

## **PUBLISHER'S COMMENTARY AN ANTIDOTE TO VIOLENCE**

AS media images of bombing in Yugoslavia and of the misery of refugees in Kosovo were becoming part of our daily consciousness, new pictures of murder and mayhem assaulted us. This time, it was from closer to home: at a high school campus in Colorado, twelve students and one teacher were killed by two young men, who then took their own lives. It was a shocking and tragic event, that brought sudden horror and sadness to thousands of lives.

The national shock and intensive media focus on this incident at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, however, belies the fact that every day, on average, a dozen or more youths in America lose their lives to gun violence. Because it is not often covered by the media, the weight of this ongoing, mostly inner-city tragedy is lost to those who do not live in its midst. In any case, I hope we can all take this most recent event as a chance to reflect deeper than ever before on the problem of violence in our society.

Reports that followed the Colorado incident speculated that this killing rampage was a form of retaliation, an act of revenge. The two boys who did the shooting had been picked on or ostracized by other students at the school, it was said. It is not the first time in recent years that such motivation—being bullied, picked on or ostracized—has been reported as a factor leading to tragic displays of violence by students.

What could possibly make a young person, or anyone, for that matter, respond with such viciousness? What leads to the ongoing violence that has become epidemic in many of our communities? A wide range of causes have been cited—a society that increasingly glorifies violence; violence as entertainment; a general decline in empathy, the ability to respect or appreciate the feelings of others; and the easy availability of weapons.

I believe that a good part of the cause lies in the realm of self-identity, or sense of self-worth. In his peace proposal for 1999, carried in this issue, SGI President Ikeda addresses the identity crisis facing the world today.

Reading this, it occurred to me that when people base their identity, their sense of self, on something that is neither solid, permanent nor meaningful, they become vulnerable to any influence or change that might upset their self-image. When young people in the process of forming their self-identity begin to define themselves based on externals—image, acceptance by peers, status, possessions, etc.—they may be particularly at risk.

Having these things threatened becomes the same as having one's very life threatened. From the outside, there is no real threat. But from the inside, the perceived threat is catastrophic—the destruction or death of the “self.”

Without a solid sense of self, people tend to feel vulnerable in social settings; they become withdrawn, close their hearts, and try to secure themselves in false courage or bravado. To bolster this superficial courage in the face of crumbling self-esteem, they resort to attitudes and behavior that are more and more disdainful of others, and finally destructive.

Violence does not always express itself physically. In an article recently published in the *SGI Graphic*, Arun Gandhi, the grandson of Mohandas K. (Mahatma) Gandhi, refers to his grandfather's designation of two kinds of violence—physical and passive (nonphysical). Arun Gandhi goes on to comment: “The relationship between passive violence and physical violence is the same as the relationship between gasoline and fire. Acts of passive violence generate anger in the victim, and since the victim has not learned how to use anger positively, he or

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she abuses anger and generates physical violence.”

Reading this made me feel once again how important it is to be vigilant against all kinds of violence—particularly, to be aware of and avoid our own use of passive violence against anyone. Open-hearted dialogue—efforts to break down the barriers of closed hearts—I feel, is the opposite of passive violence. It is the antidote to violence. The purpose of our Buddhist activities is to conduct dialogue that enables people to develop a solid self-identity, a sense of self-worth that is impervious to external conditions or the negative opinions of others. Buddhism calls this the “greater self.”

In his peace proposal, President Ikeda equates the solution to this identity crisis to the formation of a new cosmology—a refreshed view of life and the universe. The view that is needed, he stresses, is that embodied by the Bodhisattvas of the Earth depicted in the Lotus Sutra.

He writes: “What the Lotus Sutra describes as a Bodhisattva of the Earth is a person committed to the work of restoring a sense of cosmology to contemporary society. In concrete terms, this means being a master of the art of dialogue and a standard-bearer of soft power.”

I cannot help thinking that in the case of violent children, having had someone to talk to—someone they could trust deeply and open their hearts to—might have prevented a tragedy. Soft power means the determination, persistence and strength of compassion necessary to help people open their hearts. Violence, I believe, is the ultimate expression of a closed heart.

It may seem like a roundabout path, but striving to awaken this spirit of a bodhisattva within ourselves and others through discussion is the most direct solution to violence in our world. Nurturing real self-worth—a sense of self that is rooted in the life of the universe, rooted in eternity, and fully cognizant of its deep connection with the lives of others—is our aim as Buddhists.

As Nichiren Daishonin encourages us, “Once you realize that your own life is the Mystic Law, you will realize that so are the lives of all others.”

And it is our strong and relentless prayer for the happiness of others, for the peace and betterment of society, that serves to strengthen and deepen this realization.

The Daishonin also states, “If you care anything about your personal security, you should first of all pray for order and tranquillity throughout the four quarters of the land, should you not?” (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 43). And President Ikeda comments on this passage in *The New Human Revolution*, saying, “The key to establishing peace and prosperity in our world, as expressed here, lies in the human heart—in people’s prayer for order and tranquillity in society—and in each person establishing a solid self-identity through the process of human revolution.”

Most crucial, I feel, is how we each respond to our awareness of the heightening state of violence in our world and in our communities. To what extent can we seek and grasp the spirit of a Bodhisattva of the Earth that President Ikeda speaks of? I pray that each of us will redouble our efforts to talk with and encourage others, particularly our younger friends, and together with them establish a firm self-identity that will serve as a fortress of peace for society and humankind. Nothing will match the joy and satisfaction we stand to gain by doing so.

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