

## FROM OUR READERS

### **Cure for Racial Disharmony**

I WANT to express my very great appreciation to Darlene Oliver for her feature article in the February issue, "A Cure for Racial Disharmony in Our Society." As she so cogently and objectively expresses, this Buddhism stirs and inspires all of us to value our lives profoundly, stepping away from the anger and superficiality of discord in our society. By bringing together people deeply dedicated to treating ourselves and all others as treasure towers, we are changing our world.

JANE ROBINSON  
Oakland, Calif.

I TAKE exception to Darlene Oliver's speech on racism printed in the February *Living Buddhism*. Ms. Oliver's main premise is that "the suffering among the races is caused by their inability to perceive the...human potential that exists in their lives and the lives of others." Earlier she states that the focus on racism is limited because it addresses external factors instead of looking internally. "The cause of the emotional suffering and insecurities within the African American community," she says, "is the inability to perceive true nature or worth of their existence."

Ms. Oliver's analysis is far too simplistic and lacks historical perspective. Personal prejudice and racial "insecurities" in America can only be fully understood in the context of deliberate, systematized, legitimized and institutionalized racism. In 1967, Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton wrote in their book, *Black Power*, "Racism is both overt and covert. It takes two closely related forms, individual whites acting against individual blacks and acts by the total white community against the black community.... The second type originates in the operation of established and respected forces in the society."

The African American quest historically has been to try to lift off the "forces" of law, politics, ideology, economics and social custom that have tried to keep "Negroes in their place." Ms. Oliver's focus on racial "securities" brings to mind the old quip about somebody who is being chased is paranoid.

In 1966, Thomas Pettigrew said, "I think one of the greatest fallacies we have had in the field of race relations for many decades has been to worry about attitudes rather than conditions."

Martin Luther King said, "Morals cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated.... We must depend on religion and education to alter the errors of the heart; but meanwhile it is an immoral act to compel a man to accept injustice until another man's heart is set straight."

I have no doubt that a strong Buddhist practice and consequent "human revolution" can set a person's heart straight. However, it is also in the Buddhist tradition to recognize when laws and authority are unjust and speak up. This is the tradition of Nichiren Daishonin as he submitted his treatise "On Securing the Peace of the Land through the Propagation of True Buddhism," to the government and went toe-to-toe with corrupt priests. This is the tradition of presidents Makiguchi, Toda and Ikeda as they resisted government pressure and went to jail to defend their beliefs.

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Understanding race relations in America must be predicated on the understanding that racism is not an illusion. It is real and contemporary. The battle today, as in the past, is to speak out against punitive, one-sided public policy, unfair laws and discriminatory economic practices. The ultimate solution to racism in America is not simply whether blacks and whites recognize their own and each other's humanity. Rather, having done that, whether each will have the courage to reject a system of privilege and make justice a practical reality for all.

BONNIE BOSWELL HAMILTON  
Los Angeles

## **On The Confederate Flag**

I AM writing in response to Mr. Jeffrey L. Towery's letter to you titled "Confederate Flag." I must confess that upon reading it I was incensed.

The Confederate flag is a symbol of the Confederacy, namely the Confederate States of America (1861–65), the government established by the southern states of the U.S. after their secession from the Union. When President Lincoln was elected (November 1860), seven states—South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, and Texas—seceded. A provisional government was set up at Montgomery, Alabama, and a constitution was drafted; it resembled the U.S. Constitution but had provisions for states' rights and slavery.

After the firing on Fort Sumter and Lincoln's call for troops, four more states—Arkansas (my birthplace), North Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee—joined. Richmond, Virginia became the capital, and Jefferson Davis and A.H. Stephens were elected president and vice president.

The story of the Confederacy is the story of the loss of the Civil War and of the callousness of those who were for States' rights (a doctrine based on the 10th Amendment to the Constitution, which states: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people). Proslavery states used states' rights to justify secession. Why? Because they wanted to continue to perpetuate the lucrative business of selling human beings into slavery.

Because I studied American history in school and did much reading on my own, I am aware that the Confederate flag signifies a consciousness held by people who would persist in keeping my ancestors in bondage. I cannot in good conscience find anything laudable about it.

Let us make no mistake: the flag of the Confederacy was never intended to honor, represent or symbolize the equality of all human beings in America.

I would appreciate not having to read such disingenuous rubbish in *Living Buddhism* ever again.

JAMES TRAMBLE  
Brooklyn, New York

SYMBOLS can be misused. The Confederate flag should be unfurled from Southern statehouses, buried with the KKK, and eliminated from the USA forever as definitive evidence that racial division is behind us. Unfortunately, it continues to animate a strange sentimentality as the letter by Jeffrey Towery demonstrated (April 1997 issue).

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Towery painted the Confederate flag as a harmless, even noble symbol of the fighting and dying of "loyal" Civil War soldiers. He clearly fails to grasp the division, hatred, violence and evil it represented in its conception, sustained throughout its history and perpetuates today. The Confederacy fought to defend slavery as a way of life on the American continent. Its soldiers died for a vision of life that prolonged injustice for millions of black people, caused the deaths of thousands of soldiers and led to the assassination of a president.

It would have been best not to publish the letter at all. Like most African Americans, I fight racism daily and resent having such ideas and images thrown at me. I will continue to receive the publication in hope that the principles of a 700-year-old movement might hold more wisdom than Mr. Towery's confusion and your misguided action could negate.

PAMELA SPRATLEN  
Paris, France

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