initiating change. They will thus experience that state of anger in an enlightened way.

Within this dynamic, the element of decision operates on multiple levels. A first decision – which, depending on the individual, may arise from rational evaluation, emotional surge, cultural affinity, etc. – is the choice to want to experience Buddhist practice by going against established habits, personal resistances, or scepticism. Connected to this is the ongoing decision required to ensure that this practice becomes consistent and daily, involving various aspects such as meditation, doctrinal study, and participation in collective activities. It is, however, in relation to the already discussed concept of *ichinen* (which in this context could be translated as “the direction of the heart/mind at a single moment”) that the aspect of decision reveals its most compelling implications. When faced with a dramatic or distressing situation (regardless, from this perspective, of whether it is objectively real or merely perceived as such), it is highly likely that even an experienced practitioner may initially respond by manifesting a lower state of life – for example, that of fear or despair. Yet, as numerous experiences and the testimonies of those directly involved show, it is quite common for this initial inner reaction – considered inappropriate or not illuminated from a Buddhist perspective – to be overturned by a shift in *ichinen*, that is, to be instantly transformed, based on the mutual possession of the ten worlds, into a higher life condition (SGI-UK, SGI USA, IBISG). What we observe here is a kind of *gestalt* reconfiguration of the present perceived situation, which comes to be experienced in entirely different terms. It is as if the subject “decides” which interpretation to give to the painful situation they are experiencing – into which life condition, or “world,” to place themselves – even if the nature of this decision is not easily classifiable in binary terms⁷. It is not merely the result of a rational process, since someone who simply studies and accepts Buddhist principles – or relies solely on their previous experiences – without engaging in consistent meditative practice, would be unlikely to manifest a high state of life that enables such a shift in perspective during a painful situation. The life state of buddhahood, which arises through Buddhist practice, is indeed understood to originate from a dimension

⁷ In this regard, one could also speak of “choice” alongside “decision”, since individuals tend to narrow their interpretive options of reality to few possibilities shaped by their karmic tendencies.

regarded as deeper still than the unconscious: the “ninth consciousness”, which, unlike the others, remains entirely free from karmic impediments or personal delusions⁸. Yet, this decision is not purely devotional, spontaneous, or unconscious either, as it requires the subject’s active and conscious participation – if not an outright effort – at the moment in which he decides to align his inner sensibility with an interpretation of events he *knows* to be more just. At the very moment I remind myself that a given negative situation I am experiencing – according to the principle of “dependent origination” – has to do with myself, I nullify it – or rather, I illuminate it – because I understand its nature (illusory, if interpreted as existing independently of who I am in that moment). In the inherently ambivalent nature of this decision, we rediscover the richness of the concepts of interdependence, the Middle Way, and non-duality that we introduced earlier. Finally, it is a decision charged with consequences: not only does it reconfigure the subject’s entire lived experience (even in relation to situations other than the specific difficulty at hand), but it also establishes a cause (and thus a latent or manifest effect in the environment), regardless of whether the individual performs any outward action – according to the aforementioned Buddhist principles of *ichinen sanzen* and the simultaneity of cause and effect. In a certain sense, this decision also acts upon the past, as the latter is reinterpreted and experienced differently in its light. It is then this internal “decision” of the subject – this *ichinen* – that is sufficient to trigger a transformative effect on the self and the environment: the decision is, in all respects, an action.

In his writings, which have gained worldwide recognition thanks to numerous translations, Daisaku Ikeda places particular emphasis on the element of decision as a crucial moment in individual practice and in what he calls “human revolution”. With this concept, Ikeda refers to a global transformation of the individual who, by through enlightenment and overcoming personal karmic hindrances, is led to dedicate themselves to the welfare of others and the entire society in which they live⁹. Decision is an act that engages the whole person – bodily, emotionally, and rationally – and although it is prepared through practice and faith, it must be actively taken:

⁸ For a concise and accessible explanation of the Buddhist Theory of the nine consciousnesses, see Causton (1995: 153-61) and SGI 2002.

⁹ *The Human Revolution* (*Ningen Kakumei* in Japanese) is also the title of a lengthy multi-volume autobiographical novel chronicling the history of the Soka Gakkai organization and its followers, published between 1964 and 2018 (Ikeda 1972-1999; 1995-2020).

If somewhere in your heart you have decided, “I alone am incapable of becoming happy”, “Only I cannot become a capable person”, or “Only my sufferings will forever remain unresolved”, then that one factor of your mind or determination [*ichinen*] will obstruct your benefit. (Ikeda 1997: lecture 20)

When we change our inner determination, everything begins to move in a new direction. The moment we make a powerful resolve, every nerve and fiber in our being will immediately orient itself toward the fulfillment of this goal or desire. On the other hand, if we think, “This is never going to work out”, then every cell in our body will be deflated and give up the fight. Hope, in this sense, is a decision. It is the most important decision we can make. Hope changes everything, starting with our lives. (Ikeda 2017: 4-5)

As this last quotation makes clear, the originality of Ikeda’s perspective also lies in grounding the element of hope in that of decision. This has important implications for the way he interprets both hope and the very act of hoping. Far from arising from an inert acceptance of reality, the hopeful stance loses the fatalistic and passive connotations we usually associate with it and becomes instead an attitude that can be consciously chosen. In the moment I become enlightened with respect to a problem, in the moment I “decide” how to live it or interpret it, I am also deciding whether or not to *generate* hope: “If we cannot feel hope, it is time to create some” (Ikeda 2017: 6). As with decision, hope too arises as a consequence of becoming aware that, through correct practice and a true understanding of reality, one inevitably arrives at a positive resolution of the suffering-inducing experience. As Sarah Wider writes in the preface to the aforementioned collection of Ikeda’s writings entitled *Hope Is a Decision*: “To decide for hope, we must think and feel and act within a lived understanding of connectedness and its far-reaching consequences” (Wider 2017: XI).

Before delving deeper into this latter point – that is, the connection between individual “human revolution” and its global counterpart – it is worth highlighting another important aspect of individual decision-making in the practice of this form of Buddhism, one that is emphasized in many explanatory texts of Ikeda’s thought and by his followers. As a conscious yet also courageous and exceptional act – given its capacity to completely reconfigure an existing situation – such a decision must be continuously renewed and “protected” from potential interference by the deluded mind and by unenlightened life conditions:

It is not enough to make a decision once; it is necessary to maintain that decision consistently over time. We must reaffirm our decision to ourselves whenever we

feel discouraged, become distracted, or face an obstacle on our path that seems too difficult to overcome. (BS 2001, n. 86)

The essential point lies in how consistently [...] we apply “the strategy of the Lotus Sutra before all else”, through prayer that is deep, earnest, and sincere. The power of the *Daimoku* [Buddhist chant] expresses the strength of our decision – a strength that may sometimes last only a few days. This is why it is vital to renew it continually and to sustain an *ichinen* that is active, fresh, and joyful. (NR 2007, n. 378)

One must have courage – in the sense of decision – and then any difficulty can be faced. This is what the Daishonin used to say: if I begin to teach the *Lotus Sutra*, many difficulties will surely arise (“the three obstacles and four devils”). But once I decide, I can no longer turn back; I must be ready to see it through to the end. (BS 2004, n. 104)

It’s one thing to have a desire; it’s another to have made a decision. I chant *Dai-moku* [Buddhist prayer] in order to make a decision, not to solve things. The point is to decide for *kosen-rufu* [collective well-being] – that’s what creates fortune. (NR 2016, n. 587)¹⁰

This act of renewing one’s individual decision is supported not only by meditative practice, the study of Buddhist philosophical principles, faith in them, and an altruistic vision (as we have seen), but also by a twofold interpersonal connection: that between the believer and the community of practitioners (*sangha*), and that between the latter and their spiritual guide or mentor. In both cases, it is a rationally understandable exchange of life experiences that reveals to the individual why the decision to adopt an enlightened (i.e., interdependent) view of reality is the most effective means of transforming inner suffering and addressing life’s challenges or resolving concrete problems.

4. *The choice of hope as the key to solving global problems*

Daisaku Ikeda’s most important work, *The Human Revolution*, begins with these words: “A great human 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” (Ikeda 1972-1999). The principle of interdependence and causality obviously also applies to the political

¹⁰ The translations of the four quotations above are my own.

and environmental spheres. Individual realization can occur only through active commitment to collective well-being (*kosen-rufu*), which in turn is possible only if an individual inner transformation takes place¹¹. Without such transformation, in fact, any collective regulation or broader change would remain externally imposed and thus inherently unstable (Ikeda 1997; 2001). Although, as mentioned earlier, the dimension of social and political engagement is already rooted in Nichiren’s doctrine, it is once again Ikeda who links this dimension to the element of decision and, consequently, to that of hope. In this case, the decision is not only individual but also collective¹². Ikeda emphasizes that the violence present on a global scale, besides being generated by the three poisons spoken of in Buddhist tradition (greed, anger, and foolishness), is ultimately caused by an individual’s sense of powerlessness. And so it becomes clear that the awareness – whether of an individual or a community – of being able to influence the problems afflicting society through one’s decisions, and thus the presence of boundless hope, can uproot the cause of that violence at its very source:

To the degree that powerlessness takes root in people’s consciousness, there is a greater tendency to resort to force. Powerlessness breeds violence. [...] We can best negotiate the challenges we face when guided by hope, not when motivated by fear. (Ikeda 2017: 102, 142)

For these reasons, Ikeda’s philosophy has also been described as a “philosophy of action”, and his outlook as that of a “new humanism”: “The philosophy of human revolution intertwines religion and theoretical-practical philosophy. It is a practical philosophy of action that requires a full personal engagement. Obviously, there is a strict link between the obstacles to peace and the individual’s limitations, just as there is a close connection between the possibilities of peace and the possibilities of self-reformation and self-emancipation” (Busacchi 2018: 47). Also for this

¹¹ The concept of *kosen-rufu* already appears in the twenty-third chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*. In a passage from the chapter, it reads: “After I have passed into extinction, in the last five-hundred-year period you must spread it abroad widely throughout Jambudvīpa and never allow it to be cut off” (Watson 2023: 330). In his commentaries, Nichiren Daishonin renders the expression “you must spread it [the *Lotus Sutra*] abroad widely” with the term *kosen-rufu*. The four ideograms that compose it mean: *ko* “widely”, *sen* “declare”, *ru* “current of water”, and *fu* “woven fabric” consisting of warp and weft (Nichiren 1999: 385, 392, 541).

¹² On the principle of *ōbutsu myōgō*, literally “the wondrous fusion of sovereign and Buddha”, or “the harmonious union between Government and Buddhism”, or more broadly, “the ideal fusion of politics and religion” see Busacchi (2018: 119-30).

reason, understanding Ikeda’s perspective requires not only analysing his Buddhist philosophical writings but also considering the concrete actions he undertook, which we will briefly examine. Ikeda developed his humanistic philosophy through an extensive network of dialogues and friendships with prominent twentieth-century figures who shared his aims (Urbain 2010). One might think, for example, of his exchange with the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee, with whom Ikeda co-authored a two-volume dialogue tellingly titled *Man Himself Must Choose* (Ikeda-Toynbee 1976)¹³; or his conversations with the Argentine pacifist and 1980 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Adolfo María Pérez Esquivel (Ikeda-Pérez Esquivel 2021); or again, his friendship with Rosa Parks, whose courageous and groundbreaking individual decision he deeply admired – an act that sparked the civil rights movement against racial segregation in 1950s America.

In light of the Buddhist principles that inspire him, Ikeda identifies six obstacles to be overcome to achieve a – not utopian – condition of global peace: isolationism, the illusion of efficiency, the greed for power, poverty, environmental irresponsibility and nuclear negativity (Ikeda 2001: 6-10). These are issues that Ikeda has not merely denounced, but against which he has decided – consistent with his thought – to implement, as well as promote concrete and impactful actions. Let us consider a few of them. One direction his peace initiatives have taken is that of dialogue with leaders of different political orientations, including those holding divisive positions. Starting in the 1970s, Ikeda increased his travels outside Japan, which led him to meet, among others, Cuban President Fidel Castro (1996), Chinese President Hu Jintao (2008), and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev (1990), with whom he engaged in a profound dialogue that was later published (Gorbachev-Ikeda 2005). Through these actions – no doubt inspired by certain figures and principles of the Mahayana tradition¹⁴ – Ikeda emphasizes the importance of understanding, though not necessarily justifying, the reasons behind the positions of world leaders involved in conflict, demonstrating how dialogue requires the rational

¹³ Beyond being the story of a friendship, that between Ikeda and Toynbee is a kind of mutual fascination. Both, for example, develop the idea that the history of peoples and civilizations is determined by how they respond to the challenges they face.

¹⁴ For example, the figure of the “Bodhisattva Never Disparaging” found in the *Lotus Sutra*, who, guided by compassion, revered every individual; or, also in the same Sutra, the “Parable of the Jewel in the Robe”, which explains how each individual possesses the life condition of buddhahood even without knowing it (Watson 1994: chap. 8; chap. 20; Ikeda-Saito-Endo-Suda 2000-2003).

choice of self-restraint and compassion. A second direction in which Ikeda's action has unfolded is the submission of an annual peace proposal to the United Nations, from 1983 until 2022. These proposals have emphasized, among other points, the need to make international humanitarian law more effective. As Antonio La Spina has noted, "Ikeda identifies the well-being of humanity as the ultimate criterion for evaluating public policy: a [political] decision is just to the extent that it guarantees the greatest possible protection of individual dignity and human rights" (La Spina: 52-3)¹⁵. Finally, among the initiatives promoted by Ikeda, particular attention should be given to his active commitment to the abolition of nuclear weapons – following in the footsteps of his mentor Josei Toda, who regarded atomic weapons as an absolute evil (Ikeda-Krieger 2002). This commitment presupposes, more radically, a rejection of the concept of deterrence as a means of securing peace, as well as the conviction that such disarmament requires, as a precondition, an "inner disarmament". The sustained efforts carried out in this direction, besides giving rise to local initiatives aimed at promoting disarmament, have undoubtedly contributed to raising public awareness and mobilizing civil society around this issue. They have helped to foster a culture of peace that found concrete expression in the adoption of the "Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons" (2017), promoted by the United Nations – the first legally binding international treaty, ratified by more than seventy countries, that declares such weapons illegal and aims at their elimination. More broadly, Ikeda's philosophical ideals have been made concrete through the initiatives of the Soka Gakkai International¹⁶.

In summary, we argue that the importance of decision and the choice of hope emerges in at least three ways in Ikeda's reflections and actions in pursuit of peace, inspired by his Buddhist philosophy: first, the individual's awareness of their capacity to influence society through their decisions represents the most effective path to discourage recourse to violence; second, understanding (though not justifying) the other's reasons – and thus practicing compassion – is an attitude that can be chosen and that also proves most effective in conflict resolution; finally, respect for human rights and individual well-being constitutes the paramount criterion for evaluating the fairness of a political decision and defining the goals of any social action.

¹⁵ My translation.

¹⁶ For a brief overview of the history of the SGI, the ideals that inspire it, and some of the contexts it has influenced, see Gebert 2016, Goulah 2020, La Spina 2013, Ikeda 1995-2020.

5. Conclusions

We have seen how decision takes on significant importance in philosophical perspectives aimed at individual emancipation, but especially within Buddhist philosophy. In Buddhism, which holds an interdependent or non-dualistic view of reality, the act of deciding has a polyvalent or multi-causal nature, being both the result of a rational and conscious choice and made possible by a prior meditative practice that involves mystical aspects and deep layers of consciousness. If we adopt certain philosophical concepts developed by T'ien-t'ai and Nichiren, decision can be understood as an action that, beyond reconfiguring our perception of reality, sets in motion changes in the external environment even if it is not accompanied by any other action. However, it was the Japanese philosopher Daisaku Ikeda – drawing on this tradition – who explicitly emphasized the importance of the act of decision both for "individual revolution" and for effecting change on a global scale. In both contexts, Ikeda also shows us that the most fruitful decision is to choose hope. This represents an interpretative and heuristic key that can potentially be applied and tested in a wide range of contexts and disciplinary fields. This aspect is particularly significant, as it provides a rational justification for choosing such an attitude even for those who do not wish to embrace a faith-based religious perspective, and it opens up a further path for philosophical dialogue between East and West. Moreover, another original aspect of Ikeda's concept of decision lies in focusing not so much on the factors that generate the decision, but rather on what it can generate: in this case, the analysis of decision opens us to the dimension of the future.

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