

**Drum Majors for Peace**  
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**LOS ANGELES**

'If you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice; say that I was a drum major for peace; I was a drum major for righteousness.... I just want to leave a committed life behind.'

— Martin Luther King Jr.

Bonnie Boswell draws parallels between Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s movement for justice and our own movement for peace, culture and education

Some years ago, a man said: "A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war 'this way of settling differences is not just.'... America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values."

The speaker was Martin Luther King Jr. This speech, delivered one year to the day before his assassination, is called "A Time To Break Silence." It, not the popular "I Have a Dream" speech, is considered by his students to be his most important. In it, he speaks out against the war in Vietnam, global poverty and the need for American society to go through a "radical revolution of values." King makes it abundantly clear to all those who would narrowcast him that his fight is not limited to civil rights but extends to justice for all.

When we, as Buddhists, reflect on the life of Dr. King, it is not hard to draw parallels between his movement for justice and our own. I draw your attention to another of King's speeches, called "The Drum Major Instinct." In it King talks about two men who, believing Jesus was to become the king of Israel, asked to be appointed his closest assistants. King says their request displayed the "drum major instinct," the desire in all of us to be out in front, leading the band, strutting.

Well, apparently, Jesus answered them by saying: "Don't give up this instinct. It is a good instinct if you don't distort it. But I want you to be first in love. I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity."

King concludes his remarks by saying that after his death not to mention that he had a Nobel Prize. He said: "If you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice; say that I was a drum major for peace; I was a drum major for righteousness.... I just want to leave a committed life behind."

Seven hundred years before King, the ultimate drum major for justice was born. On Feb. 16, 1222, Nichiren Daishonin, the founder of our Buddhism, was born in a small fishing village in Japan. He also led a committed life. Disturbed by the great sufferings of people around him, Nichiren Daishonin left the priesthood to find a teaching that would enable all people to become happy.

He concluded that the essential teaching of life was the phrase Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. And that there was no difference between the Buddha and the common mortal. "Abutsu-bo is the treasure tower, and the treasure tower is Abutsu-bo," he said. "No other knowledge is purposeful" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 30). He also wrote, "There should be no discrimination among those who propagate the five characters of Myoho-renge-kyo" (MW-1, 93).

For this thesis on nondiscrimination — the recognition of the fundamental dignity of all

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human life and the inseparability of life and all phenomenon — Nichiren Daishonin was vilified, attacked, imprisoned and sentenced to death. He, too, was a drum major for justice.

Nichiren Daishonin was concerned about the sufferings of others. He challenged the government to give up teachings that were driving the country to ruin. In his famous treatise, the “Rissho Ankoku Ron,” he notes: “There are...strange occurrences on earth, famine and pestilence...spreading throughout the land... Over half the population has already been carried off by death, and in every family someone grieves” (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 3).

But Nichiren Daishonin was not content to watch his nation decline. He said: “If even a good priest sees someone slandering the Law and disregards him, failing to reproach him, that priest is betraying Buddhism. But if he takes the slanderer severely to task, then he is my disciple and truly understands my teachings” (MW-1, 30). Year after year, whether on a desolate beach, an isolated island or faraway mountain, Nichiren Daishonin dedicated his life to taking to task those who denigrated human life. He was a drum major for justice.

When I look at our world today, I wonder what Nichiren Daishonin would think. We have our share of famine, pestilence, war, earthquakes and floods. And that’s just in Los Angeles. But there’s more. Every day in our land, 135,000 children take guns to school; 27 children die from the effects of poverty.<sup>1</sup> More than half of the yearly deaths are from suicide.<sup>2</sup> The United States imprisons more of its population than South Africa did under apartheid.<sup>3</sup> There is no peace and security in this land.

In the last 20 years, real wages have plummeted for 80 percent of the population.<sup>4</sup> MIT economist Lester Thurow has said, “No country without a revolution or military defeat has experienced such a sharp shift in the distribution of earnings as America in the last generation.”

Meanwhile, corporations, driven simply by short-term greed, have emerged as the dominant governance institutions on the planet. Economist David Korten points out that economic globalization has shifted power away from government responsibility for the public good. Our democratic institutions are rendered impotent — feeding on life in an insatiable quest for money. Income for the top 1 percent has ballooned by 60 percent in the last 10 years.<sup>5</sup> There is no peace and security in this land.

I wonder what Martin Luther King Jr. would say about our land, where certain forces co-opt and re-lexify the language of justice. Now we have a “civil rights” initiative that promotes the myth that race is no longer an issue in America. We practice the politics of denial in America — despite the facts and despite the need for justice. White males constitute 47 percent of the work force yet occupy 95 percent of all top managerial jobs.<sup>6</sup> Blacks are 11 percent of the population but still are only 3 percent of its doctors and lawyers.<sup>7</sup> There is no peace and security in this land.

I believe Martin Luther King Jr. and Nichiren Daishonin would want us all to be drum majors for justice. I think they would expect us to take up the mantle for peace. I think they would want us to challenge, to the best of our abilities, the forces that denigrate human life, whenever we find the opportunities — on the job, in the voting booth, in our neighborhoods. We are in the middle of a holocaust, and few seem to notice.

To be drum majors for justice, we need to reeducate ourselves. When popular culture promotes greed as the path to happiness, we must seek out new sources of information. When the “watchdog of the government,” the press, is little more than a medium for entertainment — promoting sex, violence and banality at every turn — we need to seek out new sources of information.

To be drum majors for justice, we need to study the sages of our land. In the “Rissho Ankoku Ron,” Nichiren Daishonin writes: “[The people] give their allegiance to evil. This

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is the reason that...sages leave and do not return” (MW-2, [2nd. ed.] 5). I believe one of the greatest sages of our land was Martin Luther King Jr.

The mainstream media, through intent or ignorance, have romanticized and marginalized King as a civil rights leader. They have ignored the fact that he was a drum major for justice and a prophet in our world. By ignoring his broader message, they, in essence, have devalued him in the eyes of the nation and removed from closer examination the full range of his message, thus lessening his historic significance.

Although he dipped down into a different spiritual well, he challenged a corrupt, discriminatory and hateful society to be better than it was. He took action against a lethargic government and an unjust justice system. He questioned the moral values of an indifferent public.

Martin Luther King Jr. can be an example for all of us. Although he did not practice Buddhism, on the American scene I think we can say he lived the spirit of Buddhism. What Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism has to offer people that is so unique is what King called for: a revolution of values. The practice of this Buddhism gives us a way to experience, firsthand, the inseparability of ourselves and others. This is the heritage of the ultimate law of life to which we are heir.

I believe it is the difficult, lonely struggle to speak up that allows a person to turn the negative drum-major instinct into a positive one. A person who engages him- or herself in the struggle and takes a corrupt society to task is forced to find reservoirs of spiritual strength, courage, humor and grace. The engagement is the transforming experience.

We are inseparable from our environment. And that’s the good news. Because when we stand up in the middle of the holocaust and, with prayer and action, encourage others to reform the tenets in their hearts, we can begin the revolution of human values. We honor men like Nichiren Daishonin and Martin Luther King Jr. only by capturing their spirits — making their voices our voice, their visions our own. This alone gives us hope — knowing there is darkness before the dawn, that winter does turn to spring, and that an arrow aimed at the earth will surely make its mark.

In closing, I would like to share some words from Martin Luther King Jr.’s last book, *Where Do We Go From Here?*:

When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows.... The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

Let’s honor the great men that came before us, each in our own way, by becoming drum majors for justice. Let’s become drum majors for peace. Let’s become drum majors for righteousness.

**WT**

1. Children’s Defense Fund.
2. National Center for Health Statistics.
3. Greenberg, Jack, “Apartheid Exists on Death Row,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 1995.
4. Borosage, Robert, “Suffocating in a Consensus Budget,” *The Nation*, Dec. 11, 1995.
5. Lind, Michael, “To Have and To Have Not,” *Harper’s*, June 1995.
6. Frank, Robert, “Research on Affirmative Action Shows Modest Gains for Blacks,” *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 21, 1995.
7. Ibid.

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