

**A RECORD OF MY LIFE  
BY DAISAKU IKEDA  
ALL LIVING BEINGS DESERVE RESPECT**

**Reflecting on the dark side of the French Revolution—how it ‘devolved into a gruesome power struggle’—SGI President Ikeda says that true revolution can be found in Buddhist compassion, in putting into practice the teaching that ‘all living beings are noble and worthy of respect.’**

There is still a great deal of argument and debate about the significance of the French Revolution. Former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, an old acquaintance of mine, once asked Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai his opinion on the French Revolution. I understand that Premier Zhou replied that it was still too soon to give a proper evaluation.

From the standpoint of China’s 4,000 years of history, 200 years is probably far too short a span of time from which to draw any conclusions. We are, after all, talking about a country whose citizens still debate the rise and fall of the three kingdoms, which is depicted in the historical classic *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, as though these events from 2,000 years ago happened only yesterday. It’s safe to say that people’s perceptions of time are different.

Besides, this was Zhou Enlai, who had given himself heart and soul to the construction of a great China, consistently viewing the circumstances with a long-range perspective. These were most likely his honest, true sentiments.

If we do not look at events or changes over the long term, we cannot appreciate their true value. Although perhaps on another level, the movement we of the SGI are advancing is also a revolution—a revolution on the most fundamental level, aiming toward the wide-open future with a vast perspective.

Second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda used to say, “The real significance of our efforts won’t be understood for another 200 years.” It will definitely take some time before the true merit and worth of our movement shines brilliantly for all to see. It is important that as we move forward, we remain aware of the judgment that history will make 10,000 years hence.

The significance of the French Revolution lies in the enormous role that the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity set forth in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) have played in elevating people’s awareness and support of human rights, and the development of democracy.

Yet, where there is light, there is also darkness. I imagine that it is because the French take so much pride in their history that many of the people whom I met in France in 1987 also recognized the dark portions of their country’s past.

The revolution had succeeded. But the overthrow of the old regime quickly devolved into a gruesome power struggle in the new. This eventually gave way to the Reign of Terror (1793–94).

Disorder and confusion reigned. Suspicions begot fear, and betrayal ran rampant. There was no new morality to replace the old system of thought that had been repudiated. People lost all sense of goodness and virtue.

It was a time of dismal antagonism and conflict that seemed like it would never end. There was no one to believe in or trust. Filled with hatred, people turned one another in to

the authorities. Terrorism and purges were prevalent.

A great deal of blood was needlessly shed in the name of the revolution. Victims numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Every day, between 100 to 200 more people were thrown to the bottom of the Loire River, which flows through Nantes, the other major center of revolutionary activity after Paris. As a result, the Loire was cynically referred to as a “public bath.”

The revolution began as a struggle for the sake of the people, for the sake of all humanity. But somewhere along the way, it became an abuser of human rights, striking fear into the hearts of the people and suffocating their humanity. It was an example of the tragedy that ensues when people commit evil out of the desire for good.

This is not a history isolated to some 200 years ago. We have seen the same horror occur in this century as well—in the independence movements of developing countries and in the struggle to protect the human rights of society’s underprivileged—all in the name of liberty, equality and fraternity.

What happened? A great many revolutions, while waving banners proclaiming justice and human rights, have created histories stained with blood. To quote the British author Samuel Johnson, “Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel”—there is an endless supply of those who will play upon the pure passions of the people in order to advance their selfish ambition for power.

How can humanity put an end to this ongoing cycle?

I spoke with Michel Baroin, director of the Committee to Commemorate the 200th Anniversary of the French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, in Tokyo in January 1987. I will never forget his profound remarks at that time: “The ideals of the French Revolution are liberty, equality and fraternity. But I feel that today the order should be changed to fraternity, liberty and equality. That’s because the ideals of liberty and equality can only be realized based on fraternity.”

Truer words were never spoken. If the ideal of fraternity, or friendship, had been firmly established during the French Revolution, the terror perpetuated in the revolution’s name could probably have been avoided. Fraternity must not, however, be limited to one citizenry or to the members of a particular social class. It mustn’t be conditional fraternity.

I talked to Mr. Baroin about the Buddhist spirit of compassion, how it enables people to create friendships of real substance that are grounded in a deeper level of life.

## **Human rights have been at the very core of Buddhist philosophy from the beginning.**

An early Buddhist text states: “Whatever living creatures there are, moving or still without exception, whichever are long or large, or middle-sized or short, small or great, / whichever are seen or unseen, whichever live far or near, whether they already exist or are going to be, let all creatures be happy-minded.... / Just as a mother would protect with her life her own son, her only son, so one should cultivate an unbounded mind towards all beings” (*The Group of Discourses*, p. 17).

Compassion in Buddhism does not end with fellow feelings among people. Buddhism teaches that all living beings are noble and worthy of respect. In that sense, human rights have been at the very core of Buddhist philosophy from the beginning.

Nichiren Daishonin says, “If Nichiren’s compassion is truly great and encompassing, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo will spread for ten thousand years and more, for all eternity” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 736). There is no discrimination in the vast, boundless

compassion of Buddhism. There are no restrictions or exceptions.

Rather, the compassion of Buddhism arises from a sense of responsibility to pray for the happiness of those whom one has not even met, or who have not yet been born. Mr. Baroin agreed heartily with my assertion that though we might speak of liberty and equality, these concepts will only begin to be realized when a spirit of compassion becomes the foundation of society.

The revolution's ideals and its reality—brilliance and darkness. The bicentennial of the French Revolution, in addition to closing one chapter of France's grand history, also marked the country's departure toward a new future. When we look into this bright future, we can see that the principles promoted during the revolution—liberty, equality and fraternity—fundamentally aimed for the same universal philosophy expounded by Buddhism.

Just 19 days after our meeting, Mr. Baroin's life came to a tragic end. The plane that he was flying on crashed in Cameroon, Africa. When I went to Paris in June 1988, I expressed my condolences to his wife and son, and together we visited his grave. The day of the opening of the "French Revolution and Romanticism" at the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum, I planted a cherry tree in Mr. Baroin's honor in the art museum's garden.

Later, I composed the following poem in his memory:

*A single mystic encounter  
that comes but once in a lifetime.  
I pray that this tree may bloom in all its glory  
fragrant every spring.*

*Oh,  
you who boundlessly sought  
to awaken the human spirit,  
and exerted yourself to give new life  
to the standards of the revolution—  
liberty, equality and fraternity—  
Mr. Baroin,  
in keeping with your will  
I promise to circle the globe  
for the sake of a new day.  
No, for the sake of people  
ten thousand years to come.*

### **Bringing about a fundamental change in the individual is the most essential of revolutions.**

The door to the modern age has been opened through revolutions of many kinds. These range from citizen revolutions, as occurred in the United States and France, to socialist revolutions, from the Industrial Revolution to the information revolution.

Each of these, however, was inherently limited in the extent to which it could win respect for the sanctity of life. But each did contain a valuable lesson. That is, that simply changing the current of popular opinion or the social systems that created the modern age is not in itself sufficient to ensure the healthy development of society.

Herein lies the importance of human revolution, which starts with the human being and

ends with the human being. As early as 1876, Victor Hugo declared that his was a time whose mission was “to complete the French Revolution and start on the human revolution.”

The French author André Maurois proclaims: “The more profound revolutions are spiritual. They transform people, who in turn transform the world.” And: “It is said that the true revolution is the revolution of a single person. More precisely, a single person, whether hero or saint, can set for the masses an example which when emulated will turn the planet over.”

The movement to bring about a fundamental change in the individual is the most essential of all revolutions. Now is the time for humankind to take on this challenge.

The Daishonin speaks in his writings about “the example of one person” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 564). When one person sets an example of great human revolution, it will inspire a second and a third to do the same, having a ripple effect throughout society that eventually changes the world. This is the theme that runs through my novel *The Human Revolution*.

We can confidently say at this juncture, when the limitations of the various revolutions attempted by humankind throughout history are becoming clear, that we have entered an age when the world seeks more than ever the brilliant light of our endeavor for human revolution.

The blood and sweat of countless forebears have been shed in order to establish human rights as a universal standard for humanity. Numerous ordeals have been challenged. The life of the Daishonin, who steadfastly carried out a nonviolent struggle against the devilish nature of the political and religious authorities of his day, was itself an incredible battle for human rights. The writings he produced through the course of such struggle radiate with a philosophy of human rights illuminating the future of humankind.

In one place he says, “Even if it seems that, because I was born in the ruler’s domain, I follow him in my actions, I will never follow him in my heart” (WND, 579). This famous passage is cited in a volume compiled by UNESCO titled *Birthright of Man*. In the midst of a feudalistic age, the Daishonin issued a courageous, gallant declaration of freedom of thought and belief.

The Daishonin’s description of himself as the “son of a humble family” (WND, 169) demonstrates his stance against discrimination. And his statement “Only the Lotus Sutra explains that women can become Buddhas” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1188) can be thought of as a declaration of women’s rights. His teaching “A sovereign is supported by the people, and they in turn live under his protection” (WND, 952) expresses democratic values. “Life is the foremost of all treasures” (WND, 1125) points to the absolute sanctity of life.

Through these succinct statements, we can see that the Daishonin’s Buddhism sheds a universal light on humankind, and that it encompasses the most progressive principles of human rights promoted in the world today. It goes without saying that the Daishonin spent his life demonstrating that human rights are not gained by sitting down—they are something that people must stand up and win for themselves.

### *Six in a series*