

## THE BUDDHIST EMPHASIS ON DIALOGUE

*The following was excerpted from SGI President Ikeda's speech delivered at Harvard University, Cambridge, Sept. 24, 1993, titled "Mahayana Buddhism and Twenty-first-Century Civilization" (A New Humanism, pp. 154–57).*

Since its inception, the philosophy of Buddhism has been associated with peace and pacifism. That emphasis derives principally from the consistent rejection of violence combined with stress on dialogue and discussion as the best means of resolving conflict. Descriptions of the life of Shakyamuni provide a good illustration. His life was completely untrammelled by dogma, and his interactions with his fellows stressed the importance of dialogue. The sutra recounting the travels that culminated his Buddhist practice begins with an episode in which the aged Shakyamuni uses the power of language to avert an invasion.

According to the sutra, Shakyamuni, then 80 years old, did not directly admonish the minister of Magadha, a large country bent on conquering the neighboring state of Vajji. Instead, he spoke persuasively about the principles by which nations prosper and decline. His discourse dissuaded the minister from implementing the planned attack. The final chapter of the same sutra concludes with a moving description of Shakyamuni on his deathbed. As he lay dying, he repeatedly urged his disciples to raise any uncertainties that they might have about the Buddhist Law (Dharma) or its practice, so that they would not find themselves regretting unasked questions after his passing. Up until his last moment, Shakyamuni actively sought out dialogue, and the drama of his final voyage from beginning to end is illuminated by the light of language, skillfully wielded by one who was truly a "master of words."

Why was Shakyamuni able to employ language with such freedom and to such effect? What made him such a peerless master of dialogue? I believe that his fluency was due to the expansiveness of his enlightened state, utterly free of all dogma, prejudice and attachment. The following quote is illustrative: "I perceived a single, invisible arrow piercing the hearts of the people." The "arrow" symbolizes a prejudicial mindset, an unreasoning emphasis on individual differences. India at that time was going through transition and upheaval, and the horrors of conflict and war were an ever-present reality. To Shakyamuni's penetrating gaze, it was clear that the underlying cause of the conflict was attachment to distinctions, to ethnic, national and other differences.

In the early years of this century, Josiah Royce (one of many important philosophers Harvard University has given the world) declared that: "Reform, in such matters, must come, if at all, from within.... The public as a whole is whatever the processes that occur, for good or evil, in individual minds, may determine."

As Royce points out, the "invisible arrow" of evil is not to be found in the existence of races and classes external to ourselves, but is embedded in our own hearts. The conquest of our own prejudicial thinking, our own attachment to difference, is the necessary precondition for open dialogue. Such discussion, in turn, is essential for the establishment of peace and universal respect for human rights. It was his own complete absence of prejudice that enabled Shakyamuni to expound the Law with such freedom, adapting his style of teaching to the character and capacity of the person to whom he was speaking.

Whether he was mediating a communal dispute over water rights, converting a violent criminal or admonishing someone who objected to the practice of begging, Shakyamuni attempted first to make others aware of the “arrow” of their inner evil. The power of his extraordinary character brought these words to the lips of one contemporaneous sovereign: “Those whom we, with weapons, cannot force to surrender, you subdue unarmed.”

Only by overcoming attachment to differences can a religion rise above an essentially tribal outlook to offer a global faith. Nichiren, for example, dismissed the shogunal authorities, who were persecuting him, as the “rulers of this little island country.” His vision was broader, directed toward establishing a religious spirit that would embody universal values and transcend the confines of a single state.

Dialogue is not limited to formal debate or placid exchange that wafts by like a spring breeze. There are times when, to break the grip of arrogance, speech must be like the breath of fire. Thus, although we typically associate Shakyamuni and Nagarjuna only with mildness, it was the occasional ferocity of their speech that earned them the sobriquet of “those who deny everything” in their respective eras.

Similarly, Nichiren, who demonstrated a familial affection and tender concern for the common people, was uncompromising in his confrontations with corrupt and degenerate authority. Always unarmed in the chronically violent Japan of his time, he relied exclusively and unflinchingly on the power of persuasion and nonviolence. He was tempted with the promise of absolute power if he renounced his faith, and threatened with the beheading of his parents if he adhered to his beliefs. Nevertheless, he maintained the courage of his convictions. The following passage, written upon his exile to a distant island from which none was expected to return, typifies his lioness tone: “Whatever obstacles I might encounter, so long as men of wisdom do not prove my teachings to be false, I will never yield!”

Nichiren’s faith in the power of language was absolute. If more people were to pursue dialogue in an equally unrelenting manner, the inevitable conflicts of human life would surely find easier resolution. Prejudice would yield to empathy and war would give way to peace. Genuine dialogue results in the transformation of opposing viewpoints, changing them from wedges that drive people apart into bridges that link them together.

During World War II, Soka Gakkai, an organization based on the teachings of Nichiren, challenged head-on the forces of Japanese militarism. As a result, many members were imprisoned, beginning with the founder and first president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi. Far from recanting, Makiguchi continued to explain to his guards and interrogators the principles of Buddhism. They were the very ideas which had made him a “thought criminal” in the first place. He died at the age of 73, still in confinement.

Josei Toda was heir to the spiritual legacy of Makiguchi, and he became the second president of the organization. He emerged from the ordeal of two years’ imprisonment declaring his faith in the unity of the global human family. He then preached widely among the population, who were lost and suffering in the aftermath of the war. Toda also bequeathed to us, his youthful disciples, the mission of building a world free of nuclear weapons.

With this as our historical and philosophical basis, Soka Gakkai International remains committed to the role of dialogue in the advancement of peace, education and culture.... For my own part, I wish only to continue my efforts to speak with people all over the earth in order to contribute in some small way to the greater happiness of humankind.