

**SEEKING OUR TRUE ROOTS
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he doors slammed shut and pandemonium filled the hallway. My four friends and I were surrounded by at least twenty of them. I was pushed to the ground and felt something hit my back. As I got up and looked around, I saw my friend standing there with blood covering his face. He had been hit by the same belt buckle that hit me.

All of this because of an argument over a volleyball game. Reason enough for members of two rival ethnic gangs.

This was where my life was at in junior high school. The kid who had hit us with the belt turned out not to be a kid at all. He was out of school, and one of the teachers caught him with the belt. My friend and I chose to press charges and send him to jail, thinking this would be our first step toward revenge. What seemed like a good idea at the time turned sour when the death threats came. I became consumed with fear.

This was how arguments were solved in my neighborhood. Violence determined who would win. I didn't have to look far to see where this lifestyle led. Grown-ups with broken lives and lost dreams. I knew there had to be more to life than this. That was when I became involved in the SGI, and it changed the course of my life.

The reality, however, is that far too many teenagers face even worse circumstances as they grow up. More and more we are seeing their frustration lead them to violent actions that can result in tragedies like the Columbine shooting. We, as a society, are facing a pivotal time where we can either turn away from the piercing scream for help from our youth, or we can embrace them and share with them a vision of hope and peace for the future.

It was, in fact, my seniors in the SGI who helped me see my own potential. Even more than the other youth, it was the men and women who expressed the greatest expectations for me. I, in turn, developed dreams and goals and began pursuing them. In the pursuit of these dreams I have come to see that it wasn't only my neighborhood where violence was being used as a means to solve arguments.

In 1991, I took a one-year leave from my doctoral program in economics at U.C. Berkeley to teach economics in Czechoslovakia. The "velvet revolution" there had seen the country abandon communism and begin to incorporate Western economics. I was chosen to be part of a first group of fifteen advanced graduate students who would teach economics, politics, law and other subjects at universities. What better opportunity to learn about economics than to live in a country going through one of the greatest economic transitions in the course of history? My experience would go well beyond economics and, once again, alter the way I view the world around me.

When I arrived in Czechoslovakia, ethnic war was raging in Yugoslavia, a relatively short distance from where I was. People were killing one another because of ethnic origins or religions.

I had thought that I would be safe in Czechoslovakia — after all, they had just been through a bloodless revolution. I soon found out, however, that this was not the case. Many Czechs and Slovaks weren't very fond of each other, and there were serious discussions about splitting into separate countries. Some threatened to split by force, if necessary.

I also found out that some Czechoslovakians were deeply angry at the Vietnamese who had come to Czechoslovakia during communist times to find work. These Vietnamese were trying to make a home in their adopted country, but they were accused of stealing

jobs. Several times I witnessed unprovoked violence inflicted on these poor Vietnamese simply because they were different.

My wife and I are of Asian descent, and on a number of occasions a group of youth approached us full of anger. As soon as I spoke they realized we were Americans. They became friendly and wanted to practice their English. I couldn't help thinking about the Vietnamese who couldn't speak English like I did.

As I experienced living in fear again, I realized that violence was all around us. It wasn't only in the neighborhood I grew up in. It existed wherever people existed, and it was used at all levels of communities — in families, in neighborhoods and among nations. I felt more than ever that America, with its rich diversity, had a mission to fulfill if we were ever going to realize a world of peace, free from violence.

I returned to America with a renewed sense of mission. I realized that, just as SGI President Ikeda states, "The task facing our planet on the verge of the twenty-first century is that of realizing the unity of diversity."¹ I felt that America could provide a great example of the "unity of diversity" for the rest of the world. It was then that the 1992 civil unrest in Los Angeles broke out in response to the Rodney King verdict. It felt like the entire nation was going to explode. "Can't we just get along?" Rodney King uttered these words as the city around him seemed to be going up in flames.

As we continue to search for a way to get along, at times it has seemed that we have even taken steps back. The school shootings in Columbine, which saw minority students targeted, and recent hate crimes in Texas and Chicago have shocked the nation. Individuals and nations continue to seek to resolve racial tensions and arguments through violence.

In my search for a greater understanding of how to promote peace and unity in diversity, I have learned some wonderful lessons from the writings of President Ikeda. In discussing the message of the Lotus Sutra, he says: "To try to locate the 'roots' of one's identity in a particular racial or ethnic group is an illusion. It is like a mirage in the desert. Such a sense of identity, far from serving as a common 'homeland of life' that can be shared by all, only heightens distinctions between oneself and others, and becomes an underlying cause of conflict and strife."² As I read these words I understood exactly my mistake in joining a gang in my youth. I also saw the same error being committed by entire groups of people and even nations that sought their identity only in their ethnic group.

Instead, President Ikeda encourages us to "Seek out the primordial 'roots' of humankind.... If one reaches back to these fundamental roots, all become friends and comrades."³ This notion of equality, based on our true roots, must be the foundation for realizing a world of peace. Only when we see one another as equals can we truly respect others' lives. This mutual respect, I believe, is a prerequisite for peace, and it can only be realized by a great transformation in each individual life.

Based on this mutual respect, we must then fully reject the use of violence as a means to resolve conflicts at all levels of society. While conflict and misunderstanding will continue to exist, we must seek alternative means to solve our arguments.

How do we do this? Each individual, each nation must seek to engage one another in dialogue aimed at furthering understanding. In his most recent peace proposal, President Ikeda states: "In the final analysis, since they usually leave scars that continue to fester, forcibly imposed 'hard power' solutions are not real solutions at all.... Instead of resorting to hard-power solutions, we must first clarify the nature of the problem and then employ dialogue —the essence of soft power—to remove, one by one, the obstacles to solution."⁴ This is the strategy that we must employ at all levels of society.

Title: Seeking Our True Roots

Subject: Living Buddhism 08/99 v.99 n.8 p.46 LB9908p46

Author: Ed Feasel

Keywords: Feasel Nonviolence Roots Seeking True Youth

Some may think that nonviolent, or soft power, solutions are too idealistic or too passive. Great examples in history, however, prove this to be wrong. Gandhi, together with his fellow countrymen, pursued nonviolent means to secure the independence of India against British colonial rule. Martin Luther King Jr. and the champions of the civil rights movement also employed a nonviolent struggle to gain basic rights being denied to African Americans. In both cases, citizens were not passive, simply allowing injustice to persist. Rather, they stood up firmly for justice and spoke out against the injustices perpetrated against them. They understood, based on a deep respect for the dignity of life, that “victory by force is not true victory.”⁵

President Ikeda once mentioned that great individuals in the past, like Gandhi, have left a path for us to follow. The problem is that too often people are arrogant and ignore this path. Gandhi realized a great revolution based on his philosophy of nonviolence. Against what appeared to be insurmountable odds, he achieved a brilliant victory that stands as an example for all of us to follow.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to standing up for justice based on nonviolence is our own fear. Our fear often leads us in directions of least resistance, in directions where we succumb to our “lesser self.” We must overcome this fear and pursue the higher road, the nobler course.

Gandhi’s followers overcame their fear through his teachings. Jawaharlal Nehru stated that Gandhi’s greatest gift to India was driving fear from the hearts of the Indian people. Martin Luther King Jr. similarly helped his followers overcome their fear and achieve a great victory for human rights.

A great mentor can lead us to overcome our fears and pursue the correct course. As President Ikeda states, “When one is completely dedicated to the path of mentor and disciple, he or she experiences no doubt or confusion, no uncertainty or fear.”⁶ The youth of the SGI-USA have initiated a campaign of Victory Over Violence this summer. They will be sponsoring seminars on nonviolence and provide people with an opportunity to sign a pledge of victory over violence. The pledge is based on the belief that the victory must begin with each of us. It contains the following three points: I will treasure my life; I will treasure all life; and I will inspire hope in others. With this Victory Over Violence campaign, the SGI-USA continues its tradition of promoting peace in society through dialogue. While sponsored by the youth, the campaign is an opportunity for all individuals to stand up for a peaceful world, free from violence.

As President Ikeda states: “As a peace movement on the popular level, SGI and its activities may be considered a contemporary development of Gandhi-ism. Our aim is to create a citadel of peace in the mind of each individual and in this way to educate the masses to love peace and reject violence.”⁷ □

1. Ikeda, Daisaku. “A New Humanism for the Coming Century,” p. 24.
2. Ikeda, Daisaku. “Dialogue On the Lotus Sutra,” *Living Buddhism*, January 1998, p. 43.
3. Ikeda, Daisaku. “The Sun of *Jiyu* Over a New Land.”
4. Ikeda, Daisaku. 1999 peace proposal: “Toward a Culture of Peace, A Cosmic View,” *Living Buddhism*, May 1999, p. 33.
5. Ikeda, Daisaku. “A New Humanism for the Coming Century,” p. 13.
6. Ikeda, Daisaku. *Addresses In the United States, June/July 1996*, p. 119.
7. Ikeda, Daisaku. *Choose Peace: A Dialogue Between Johan Galtung and Daisaku Ikeda*, p. 71.