

**Recollections
Because He Was a Living Flame
By Daisaku Ikeda**

**Dr. Cintio Vitier — Founder and President of the
Center for the Studies of José Martí**

Inspired by the life of José Martí, Dr. Vitier dedicates his life to perpetuating Martí's ideals. Martí endured every conceivable insult for the sake of his beloved compatriots — much like loving parents are willing to undergo any suffering or submit to any indignity if it means saving the lives of their children.

The figure's visionary gaze was focused on the future. I was riveted to the spot, looking up at the photographic portrait of the revolutionary hero himself, there at the Center for the Studies of José Martí in Havana. Here, I thought, is a hero for the ages. His brow reveals an intelligence that seemed to understand all; his calm bearing, the perfect composure of a person unafraid of death. He had the heart of a lion, a will of steel. His clear eyes were beacons of justice and goodness, and his face shone with a noble glow.

José Martí (1853–95) was the spiritual father of the Cuban Republic, a living flame of a man. A passionate cry echoed from the depths of his being: “Rise and fight until slavery has been abolished from the Americas! Until our society is cleansed of all corruption! Until the people are free from suffering!” This bold cry flew like sparks from his pen, from his lips.

Because he was a living flame, he sent a light of hope to his compatriots who felt alone and abandoned. Because he was a living flame, his warmth extended to all — there was nothing more alien to him than coldness or lack of passion. Because he was a living flame, he changed his form at will. He could be a poet, a philosopher, a journalist, a teacher, an orator, an accomplished organizer and, in the struggle for independence, a leader of the revolutionary forces. Though his form changed, the fire that burned within was unchanging — a fire fueled by love for the weak and exploited. He was a bodhisattva from the Caribbean. His motto was “Live to serve others! Live to love others! Say good-bye to yourself! And if you fall, fall the right way so you may rise again!”

Because he was a living flame, he was pure. Anyone who came near with selfish interests or ambitions was scorched by the intensity of his searing integrity. To Martí, his nation was an altar upon which he would sacrifice his life, not a steppingstone to personal glory. The ill, the oppressed and the poor were his altar. It was to them that he bowed his head in veneration.

When he was 9 years old, he witnessed a sugar plantation slave being whipped. He never forgot the scene. Spanish rule of Cuba was growing more and more oppressive until, in 1868, the Cuban Revolution — which continues to this day — began. It was a revolution to win the right to be free of outside control and exploitation. At its inception, José Martí was 15 years old.

Spain's reaction was harsh, and Martí's mentor, the patriotic poet Rafael María de Mendive, was arrested. The young Martí comforted his teacher's weeping wife, assuring her that he would avenge this injustice. This is the spirit of a true disciple. It is the same kind of dedication I felt toward my mentor, Josei Toda.

At 16, Martí himself was arrested. The pretext was a single letter in which he had criticized the authorities. The letter was signed by Martí and a close friend, but Martí insisted that he alone had written it. That declaration resulted in a six-year prison sentence.

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The prison for political prisoners was a living hell. Forced to wear chains around their waists and attached to a metal cuff on their right ankles at all times, prisoners worked in a rock quarry from before dawn until sunset. Some of the prisoners were sick and elderly, and there was even a 12-year-old orphan. The sound of harsh beatings constantly assaulted their ears, as did the scornful laughter and insults of the guards as they brutally abused their prisoners. When a prisoner collapsed under such torture, he was left to die.

With every move the prisoners made, the leg cuffs cut into their flesh. The wounds became infected, crusted over in blood and filth and dust from the quarry. Many people were left with festering sores that never healed to the end of their days.

From these horrific firsthand experiences, Martí learned the true awful nature of tyranny. Because tyranny reigned, countless innocent people had been murdered; children lived in fear, hovering wraithlike in the shadows; mothers went mad with grief. Martí was outraged at the smug, smirking individuals who perpetrated such evil. But he knew that those who caused such terrible suffering to others would eventually be judged themselves. He declared that while it might be possible to sully a person's reputation, to subvert justice, or to destroy all, the ideal of good itself would always rise to the top, indestructible and eternal.

The burning fires of extreme suffering branded this young life, forging an invincible revolutionary.

Dr. Cintio Vitier, founder and president of the Center for the Studies of José Martí, said: "Martí's will of iron was at the same time a will of love. There was nothing forced about it; it was simply born of his single-minded commitment to serve those who were suffering."

Martí endured every conceivable insult for the sake of his beloved compatriots — much like loving parents are willing to undergo any suffering or submit to any indignity if it means saving the lives of their children.

Martí was released from prison after six months. For his revolutionary activities, however, he was eventually forced to leave the country and live in exile abroad. He never enjoyed a moment's peace or comfort until he died at age 42. He experienced poverty, illness and the betrayal of his comrades. But he bore it all. He was a flame. Because he was a flame, the stronger the winds of adversity blew, the higher he rose and the fiercer he burned.

"If Martí were alive today," Dr. Vitier said, "I am sure he would completely agree with the idea of human revolution. The armies of force always perish. What we need is an army of human love."

Dr. Vitier is a second-generation scholar of Martí. His father, Dr. Medaldo Vitier, was a well-known researcher who published Cuba's first in-depth biographical study on Martí. The senior Dr. Vitier was appointed as education minister in an earlier administration, but he quickly wore out his welcome because of his firm convictions. He walked out of the ministry in disgust and resigned. Later, he founded a private school in his own home.

From the time he was a boy, Dr. Vitier had a great love of poetry. When he was 17, he sent some of his work to a Spanish poet visiting Cuba, Juan Ramón Jiménez. Mr. Jiménez invited the young Vitier to meet with him. Sitting together in the huge dining room of the hotel where the poet was staying, the poet read aloud each of Dr. Vitier's poems and offered his praise and approval. "You are a poet," Jiménez told the youth. These were words of tremendous encouragement for Dr. Vitier since Jiménez was one of the outstanding successors to the contemporary poetry movement started by Martí. Later, in 1956, Jiménez won the Nobel Prize for literature.

A poet is a witness, says Dr. Vitier. In each fleeting, ephemeral moment, the poet discovers beauty, resurrects it, expresses it and affirms it for all eternity. In that sense, Dr. Vitier's

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work to preserve Martí's timeless legacy for future generations is well suited to a poet.

I have met with Dr. Vitier twice to date — once in Havana and once in Tokyo. His wife, Dr. Fina García Marruz, is also a distinguished Martí scholar. Dr. Vitier and I are making arrangements for a dialogue on the theme of Martí. I am looking forward to it, because I believe that a nation which holds in high esteem a great humanist philosopher is a fortunate nation indeed — a nation that will always be spiritually rich, whatever hardships it may face. Martí declared that an irreligious nation will die because it has no means to nurture virtue.

Martí was a source of constant spiritual nourishment. He told his fellow citizens that an upturned face is far more beautiful than one gazing downward, urging them also to look, not at the clouds, but the sun. And he proudly proclaimed, "I am a good man, and for that goodness, / I will die looking up at the sun!"

The freedom fighter wanted to die on the battlefield. He devoted himself to preparing the groundwork for liberating his country. He organized the stirrings of revolution in different regions into a unified movement. He wrote until his arm became sore and swollen. And all the time he was hoping to fall in a hail of bullets. He wanted to give his life to illuminate the way for his comrades to realize their shared ideal.

He was a flame. His desire was to give every moment of his life, every breath of his being for his cause until there was nothing left. He knew that only when we blaze brilliantly ourselves can we illuminate others. "Logs endure death to provide illumination. Are human beings less brave than logs?" he asked.

In 1895, Martí finally returned to his homeland. A month later, he was killed in action on the battlefield. Struck by an enemy bullet, he fell from his horse. He fell face upward, looking at the sun. His followers vowed, their voices choked with tears, that they would avenge him. His noble sacrifice inspired thousands to rise up and join the struggle. The seed of the revolution grew and germinated in the people's hearts.

While Spanish rule was replaced with United States' rule, the sufferings of the Cuban people continued. But the spirit of Martí was alive and well. It spoke to the people; it lit their way. The Cuban Revolution finally toppled the corrupt Batista regime in 1959.

When the young rebel leader Fidel Castro was arrested in 1953 in the midst of the struggle, he was questioned at a military tribunal, "Who is your leader?"

He replied, "Our intellectual leader is José Martí!" That was 58 years after Martí's death.

In the visitors' book at the Center for the Studies of José Martí, I expressed in the form of a poem the emotions that rose in my heart when I thought of Martí's courageous life:

*The great and good
Meet troubles fierce as the harshest gale
But on such a person, too,
A great sun of eternal glory, victory and acclaim
Shines with brilliant grandeur without fail,
Always and without fail.*

Buddhism teaches the principle of emanations of the Buddha. The burning spirit of one great person lights a flame in the hearts of thousands and millions who become emanations of that spirit, spreading like a prairie fire across all time and space.

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