

## DEVELOPING A NEW CONSCIOUSNESS

**A dialogue between SGI-USA General Director Danny Nagashima and Lawrence Carter Sr., Dean of the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel and professor of philosophy and religion at Morehouse College in Atlanta, March 14.**

**Danny Nagashima:** Dean Carter, thank you for talking with us. The Gandhi Institute for Reconciliation you are establishing sounds very interesting. What is the Institute's purpose?

**Lawrence Carter:** The Gandhi Institute will be an information distribution center. I want to have the largest website on Gandhi in the United States. I want to have a living learning center, where students from all over the world will be given the opportunity to participate in seminars, symposium and have exposure to the resident scholars.

I want to try to create some new solutions, some less violent approaches. You see, we have ignored the fact that the diplomatic agencies of the world are perhaps the best examples of institutionalized nonviolence. I want to deal with conflict resolution, domestic violence and ecological violence.

**Nagashima:** Our SGI organization is based on the principle of human revolution, that one person's decision to live a contributive, valuable life can influence a change in society at large. Gandhi is certainly one of humanity's greatest examples of this principle.

**Carter:** I think that there is a "value revolution" going on. College is the time when most students are trying to decide what values they are going to be claiming as their own. And we are living in a time when the greatest values are claimed to be material values; the values of appearance—the weighable, the seeable and the spatial. There is great confusion about what spiritual values are. Most people talk about ethical principles, but very few have ever seen one and would not know how to write about it. That will be another emphasis for us.

I have a couple of book manuscripts that are unpublished, and one of them is titled *Ethical Options: Virtue and Value Centered Learning in the Tradition of Martin Luther King Jr. and Mohandas K. Gandhi*. Most of our youth don't understand that virtues are character values. They characterize us.

Our religious institutions don't really teach people how to imbibe values. Most students are not aware that values are coherently criticized wants. They don't understand the nature of coherence as a synonym for reason and that we're talking about the need to be consistent. We don't do a good job with helping youth to understand that they should become the things they want to see.

That's Gandhian; that these ideals, when imbibed, consciously have within them all of the germinating power and ethics to help the individual manifest that idea. This goes back to the whole notion of being the truth. Rather than just hearing it or trying to digest it, we should make a conscious decision to be love, to be courage, to be kindness.

**Nagashima:** Our SGI president, Daisaku Ikeda, has spoken of the need to create a new spirituality among our youth, who are being inadequately served by government, educational and religious institutions.

**Carter:** It isn't that youth are not moral or not ethical. I think we all are spiritual beings, planetary citizens and human incarnations, but we are unaware of our spirituality. It needs to be evoked. President Ikeda is right. When students become aware on a deeper level, the new spirituality will emerge.

**Nagashima:** Morehouse College has been in existence for 133 years and is internationally renowned for building leaders. How has this tradition been established, and what are you doing to preserve it?

**Carter:** The whole emphasis of Morehouse building leaders rested on the shoulders of a few powerful mentors, the most famous of whom was Benjamin Elijah Mays, who was the college's sixth president and served for 27 years. Every Tuesday morning, he addressed the student body. In those talks, he planted seeds of revolution in the minds of the students, saying that they should be ashamed to die until they'd won some victory for humanity. On the Tuesday after Gandhi's passing, President Mays delivered a tribute to him, reflecting on their dialogue, which is now published. Seated dead center in front of the pulpit on this occasion was Morehouse College senior Martin Luther King Jr.

The biggest concern for President Mays was the elimination of segregation in the United States and ultimately the world—educationally, legally, corporately, socially and culturally. Many outstanding people have graduated from Morehouse College who claimed him as a mentor, the most famous of whom was Dr. King.

But when President Mays' generation passed, it was widely felt that the incubator that produced leaders passed with him. So now that that era has ended and we have changed centuries and also millennia, it is felt that we have to do something new.

This is what has motivated me. We have to do something to institutionalize and re-create the incubator for leadership. We can't do the same thing President Mays did.

What I'm trying to do is begin an approach and a system that others will become attracted to. First of all, I am claiming—not just for Morehouse College, but for Atlanta and the nation—one of the ignored mentors, Gandhi. He's ignored in this country primarily because he's from another world. Asia is another world. Americans can be so disdainful of difference. We think we are almighty and know it all.

When somebody starts to question all of my excitement about Gandhi, I will quickly remind them of one of my favorite stories about Dr. King. He was asked who should be named Christian of the Century, and he said Gandhi, a Hindu. That immediately shocks most Christians, because you're not suppose to step outside of the tradition.

**Nagashima:** As dean of the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel, how did you come to found the Institute in Gandhi's name?

**Carter:** One of the things I'm doing is subtly reintroducing people to whom Dr. King really was, because most people don't know him. They want to baptize him in a kind of traditionalism, when he would have baptized himself in truth. This is where he and Gandhi come together. Gandhi believed that you should worship in those places that take you

closer to the truth. It's tradition that's killing us and he went so far as to say that for him God was truth.

It's hard to elevate and revere Dr. King without looking closely at the stereotypes that he shattered. That can be a little painful. He has been anesthetized, sterilized, and he is only quoted in a popular way around the 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech. Most people don't quote him after 1965, when he made his most revolutionary statements and when he and Malcolm X were getting closer together.

I have deliberately called this the Gandhi Institute for Reconciliation. I'm putting the spinach into the ice cream by using the term *reconciliation*. That has been a problem for this nation since the Civil War. We're talking about dialogue across all boundaries and disciplines, learning to bridge differences with integrity. This does not mean that you have to give up that which is yours by inheritance or by birth, but learning how to hold your views with a tentative confidence and open your ears.

**Nagashima:** Last year, the youth of our organization started a nonviolence campaign called Victory Over Violence, focusing on each person's impact on violence and encouraging people to make a pledge of nonviolence. I believe that it is through grass-roots efforts such as this that we will change the hearts of Americans.

**Carter:** We're talking about a kind of harmony here that has not been given a chance, because we have a defense department rather than a peace department. Even our national anthem is violent. Whenever someone suggests that we change it to "America the Beautiful," you get the hawks who want to out-shout the doves.

We have so much to learn from Gandhi and King, who are the two preeminent champions of nonviolence. We're trying to raise a new phoenix from Morehouse College. That's my vision.

What we're doing on April 2 [the founding of the Gandhi Institute for Reconciliation] is inaugurating a program emphasis around the philosophies of these two men. We are bringing together Gandhi and King in a very natural way, around the common denominator of nonviolence as a way of life.

I know that when we go deep enough in their theories, we're going to come up in everything else on the planet. We're going to come up in all of the religions, because you're going to come up in truth. In all the scientific disciplines, you're going to come up into a new consciousness. The consciousness of nonviolence is the common denominator that will bring science and religion together. One is anticipated in the other. You can't have change without this new consciousness.

This is why you as Buddhists and I as a Christian, a follower of Jesus can be discovering this common ground. It's because there is one mind and in every person we are longing for the same thing.