

PERSPECTIVE: MORATORIUM ON THE DEATH PENALTY

SGI members of Italy have joined in a worldwide petition drive calling on each nation to establish a moratorium on the death penalty by the year 2000. Nicoletta Nencioli says that ‘indifference, detachment, silence or lack of dialogue are the most fearful dangers on private or public issues.’

“Life itself is the most precious of all treasures. Even the treasures of the entire universe cannot equal the value of a single human life.” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 267)

Every time I want to introduce someone to Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism; every time I chant, I think, I reflect on how to reach another’s heart, on how to plant the seed of hope through my Buddhist practice, I find the same answer: This religion honors above all the sanctity of life, of human life, of every single life. This is why I am a votary of the Lotus Sutra. Because one day someone reminded me how valuable my life was, and how blind I was in not recognizing it. And I inevitably find out again and again that the only thing I have to do to open an unexpected ocean of hope even in the most pained, tortured, suffering or just distracted person is to convey the simple, revolutionary message: Each of us possesses a Buddha nature. Even you. You have an immense wonder of treasures, an infinite source of happiness inside yourself. Your life is so precious that “even one day of life is more valuable than all the treasures of the universe” (MW-1, 231).

To me the message of Nichiren Daishonin is as clear as crystal: Each person is a manifestation of the Mystic Law, is inherently invaluable and irreplaceable. There is no human being to give up on, there is no single human being who can’t be awakened, who can’t start the transforming spiritual journey we all undertook: The seed of Buddhahood can be buried in some remote corner, be hidden behind the most unfair, incorrect existence, but it is there. And to me what makes all the difference is this HOPE: There is hope, always, for every one. Right now. Nothing is impossible with Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Each person is capable of achieving their human revolution. The Daishonin’s Buddhism encompasses the most powerful, compassionate, humanistic way of living life.

It is a teaching that invites all of us to practice one of the most challenging lessons of the Lotus Sutra: to honor the Buddha nature inside every human being, even the apparently most despicable, lost and depraved. To honor it in our enemies. To learn how to fight the devilish nature inherent in life by appealing to the Buddha inside the original self.

But this does not mean to be weak, yielding or lacking in firmness. SGI President Daisaku Ikeda reminds us by pointing to President Toda’s message advocating the abolition of nuclear weapons that “it is the duty of Buddhists to struggle dauntlessly against those who would rob life of its sanctity” (Lectures on the “*Expedient Means*” “*Life Span*” Chapters of the Lotus Sutra, vol. 1, p. 157).

In his speech before the Rajiv Gandhi Institute in 1997, President Ikeda affirmed the primacy of the Buddhist principle of non-harming. The first key principle for a new humanism must be non-killing, he states: “Humans should under no circumstances kill other humans.... Too much blood has been shed in the name of ‘justice’..... Such suffering must never be repeated. Thus, the first provision of a new humanism must be an absolute

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injunction against the taking of human life” (January 1998 *Living Buddhism*, p. 14).

It was on this basis that our sister organization the Italian Buddhist Institute Soka Gakkai, “based on Buddhism’s fundamental respect for every form of life,” has joined in a worldwide petition drive calling on each nation to establish a moratorium on the death penalty by the year 2000. The appeal, which has been endorsed by the Vatican and by numerous human rights organizations like Amnesty International and the International Red Cross, will be delivered to the U.N. Secretary General by October 1999. The goal of the appeal is to press the Secretary General to ask each member nation for a formal statement on the death penalty. The appeal invites everyone, even those in favor of the death penalty, to seriously consider the need to stop the executions. It goes on to say that “the death penalty is the ultimate denial of the universally recognized right to life; it is a punishment incapable of fighting violence. It instead legitimates the worst violence: the one that takes human life by social law; it is a concept that makes our world more inhuman by making revenge the only winner, and eliminating forgiveness and rehabilitation from the justice system.”

The appeal also points out that “according to the United Nations there are no data demonstrating that the death penalty is effective in preventing the worst crimes and that wherever the capital punishment has been reinstated there is no evidence of any decrease in serious crime.”

The SGI members in Italy are collecting signatures and every member has been invited not only to sign the petition themselves, but to become an active promoter of the appeal and try to collect 20 additional signatures.

President Ikeda has been on different occasions adamant on the issue of the death penalty. In *Choose Peace*, his dialogue with Johan Galtung, he says: “As a Buddhist, I oppose capital punishment as an extreme form of state inflicted violence. Nothing justifies deliberately depriving another human being of life. Justice may sometimes miscarry; when it does, the innocent may be wrongly executed. The crime-deterrence of the death penalty is widely claimed but remains unproven” (p. 67). And he quotes Mahatma Gandhi’s words that “it is braver to forgive than to punish an enemy.”

The message of President Ikeda is consistent. Twenty-five years ago in his dialogue with Arnold Toynbee, in *Choose Life*, he expressed the same concept: “My reason for insisting that the death penalty ought to be abolished everywhere is based on the Buddhist respect for the dignity of life.... Whether it has this effect [of reducing the crimes perpetrated] or not, the concept of the death penalty involves the taking of life as a warning to other people or as a retaliation for crime. But one retaliation, by inevitably leading to another, sets in motion a course of wicked acts. I feel that life, as an absolute entity worthy of the profoundest respect, must never be treated as a means to achieving anything else than life itself. The dignity of life is an end in itself; therefore, when social restraint is necessary, it is certainly better to devise a method that does not tamper with life. The use of the death penalty as a warning manifests a regrettable tendency.... That tendency is the habit of undervaluing human life.” (pp. 158–59).

I started chanting in this country. I encountered Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism through the words and the compassion of the American members, and my mentors, my friends are active members of SGI-USA. I learned gongyo with such an American accent that Italian members tease me. My bonding and gratitude are deeply connected with this country, this earth, these people. But I learned over time that in the American culture, even in the SGI-USA culture, the death penalty is a very controversial issue. It is something so deeply root-

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ed and widely accepted that to my surprise, at least in my experience, the topic is rarely approached. Individually, members are committed to one or the other side of the arena, but to my knowledge there has not yet been any collective reflection. This puzzles me.

I oppose with no ambiguity the death penalty. I subscribe entirely to President Ikeda's thought. But what I believe most is that an issue like this cannot be ignored. Indifference, detachment, silence or lack of dialogue are the most fearful dangers on private or public issues.

Dialogue is the most powerful and pacific tool to change the world, our lives and the destiny of the societies where we live. It is only when we don't talk that we can't create bridges among different positions, and instead remain disengaged, isolated, in personal relationships as in public matters.

Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism invites us to understand and become involved in worldly affairs. One of the Buddha's 10 honorable titles is "*Understanding of the World*." The Daishonin teaches that "a person of wisdom is not one who practices Buddhism apart from worldly affairs but rather one who thoroughly understands the principles by which the world may be governed" (MW-6, 142).

Mr. Makiguchi declared that "a religion that refuses to involve itself in society has no reason to exist."

President Ikeda always invites us not to be bystanders, but to take action, to live by our conviction based on faith. My conviction based on faith is that the only way to build peace across the globe, to purify the land, to construct a better society, is through nurturing a culture of uncompromising respect for life, a culture that does not allow the capital punishment. And that the starting point to achieve this goal is an open dialogue.

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