

UNFORGETTABLE FRIENDS FROM AROUND THE WORLD DR. VED PRAKASH NANDA—THE ETERNAL SPIRIT OF LEARNING

In this series, SGI President Ikeda has recorded his impressions of the many friends he has made in his travels for peace. In his New Year's poem in the January issue, he states: "I will continue to knock on the doors / Of diverse cultures and civilizations, / Seeking out the humanity that is vibrantly alive / At the heart of each, / Believing that sincere dialogue/In search of our shared humanity / Will build a rainbow bridge linking the world."

It was a long, long road. Fifty years ago, a mother and her children were walking on a road of terror.

The joy of India's hard-fought independence from Great Britain (1947) was soon transformed by the Partition of India and the creation of the new Islamic nation of Pakistan into what could only be described as an insane and hellish religious war. Gandhi opposed the division of India along religious lines to the very end, but nevertheless India split, with all the wrenching pain and tragedy that would be experienced by a living person torn in two.

The hunt for "heretics" sprang up on both sides of the new border. The Hindus and Sikhs living in Pakistan fled to India and Muslims in India fled to Pakistan, crowding the roads in a rushed double-exodus. They had to rush, for they never knew when they would be attacked by followers of another religion. The violence was horrific and bloody, as people set upon others with guns, swords, knives, hammers and staves.

Dr. Ved Prakash Nanda, former president of the World Association of Law Professors, looks back on those times: "I remember walking with my mother for a long, long time, day after day. The only reason we had to leave our home was that we were Hindus. At the time, I couldn't understand that. Even today, I cannot."

Dr. Nanda was born in the town of Gujranwala in northwest India, which had become part of Pakistan. He was only twelve at the time of the Partition, when he and his family were forced to flee to India.

It was an enormous and terribly cruel emigration. According to differing estimates, between ten and fifteen million people were displaced. They walked four hundred, five hundred kilometers on a journey of despair, fleeing arson, looting, starvation and murder. When members of one group were killed, their relatives and colleagues would exact revenge on the killers, continuing the cycle of destruction. Members of the police and the military were also guilty of looting and murder. Well over a million perished, many of them women and children.

Dr. Nanda can never forget this primal experience. "Up to now, history has seen people being constantly persecuted in the name of religion, dividing humanity. But the true purpose of religion is to forge bonds between people," he says, that last sentence conveying his most deeply cherished wish. Out of his passionate belief that religion should exist for the sake of people, not the other way around, he commented that the Soka Gakkai International is a religious organization where one finds the victory of culture, spirit and individual.

The first time I met Dr. Nanda was at an annual performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at Soka University in Tokyo (in December 1994). Dr. Nanda attended the event as the associate provost of the University of Denver accompanied by Dr. Maria Guajardo, a trustee of the university. Dr. Nanda remarked: "The students of Soka University are singing Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy,' which is an expression of an open spirit that recognizes and praises all cultures. This shows a spirit of true tolerance at Soka University."

I was very moved by Dr. Nanda's humble willingness to always learn from others. All conflicts — not just religious conflicts but conflicts between nations, ethnic groups, political

factions or ideologies — as well as deadlocks in such spheres as government and education are fundamentally the result of an arrogant and narrow-minded refusal to learn from others. The most important task facing us is to change such minds into open and broadly-accepting ones.

Dr. Nanda is a firm believer in not judging by appearances. He once remarked on how a student who was depressed over poor grades came to see him. Perceiving the student's great potential that grades alone did not reveal, Dr. Nanda encouraged him wholeheartedly. He said later: "I was able to achieve what I did because of the opportunities given to me. By making a similar opportunity available to that student, he might perhaps go on to do better than I ever have. Everyone is gifted with wonderful potential. Sometimes it's just that we haven't noticed it yet."

Dr. Nanda learned this lesson from his parents. "My mother never spoke ill of family members or friends. All her life she always tried to see what was good in everyone and praise it. When we children would say, 'That person is bad,' she would always gently correct us. 'No,' she would say, 'that person has good points as well. It's just that we can't see them right now.' ... My father, too, never raised his voice to scold us, and he never raised his hand to physically punish us." This spiritual legacy has matured into a great treasure in Dr. Nanda's heart.

After graduating from Punjab University in India, Dr. Nanda went to the United States and studied at Northwestern and Yale universities. He served as the president of the World Association of Law Professors and the vice president of the World Jurist Association.

Dr. Nanda's special cause has been winning international acceptance for the idea that the threat or use of nuclear weapons violates humanity's right to live and as such is against international laws. As a result of his activities and those of his associates, the International Court of Justice in the Hague issued the advisory opinion in 1996 that "the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law"—an enormous step forward in human history.

Last year [1996] I was invited to the graduation ceremony of the University of Denver and presented with an honorary doctorate. Denver is known as the "Queen City of the Plains." The sun shines brightly in the endless blue sky, and in the distance the Rocky Mountains rise imperviously, like monuments of indomitable conviction. The day before the ceremony, my wife and I visited Dr. Nanda at his home, where we met his wife Katharine and daughter Anjali. They are a family as warm and bright as the sunshine.

Dr. Nanda is doing great work for all of us, and I told him to take care of his health so he can continue his service to humankind.

There was a piano in the room, and I played "Dainanko" (The Great Hero Kusunoki) for the Nanda family. "This is a very old Japanese song," I said. "It is a song for parents and children. It says that whatever may happen, father and child will work to survive it together. 'Let's build a good future together. When Father is having trouble, I'll take up his burden and continue the fight,' it says. It's a song filled with a noble spirit."

I played this song for the Nanda family out of a sincere wish for their well-being and longevity — also for the sake of Dr. Nanda's late parents, who suffered so much in their homeland. I played with a prayer for the happiness of Dr. Nanda, who had inherited his parents' spirit and carried on the fight for human rights and the happiness of his family.

The desire to learn, to study, is crucial. The Soka Gakkai — if we take its name — is a group for learning about value-creation. The humility of a willingness to learn reflects a respect for others; in it are to be found peace, culture, progress and a springboard to limitless improvement.

As Dr. Nanda said: "I still feel that I haven't learned enough from my parents. My challenge is to continue learning, as long as I live."