

**A Cure for Racial Disharmony in Our Society  
The Practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in Modern Society: The  
Soka Gakkai Approach to the Twenty-first Century**

The following essay is based on a presentation given at the 1996 Conference of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies at DePaul University, Chicago, July 29, 1996.

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IN 1992, the world looked on in disbelief as riots broke out in South Central Los Angeles after a jury exonerated four white policemen of serious charges in the videotaped beating of a black man named Rodney King. Those riots were the result of decades of frustration felt by many African Americans at the perceived injustice of the legal system.

In 1995, the world again sat in disbelief as O.J. Simpson, an African American man, was exonerated of charges for the brutal murders of Nicole Simpson and Ron Goldman. Many whites were angered and believed that the legal system had failed to punish the person they viewed as being obviously responsible for the killings. Many African Americans, on the other hand, rejoiced in the verdict and believed that they "had finally won one [a legal decision]."

Both of these spectacles, or tragedies in American history, offered many parallels. They seemed to further fragment race relations in this country and to highlight the role that the legal system has played in fostering racial inequities and injustice.

The general purpose of the laws of society was to create a civilized, harmonious system to bring people out of the chaos that existed when there were no rules. The aftermath of the Rodney King and O.J. Simpson verdicts, and the adverse effect they have had on race relations, demonstrate that this system of rules, or the "civil law," is failing to create the peace and civility originally intended.

Despite our best efforts, such as the desegregation of schools, fair housing and equal employment laws, racism and racial tensions permeate our society. This is so because we cannot legislate away the deeply rooted insecurities that cause people to hate and distrust people of other ethnicities. Nor can we legislate away feelings of inferiority brought on by centuries of slavery and discrimination. Instead, what we need to foster true equality is a "law" that focuses on healing each individual — a spiritual or mystic law.

NICHIREN Daishonin's Buddhism focuses on the existence of an all-encompassing mystic law within the individual — rather than an external societal or civil law — as the key to ending the suffering of all people and as a result, the disunity and disharmony among the races that permeate society today. Nichiren Buddhism also teaches the interconnectedness of all human beings, such that we can achieve our highest potential when we perceive the inherent greatness of our lives as well as the lives of others.

Let's examine the insecurities that underlie the African American and white American experience. Among many African Americans, there is a prevailing belief that they can never achieve their highest potential because white society is designed to either limit their success or ensure their failure. This belief is felt across socioeconomic lines.

Title: A Cure for Racial Disharmony in Our Society  
Subject: Living Buddhism 02/97 v.1 n.2 p.16 LB9702p16 Chicago, Illinois  
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Keywords: Chicago Cure Disharmony Features Forums Illinois Panels Racial Seminars Society

In his book, *The Rage of a Privileged Class: Why are middle-class blacks angry? Why should America care?*, Ellis Cose posits that despite the economic growth and status that middle-class African Americans have achieved as the direct beneficiaries of the civil rights movement, there is a prevailing sense of despair among that group. Many middle-class blacks believe that because of racism they will never be able to advance to the top of their professions. An African American female who resigned from a high-paying job at a Fortune 500 company is quoted in Cose's book as saying that, "the bottom line is you're black, and that's still a negative in society" (p. 6).

In her book *No Disrespect*, Sister Souljah also views white society as being the ultimate barrier to the progress of poor urban blacks. She states: "I could see every day, as I walked to work, how the processes and practices of institutionalized white racism and the way those whites in power had designed, organized and maintained the lifestyle of urban Africans had created a pressure cooker in which blacks could no longer survive" (p. 237).

Cose and Souljah echo sentiments felt by many people of color that their potential to achieve ultimate happiness and success is limited by white society. However, true racial harmony will never exist if African Americans continue to believe that white society controls their ultimate destiny, because such limited views become barriers to success in and of themselves.

Many African Americans also feel a sense of inferiority and devalue their own lives. We see this phenomenon in black-on-black crimes, gang violence and the drug use that exist in many of our communities. Again, Sister Souljah holds the view that whites have caused these feelings of inferiority. She states: "Racism has turned our [African American] communities into war zones where we are dying every day. It is black on black hate, created by racism and white supremacy that is killing us. Black people killing black people. It is a sad measure of our profound contempt for each other and our thoroughgoing self-loathing that we continue to persist in this ugly practice" (p. 350).

Cose and Souljah both highlight the insecurities felt within the African American community and focus on racism and white society as the cause of African American suffering. However, this view is limited because it focuses on external factors as the cause and solution for this suffering, instead of looking internally at the individual. The cause of the emotional suffering and insecurities within the African American community is the inability to perceive the true nature or worth of their existence; a concept that I will review shortly.

INSECURITIES also permeate the experiences of white Americans. Many whites believe that they are inherently superior to people of color, especially African Americans. Some also feel that the economic and social gains made by African Americans have somehow caused them, meaning whites, harm.

In 1991, ABC's "Prime Time Live" demonstrated how this idea of whites believing they are superior to African Americans still exists in our society. Over a period of two-and-one-half weeks, the program followed two "testers," one black and one white. Both were trained to present themselves in an identical manner in a variety of situations. While at times the two men were treated equally, over and over again, every single day, they were not. The white tester got instant service at an electronics store; the black man was ignored. The black man was followed, not helped, by a white salesman in a record store. In an apartment complex, the white man was given the

keys to view an apartment, while the black man was told that the apartment was rented (Cose, p. 4).

The insecurities of White America also come in the form of fear that economic and social progress made by African Americans and other people of color somehow diminishes the economic and social progress of whites. For example, a national survey of American youth conducted in 1991 by Peter Hart Research Associates found whites more likely to believe that “qualified whites” were more harmed by affirmative action than that qualified minorities were harmed by racial discrimination (Cose, p. 9). This type of thinking has no doubt been a catalyst for referendums such as Proposition 209, which is aimed at nullifying affirmative action policies in the state of California.

Just as African Americans are mistaken in their belief that whites are the cause of their suffering, whites are equally mistaken in their feelings of superiority and their fear that social and economic progress by people of color somehow negatively affects whites.

Another false view that both whites and African Americans hold is the belief that each race is inherently different from the other; that there is no common ground between them. In fact, both races suffer from the inability to perceive the true nature of their own lives and the lives of others, a concept that I alluded to earlier.

In the “Prophecy of Enlightenment” chapter of the Lotus Sutra, there is a parable called the “Gem in the Robe” about:

... a man who went to the house of a close friend and, having become drunk on wine, lay down to sleep. At that time the friend had to go out on official business. He took a priceless jewel, sewed it in the lining of the man’s robe, and left it with him when he went out. The man was asleep, drunk, and knew nothing about it. When he got up, he set out on a journey to other countries. In order to provide himself with food and clothing, he had to search with all his energy and diligence, encountering great hardship and making do with what little he could come by.

The story goes on to say:

“Later, the close friend happened to meet him by chance. The friend said, ‘How absurd, old fellow! Why should you have to do all this for the sake of food and clothing? In the past I wanted to make certain you would be able to live in ease and satisfy the five desires, and so on such-and-such a day and month and year I took a priceless jewel and sewed it in the lining of your robe. It must still be there now. But you did not know about it, and fretted and wore yourself out trying to provide a living for yourself. What nonsense! Now you must take the jewel and exchange it for goods. Then you can have whatever you wish at all times and never experience poverty or want’” (Burton Watson, trans., *The Lotus Sutra*, pp. 150–151).

In our society, whites and blacks are like the poor man stumbling along in life, blaming each other for their “impoverished” condition. The insecurity, or the suffering among the races, is caused by their inability to perceive the true nature, or the “gem” of the highest human potential that exists in their own lives and the lives of others. Instead of focusing on the internal, individual mystic law that exists within each of us, we have created a system of external, social law to create some sense of equality among the races. However, this socially created system of equality remains

artificial. And that is because it fails to address the insecurities and fears felt by African Americans and whites.

If I am taught as a child to believe that I am inherently inferior, there is no man-made law that can change my inability to see my inherent greatness. If I am taught as a child to believe that people of color are inferior and that any progress made by that group somehow takes away from my own ability to progress, then I resent man-made laws designed to assist people of color.

Given this deep-seated inability to appreciate one's own worth and the worth of others, it is understandable that social or civil law has been unable to create true equality among the races. Equality is a state of being that is reached when an individual feels neither superior nor inferior to another individual for any reason — racial or otherwise. Therefore, to reach true equality among the races, we must make revolutionary, though gradual, changes within the psyche of the individual and illuminate each person's individual worth. Dialogue among the races is essential to this process. (Daisaku Ikeda, "In Search of New Principles of Integration," March 1993 *Seikyo Times*).

Nichiren Buddhism does away with the insecurities and fears of the individual by teaching that each person is inherently great. Nichiren Daishonin states: "Life itself is the most precious of all treasures. Even the treasures of the entire universe cannot equal the value of a single human life" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 267).

He also expounded on the fundamental equality of all human beings by recognizing the "gem" or the highest human potential in every individual. On that fundamental level, regardless of status or race, we are all equal because we inherently possess a life of great goodness (Greg Martin, "A Buddhist Perspective on Diversity," August 1993 *Seikyo Times*).

In addition to the inherent equality of all individuals Buddhism also teaches that there is a common thread connecting all life, a "dependent origination" (Martin, p. 32). "Nothing in this world exists alone; everything comes into being and continues in response to causes and conditions" (Daisaku Ikeda, "The Sun of *Jiyu* Over a New Land," March 1993 *Seikyo Times*). It is important that we come to understand this connection and how we relate to others. The term *dependent origination* means to be able to recognize the connection of all living things, while also being able to appreciate the worth or the value in each individual.

"We need to remember that we owe people so much. Dependent origination implies that we need to feel and express appreciation for the efforts of others." (Martin, p. 32). Our society could break through the bonds of racial insecurities and inequality if each individual would embrace these higher principles.

Having discussed my views on racial diversity and the Buddhist solution, I would like to leave everyone with this challenge:

When neighbors distance themselves  
from neighbors, continue your  
uncompromising quest  
for your truer roots  
in the deepest regions of your lives.  
Seek out the primordial "roots" of humankind.  
Then you will without fail discover  
the stately expanse of *Jiyu* [emerging from the earth]  
unfolding in the depths of your life.

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Here is the home, the dwelling place  
to which humankind traces  
its original existence —  
beyond all borders,  
beyond all differences of gender and race.  
Here is a world offering true proof  
of our humanity.  
If one reaches back to these fundamental roots,  
all become friends and comrades.  
To realize this is to “emerge from the earth.”  
(Daisaku Ikeda, “The Sun of *Jiyu* over a New Land,” March 1993 *Seikyo Times*) □

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