

NOW IS THE TIME TO TAKE ACTION A DIALOGUE ON THE SEPTEMBER 11 TRAGEDY

The day after the tragic events of September 11, a group of SGI-USA staff and national leaders sat together and shared their thoughts. It was an impromptu gathering of friends, much like what was occurring around the country. It was not a search for definitive answers as much as a chance to open hearts and comfort one another. We decided to include part of the discussion in this issue to encourage others to dialogue, to share with friends in these difficult times. Participants: Greg Martin, Matilda Buck, Mike Bynum, Guy McCloskey, Alexis Trass, Dave Baldschun.

Dave Baldschun: The terrorist attack yesterday seems like an impossible event to understand. Do you remember events when you were growing up that altered your view of the world? I remember the Cuban missile crisis and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy as events that made me feel the world was not the safe and predictable place I thought as a child.

Greg Martin: I was thirteen when Kennedy was shot in 1963. I vaguely remember it as being a terrible thing. The assassination of Dr. King in the summer of 1968 was definitely a kind of awakening to a sense of social consciousness for me. It totally shocked me. I felt most of the people I knew, and things in general, were never the same. After that I felt a growing sense of hopelessness and despair. Even demonstrating against the Vietnam War lost its meaning and any sense of making a difference. It became an excuse to get high and be grungy and cause trouble, but when Dr. King was shot and then the riots broke out and Bobby Kennedy was shot — it all seemed to lose its point after that. I had an ideal '50s childhood. It was like an Ozzie-and-Harriet childhood. But then the missile crisis, the Kennedys, Dr. King and all of this, it was all boom-boom-boom, wake up. It was reality; it was horrible. It was like living in a dream and waking up to a nightmare.

Matilda Buck: For me, it was similar in some ways and very different in others. In my own family life, I always felt the world wasn't safe, I always felt something bad was going to happen. So even when those events occurred — actually the one that was most frightening was the Cuban missile crisis — they were almost confirmations of the inner direction of my life. I didn't ever feel like giving up, because I knew this was the way life was. I would just endure.

Guy McCloskey: I remember what I was doing November 22, 1963, when they announced President Kennedy's assassination. I did not have a happy or secure childhood, and I knew from an early age that the world was not a safe place. When I encountered Buddhism in the late '60s, I had just come back from overseas, I had been discharged from the army, and I had no hope. I was a survivor, but survivors just survive. It's not a very human way to live.

Alexis Trass: Growing up, I felt very safe. My parents provided a home that felt like a safe haven for me. I remember hearing about certain events in the news or something my parents might have been talking about. It could have been a natural disaster, a shooting or anything that took lives or destroyed property. I knew that bad things happened, but it never occurred to me

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that those same bad things could happen to me.

The last time I felt so vulnerable was when I was in high school and the Gulf War was going on. I wasn't concerned about my personal safety as much as I was about the men and women who served in the military. I was thinking and learning more about life in general and Buddhism, in particular, and I remember feeling concerned about what we were doing in the war.

The events of September 11 have made me feel completely vulnerable, anxious and devastated. I've been thinking a lot about my personal life and grievances I carried and everything came into perspective. I've had epiphanies before, but nothing like this. Everybody I was mad at yesterday, today I have no ill feelings toward them, none.

Greg: Exactly! Before this I had a list of ten major concerns. Since yesterday, I realize that most of them aren't even concerns at all.

Mike Bynum: The Gulf War eleven years ago also shook me at my foundation. I was in the Navy then and we were deployed to the Persian Gulf just before hostilities with Iraq. During that time, there was an atmosphere of fear, constant fear, because we didn't know whether or not Saddam Hussein had nuclear weapons. I was a lieutenant junior grade at that time. That was my first assignment. It was a very stressful time.

My ship was in the Gulf when Operation Desert Storm started and dead Iraqi soldiers would float down into the Gulf. Whenever we came across a body, we would pick it up and bring it to the ship so that it could be sent back home. I was involved in several of these pick ups. Looking at the faces of these dead young men, who looked no older than nineteen or twenty, is something I will never forget. I think that was my defining moment. I chanted for each of these individuals and remember feeling so angry because they were obviously misled about what they thought was most important, and what was worth sacrificing their lives for. It was a feeling of sadness, of pain, but then always followed by anger.

Dave: How can we view these tragedies in the context of our Buddhist practice? Can they motivate us to deepen our commitment to kosen-rufu?

Mike: Yes, I think so. When we were in the middle of our hostilities in February 1991, my New Year's issue of the *World Tribune* arrived. Right on the cover in big letters was "The Year of Peace and Development." The timing of the arrival of the *World Tribune* was precisely what I needed. That theme for the year became my mission. More than ever, I needed to dedicate myself to peace.

Greg: Yes. If it had not been for the tragedies of my youth that left me so disillusioned, I don't know if I would have even considered practicing Buddhism. But those difficulties were the perfect fertilizer for developing a sense of commitment. I definitely joined this organization in the early '70s with a sense of mission. It was not about benefit. Benefit was there, of course, but I was definitely motivated by a sense of mission to improve the world, to do kosen-rufu.

Guy: Today is a matter of me regaining perspective and of recognizing that it is urgent to realize kosen-rufu. This discussion is helping me to regain perspective, conviction, hope that our movement is real, and that we're doing something.

Alexis: I agree with Guy. Yesterday, I thought I was taking kosen-rufu seriously. I realize now that whatever contributions I've made toward that end, I can be doing more. I'm not sure what I can do right now, but I refuse to believe that I can't do something.

Matilda: We will probably never be the same again, and I think it could be for the best. I think America has moved out of its adolescence. I am grateful that I haven't just been glued to the television watching something happen; because of my involvement in the SGI-USA, which is connected to every kind of person everywhere all over the United States and the world, I was interacting with so many people. It wasn't some theoretical thing — I could be part of the moment and maybe be of help.

I started to practice Buddhism in 1972 because at my first meeting I had the tiniest glimmer of hope. They told me I could chant for anything, about anything, and I believed them. There was something in their eyes that gave me the hope that maybe I could be happy, maybe things can be OK. I have seen that hope blossom in my personal life. I still hold that hope about the world.

Dave: Emotionally, the attack produced a great sadness about life, about humanity itself, that this is what we've come to. It's the kind of sadness that transcends the event but is relevant to the overall condition that the world finds itself in. How can we best understand this?

Matilda: The root cause has to be at the smallest increment in the heart of a human being, in the collective hearts of human beings, people who feel that there is no hope. When we talk about the Ten Worlds, one definition of *Hell* is that there is no way out. So, peace has to start in the hearts of people. When people are truly hopeless, they feel they have nothing to lose — including their lives or the lives of others. There may be injustice, but it isn't just some giant social or economic injustice — their hearts have been closed off. The greatest thing is that the human heart can be healed, can expand, can find the highest potential in life.

Mike: The terrorist attacks obviously rock us at the very foundation of what we believe. I think, for the Pearl Harbor and the Holocaust generation, this must have been how they felt. The best thing that could come out of this now is resolve and a sense of mission unlike we've ever had before.

Buddhism has at its most fundamental point the sanctity and the respect for all life. When faced with an attack like this, it's very difficult for a lot of people — myself included — to temper, to restrain the feelings of rash and just anger. There's the initial shock, and then there's the incredible feeling of pain for the individuals involved, the innocent people who were killed.

We've lost our sense that "we're safe because those things that we see around the world don't happen here." That's probably the way to describe what's going on: the fear that we're not safe, even just going down the street, going into a high-rise building. The more I think about it, I think that such attacks and this mass destruction were implemented by individuals. These individuals had a certain view of what was important and what was right and just, and that's why they did what they did. But it's obviously not based on value for life. It's the same thing that I felt in the Persian Gulf. Those of us who do value life, as Nichiren Daishonin teaches, understand that to take more life in retaliation cannot be the solution.

Dave: When I joined SGI-USA, we were at war in Vietnam. Every time you turned the TV on, every single night, seven nights a week, they had news footage of body bags and combat

and blood and agony on the one hand. Then we had riots at universities, riots in the streets on the other. I remember thinking: “What’s the use of trying? This world is so crazy, so out of control, why would I want to live in this society?” To many people of my generation, dropping out was the only option. It was either armed revolution or getting stoned and forget about it.

But what happened when I joined SGI-USA, and to a lot of people who joined then, is that because of those societal conditions our passion for kosen-rufu was very intense. We had found a solution to the world’s ills. We felt that if we didn’t do kosen-rufu right away, the world was definitely going to come to an end. Everywhere you looked, the signs seemed very evident that the world needed kosen-rufu right away. That’s why we were motivated to do so many Buddhist activities.

But things changed, the organization changed, society changed, and that sense of urgency seemed to be gone. I’m wondering, what’s the correct response for youth of this generation in the organization now?

Mike: I would love to see the SGI youth be the driving force to unite this country, not to rally around retaliation, which is what seems to be happening, but to unite around Victory Over Violence, which is what we need. For lasting peace, people have to be convinced that, number one, life is precious above all else, above all the differences, and then, two, to spread that word throughout the country and the world.

Alexis: I know it sounds cliché, but the youth can make a difference in this. Given the times, I don’t think we’ll be doing the same things that were done in the ’60s and ’70s, but whatever we do will have a noticeable effect. I agree with Mike, and I hope we can unite around Victory Over Violence. This is, of course, a crucial time when VOV has to be real and not a just a slogan.

Dave: I look at SGI President Ikeda and have a sense that he never perceived the world as a safe place. He never felt he could relax in his efforts for kosen-rufu. I think the fundamental darkness — the evil in the hearts of people — is always evident. I think it was the same with second president Josei Toda. When he was released from prison, he saw two paths — one was the path to World War III and the other was the path to kosen-rufu. He said, “I reject World War III.” We have the same choices today.

This event can rekindle our commitment to kosen-rufu and our passion for what the SGI is doing. What happened to many Americans when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 and the country became prosperous is that we began to take things for granted. How do we avoid falling back into complacency?

Guy: The only answer is to maintain our momentum. Whatever inertia faces us, we have to move beyond it, we have to keep moving. This is President Ikeda’s point: This is the time to make progress.

Matilda: It’s important that everybody take good care of their lives. When we talk about how precious lives are, and we hear the news, it’s important that people start realizing how precious their own lives are. For members who still don’t believe that they have the Buddha nature, for people who are chanting but anesthetize themselves with drugs or alcohol, for people who don’t believe humankind can change — it’s time for those people to value their lives, to nourish their lives. It all begins with each of us.

I want to mention how the SGI-USA organization in New York really came through in this crisis. I am not good at keeping statistics, of making lists, etc., but because New York was responsible in this regard, they determined very quickly where all the members were and checked on every single person. Members felt responsible to check in as well.

Dave: I think there are certain personal truths we learn over time, and even though it's not always easy to live by them, it's knowledge that once known we can't forget. It's like knowing the Gohonzon is true. This crisis is a time when each person in his or her own way will come to a personal truth, such as a deeper understanding of the need to accomplish kosen-rufu.

Matilda: I choose to view this in those terms, that millions of people around the world are chanting for world peace every day, and then actually putting their lives into action. I would like to live my life like that every day, in every effort that I make, to pray strongly about every fear, every apprehension, about every problem, about every complaint that I have, and then do my best.