

A TRADITION OF DIALOGUE

THIS month we turn to the subject of dialogue, which lies at the very heart of Buddhism. Kumarajiva (344–409), widely known as the most outstanding translator of Bud-dhist texts from Sanskrit into Chinese, completed an unexcelled translation of the Lotus Sutra and rendered the sutra's title and essence as Myoho-renge-kyo. How did Kumarajiva accomplish this task? He engaged a great number of people in dialogue, patiently an-swering question after question about the meaning of each word or phrase of the sutra. Regarding this, SGI President Ikeda writes:

One would think he had devoted decades to these difficult translations, confined to his study with nothing but dictionaries around him, but that was not the way he worked. He worked with the people, acutely sensing their innermost feelings as he carried on discussions about Buddhism with them. His translation of the Lotus Sutra was the fruit of this broad and sensitive approach. I am convinced this is why Kumarajiva was able to produce such a smooth and still accurate rendition of the sutra's original meaning. No matter how important or valuable the teachings of Buddhism may be, if they cannot be correctly understood, they will never become part of the lives of the people. Philosophy's true value can only shine through communication between people and in their daily experience [Kumarajiva] devoted himself to dialogue with the people, always remaining among them. (*Selected Lectures on the Goshō*, pp. 14–15)

IN reading this, I realize that dialogue is more than simple discussion or the assertion of our opinions in order to convince others of our views. Rather, it is an exchange of ideas in pursuit of truth and knowledge of our world and, consequently, of our own lives. It is a journey, a process of discovery that leads to a higher level of understanding between the participants.

Also when I talk with people, I try to keep in mind that listening comes first. Listening is an integral part of any good dialogue. While the format of this monthly column, for example, necessitates the presentation of my opinions, these are opinions I have formulated after listening to members' voices. I realize this commentary is an opportunity to respond to some of the questions of the many people I meet. My sincere desire is to respect their viewpoints, rather than feel that I have to *teach* them something. I believe this elevates knowledge and promotes learning. Through dialogue I want to walk away having gained something; at the very least, I try to see another point of view. We can always gain from others. Because of this, I am convinced that dialogue is the tool with which we will build the future.

It is certainly easier to assemble in large auditoriums with hundreds of people to hear speeches. Such gatherings can, of course, be helpful in

delivering a specific message, information or encouragement to sizable crowds at one time. And although it is often an important and necessary means of communication in a large and complex organization, given a choice, I'd much rather sit down and talk with others one to one. That is how trust is built. That's where the conversations that make lifelong memories take place. In that sense, dialogue is a powerful tool for peace and spreading the principles of Buddhism throughout the world. Both Shakyamuni and Nichiren Daishonin relentlessly engaged in it. President Ikeda writes:

The truth is that Shakyamuni taught in the form of encouragement to poverty-stricken people—to an old woman afflicted with illness, as if he felt her pain as his own and carried her on his back, or giving warm encouragement to a youth gripped by deep spiritual suffering. All his sutras were the natural result of his lifelong devotion to the people, the accumulation of every compassionate word he spoke to alleviate the pain of people oppressed by the cruel caste system. That is why the sutras consist of questions and answers throughout. (Ibid., p. 16)

AND Nichiren Daishonin carried on with this very spirit. His many writings crystallize his continuous struggle to save the people. He fought for the people, among the people, talking with them and responding to their questions and concerns by writing them hundreds of individual letters of encouragement.

This is the eternal spirit of Buddhism. This is the heart of our SGI movement. When thinking about the efforts of our predecessors of Buddhism, as we continue in their stead, we can imagine what great accomplishments are possible through open dialogue. It is a tradition I earnestly hope never ends.

Finally, with this being the last issue of the year, I want to thank the many SGI-USA members who have worked so hard to contribute to *Living Buddhism* in 1998—all of you who subscribe to it, and all those who submitted articles, poetry, photographs and art. And of course all the staff, thank you from the bottom of my heart. I hope you all enjoy a safe and joyful holiday season and welcome an exciting new year, 1999!

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