

**PERSPECTIVE**  
**CIVILITY: CONCERN FOR OTHERS**  
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In November 1998, I attended a conference at the Huntington Library in San Marino California on George Washington. One of the speakers, Dr. David S. Shields of the Citadel University, Charleston, South Carolina, presented a very interesting lecture titled, “George Washington: Probity, Publicity and Power,” which had a very powerful effect on me.

He stressed how Washington had placed a great emphasis on civility and how to conduct oneself in daily life. He saw it as much more than just good manners; it was also as a basic respect for the dignity of every human being. He supported a concept known as the “Stage Theory,” which says that society goes from nature, to civil culture, and then to decadence. This made a great impression on me, as I fear that we are very much in the latter stage, where a lack of common decency and respect is very prevalent.

Washington denied over-familiarity, and he cherished civility—respect for others—as a way of enriching society. He wrote a pamphlet, “*Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior*,” when he was only 16, based upon an earlier book by French Jesuits.

Some rules in the pamphlet seem funny and archaic now, such as “Spit not into the fire, nor stoop low before it,” or “When in company put not your hands to any part of the body not usually discovered.” But the great majority are very relevant today. For example: “Every action done in company ought to be done with some sign of respect to those that are present”; “Use no reproachful language against any one, neither curse nor revile”; “Be not hasty to believe flying reports to the disparagement of any.” (Do not slander.) “When another speaks, be attentive yourself, and disturb not the audience. If any hesitate in his words...interrupt him not, nor answer him until his speech be ended”—I think we have all been guilty of that one time or another, myself included!

As SGI President Ikeda has said: “Since we are all friends from the remotest past, let’s treat each other with dignity, courtesy and respect.” George Washington, with his 110 precepts, seems very much in keeping with this.

Many articles and books have been written on this topic of civility recently, and whole conferences have been devoted to the subject and its influence on society. Stephen L. Carter has written a book called *Civility: Manners, Morals and the Etiquette of Democracy*. He sees civility as the moral obligation to make sacrifices for the common good, live in a spirit of generosity and risk, and treat our fellow citizens with respect even when we disagree, all of which underscore the fact that we do not go through this life alone. He feels we must return to religion and the values that come with it to accomplish this, including prayer, courage and unselfish devotion to others (the way of the bodhisattva in Buddhism).

In addition to these many writings, a conference was held at the very prestigious Johns Hopkins University in 1998 to measure the influence of civility on society. An outgrowth of this was the Johns Hopkins Civility Project. Some of the project’s findings attribute the serious decrease in civility, which pervades society, to an increase in violent crime, divisions within the community, and a lack of communication. All of these seriously affect young people.

The importance of communication is stressed toward improving this area, and discussions and workshops on the improvement of politeness, and manners and respect for

the rights of others are recommended for high school and university students.

In accordance with the concept of “Stage Theory,” I believe most people have slipped away from civility — which includes respect for oneself and others — and need to re-learn and implement these principles.

Although we may not formally discuss or promote the concept of civility, the SGI’s emphasis on dialogue, care and concern for others, and respect for the basic dignity of every human being — manifested by how we respect the Buddha nature in everyone via our activities for kosen-rufu — is a significant step in promoting the culture of civility in society.