

UNMASKING EVIL
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Unmasking the evil that is racism — the evil that pains, frightens and destroys us — is James Baldwin's mission in his book *The Evidence of Things Unseen*. And although he structures his thesis around the landscape of racism in America, it is evil in its fundamental sense that he addresses: Who falls prey to evil, and who perpetrates it? What form does evil take, and where is it contained? These questions he weaves into parallels of every kind, from Atlanta police brutality and the African dictator to the corruption of public officials.

He illustrates how evil trickles down and runs through every current of our modern age and the fortitude that each of us must develop to withstand it. Baldwin writes: "The black man's first encounter with the West — by which I mean, mainly, the Christian church — brought him devastation and death. We are only now beginning to recover, are beginning, out of the most momentous Diaspora in human memory, to rediscover and recognize each other. This is a global matter, and the denouement of this encounter will be bloody and severe; precisely because it demolishes the morality, to say nothing of the definitions, of the Western world."

Baldwin equates this revolution as both literally and figuratively coming about through an uprising of the human spirit. The human spirit that is at last prepared to do battle against great evil.

As Buddhists and SGI members, we are infinitely fortunate to perceive this uprising, this revolution, as one that takes place first and foremost through our inner reformation — not one brought about by force of arms, intellect or politics, but through the act of living. We are engaged in human revolution. The dynamic that takes place when we resolve to use our spiritual resources to meet life's thorniest questions head on and the questions raised act as catalysts for our growth and transformation.

Our spiritual resources are unlimited, a discovery we make each time we delve deeper for the strength and clarity to perceive the nature of our lives. This unlimited resource can be called the wonder of life, as it defies description. It can neither be quantified nor contained. "Buddhism gives people the means to develop themselves thoroughly," SGI President Ikeda says in *Learning From the Goshu*, "and opens their eyes to the limitless power inherent in their lives."

Along with this power comes the attendant responsibility to live in accord with the Law. To ignore this fact is to in effect try to exist apart from one's life. As Nichiren Daishonin states: "Explaining the wonder of life is the prime objective of all the sutras [that Shakyamuni preached], termed the eighty-four thousand teachings.... We hold and embrace the eighty-four thousand teachings in our lives. To suppose that the Buddha, the Law, and the pure land of Eagle Peak exist apart from one's life and seek them outside is a delusion" (*Goshu Zenshu*, pp. 563–64).

It seems evident, then, that influences, overt or insidious, which strive in direct opposition to the wonder of life can be called what they are — evil. It must also be recognized that evil does not exist apart from one's life either.

It is at this juncture of recognizing evil that we can keenly observe how committed we are to the path of our individual human revolution. For it is at the eye of the storm, the core of our lives, that we must name evil, stand up to evil and thereby transform it.

Our lives are where this struggle has its roots, though evil will simultaneously appear as an "outside" entity. That authoritarian leader. That madman in the Middle East. The High Priest Nikken.

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Evil thrives where there is silence, indifference, weakness and betrayal. In every petty, negative thought or emotion we entertain individually. Every grudge and bias and judgment we harbor as a society. These are the causes for disunity and invite the presence and rise of evil.

Each time we witness or intuit a profound injustice and choose to slink away, leaving someone else to shoulder reform, we are personally condoning and encouraging evil. This poisons the very source of our faith. If it is allowed to happen once, it will happen twice and 10 times and a hundred more times.

The more evil encroaches on the wonder of life, the more accustomed we become to it. We may find ourselves able to rationalize evil, but all the while, the life-spring from which we draw our faith will be slowly, systematically tainted. Accordingly Nichiren Daishonin writes in the Gosho “On the Buddha’s Behavior,” “So long as a person does not try to depart from the cycle of birth and death and seek enlightenment, the devil will watch over him like a parent” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 186). And in the same way that peace cannot be defined as the absence of war, the perceived absence of evil does not mean that good is flourishing.

As Bodhisattvas of the Earth, it is our mission to be the voice of truth and the body of action for the happiness of the people. How can we hope to accomplish this if we hide from the evil in our own lives? If we choose the path of least resistance and forfeit our opportunity to stand toe to toe with evil, we are essentially turning our backs on the fundamentals of the Daishonin’s Buddhism. Ultimately, we are robbing ourselves while abandoning those around us, those whom we have sworn to protect and serve.

Combating evil is, then, a function of our Buddha nature. We do not need banners, the cavalry or Steven Segal to take a stand. All we need is the practice of faith “to become genuinely aware,” as Mr. Ikeda writes, “of the true entity of all phenomena and to manifest it actively in our own lives. Through faith, we can develop a great state of absolute freedom in our lives.”

Absolute freedom, or enlightenment from the dark recesses of our delusions and false beliefs, is like a high beam exposing evil for what it is — enabling each of us to transform evil into a source of good, beauty and gain. Recognizing the evil within is essential to taking deep responsibility and action. Recognizing our own evil instructs us in the correct attitude to maintain in the face of the manifest evil we encounter without.

It is said that freedom requires eternal vigilance. The Daishonin urges us that if we can fully take personal responsibility, there is no evil that can eclipse our attainment of absolute freedom.

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