

**SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA'S ESSAY SERIES
WONDERFUL ENCOUNTERS
VEENA SIKRI—FORMER DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE INDIAN COUNCIL
FOR CULTURAL RELATIONS (ICCR)**

“Wonderful Encounters” is a series by SGI President Ikeda recounting his meetings with people from a variety of fields and their discussions on issues of common interest. We have published two installments in this issue because of their relevance to current events.

At the risk of his life, Gandhi waged a desperate struggle in India to stop the fighting between Hindus and Muslims. In this article, SGI President Ikeda addresses the problem of religious conflicts and the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States.

**THE CHALLENGE FACING THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY IS NOT
BETWEEN CIVILIZATIONS NOR RELIGIONS BUT BETWEEN VIOLENCE
AND NONVIOLENCE**

I don't want toys or chocolate. All I want is peace and freedom. People of Europe, people of the world, please find the humanity in your hearts and put an end to this war!

—A young girl of the former Yugoslavia

I was visiting Raj Ghat in India, where the great Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) was cremated. Director General Veena Sikri of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) was with me on that day (February 7, 1992). Somewhere a bird sang. The green forest was nearby. Squirrels were running through its thickets. The area was a spacious, well-tended shrine to nonviolence.

As I offered flowers before the black marble platform that constitutes Gandhi's memorial, I bowed my head and thought of Gandhi's brilliant spirit. I thought of his dauntless struggle to extinguish the fires of hatred with the pure waters of love for humanity. And I thought of how alone he was in his quest.

On the Side of Humankind

Gandhi tells us not to retaliate against the Muslims! Is he taking their side? I can't forgive them. They killed my family. My son was only five years old....”

“Is he telling us to endure the attacks of the Hindus? Doesn't he know how much we Muslims have put up with for so long? Gandhi's a Hindu himself, after all.”

The elderly sage hurried to regions where followers of Hinduism and Islam were mired in an endless cycle of bloody conflict and urged them to stop killing each other. But crazed by hate, they did not listen. They told him to leave and to stop his hypocritical do-gooding. They demanded to know whose side he was on. But he wasn't on either side. And at the same time, he was on both sides. All people are brothers and sisters. How could one stand by and watch them kill one another?

Gandhi was willing to be cut in two if that was what people wanted, but not for India to be cut in two. What good could ever come from this mutual hatred? If hate was returned with hate, it would only grow more deeply rooted and widespread. This was Gandhi's view.

Suppose someone sets fire to your home, and you retaliate by setting fire to theirs — if

everyone operates on this mentality, soon the whole city would be in flames! Burning down the original perpetrator's house won't bring yours back. Violence doesn't solve anything. By engaging in tit-for-tat retaliation, you ultimately only hurt yourself.

But no matter how urgently Gandhi called out to the people to listen to reason, the fires of hatred raged on. He was outnumbered by those who fanned the flames.

Fire Cannot Extinguish Fire

Ten days before Gandhi was assassinated, on January 20, 1948, a handmade bomb was hurled at him during a meeting. This act of terrorism was carried out by a Hindu youth. Fortunately, it did not succeed, and the youth was arrested.

The next day, several Sikh followers came to visit Gandhi and assured him that the culprit was not of their religion. Gandhi rebuked them, saying that it mattered nothing at all to him whether the assailant was a Sikh, a Hindu or a Muslim. Whoever the perpetrator might be, he said, he wished him well. Gandhi explained that no doubt the youth had been taught that Gandhi was an enemy of the Hindu cause, and hatred had been implanted in his heart. The youth believed what he was taught, and was so desperate, so devoid of all hope, that he thought he had no choice but to assassinate him. Gandhi said that he felt only pity for the young man. He also told the outraged chief of police not to harass his assailant but make an effort to convert him to right thoughts and actions.

This was always Gandhi's approach. No one abhorred violence more than he, but he also knew, far better than anyone else, that only nonviolence could rid the world of violence. Fire is extinguished by water, and hatred can be defeated only by love and compassion. Some criticized Gandhi as being soft on terrorism. Others scorned his conviction, calling it sentimental and unrealistic.

Gandhi was alone.

Many revered his name, but few truly shared his beliefs. For Gandhi, nonviolence was an overflowing love for all humanity, a way of life that permeated the very marrow of his being. He could not have lived a moment without it. But for many of his followers, nonviolence was a political strategy, a tactic for winning India's independence from Britain.

Gandhi was alone.

His love for humanity grew ever stronger as his religious faith deepened, making it impossible for him to divorce himself from the politics that shaped the reality of the people's lives. And his growing encounters with various political realities only served to reaffirm for him the vital importance of love for humanity.

His involvement in politics placed him, however, in the position of being denounced simultaneously by religious figures who accused him of harboring personal political ambitions and by political leaders for what they saw as his ignorance of political realities. Because he walked the Middle Way — humanity's supreme path — his beliefs and actions seemed one-sided to those on the two extremes.

Putting an End to Terrorism

The September 11 terrorist attacks against the United States were savage beyond words. Our fellow SGI members and friends were among the victims. "Such wanton killing must never happen again!" — this was the reaction everywhere.

How long will humankind continue with this kind of barbarism? What crime did the innocent people who were killed commit? No matter what reason the terrorists might give for their actions, who could ever sympathize with them, who could accept their arguments?

Even if, as it is reported, they believed they were acting based on their religious faith, their

acts do not deserve the name “martyrdom.” Martyrdom means giving one’s own life, not taking the lives of others. Such self-sacrifice is made to save others and bring them happiness; one who kills others is merely engaged in destruction.

The time has come for all humanity to join together to put an end to terrorism. The problem is, how can this be achieved? Can it be done through retaliatory military action? Such action is certain to stir up more hatred. It will only add fuel to the fire, and possibly even grow into an all-consuming global conflagration.

Since a strong and widespread anti-U.S. sentiment in the Arab world provides a backdrop to this terrorism, military retaliation by the United States would be like tossing a lighted match into a room filled with gas. And if, for argument’s sake, the immediate “enemy” could be brought under control, would that result in true peace? The long-accumulated hatred would only burrow even deeper underground, making it impossible to predict where next in the world it might burst forth. Such a development would only bring greater anxiety and unease to the entire world.

At this time I am reminded of the simple wisdom of the famous Aesop’s fable “The North Wind and the Sun.” The North Wind tried to make a traveler remove his coat by assailing him with icy gusts, but the harder the North Wind blew, the tighter the traveler pulled his coat around him.

Peace that is based on the forceful suppression of other nations’ voices and concerns is a dead peace, the peace of the grave. Surely that is not the peace that humanity is seeking.

Military action invariably makes victims of innocent civilians as well. In military parlance, this is referred to by the cold, inhuman term *collateral damage*.

The people of Afghanistan have already been reduced to the most desperate straits through prolonged civil war and drought. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) warns that retaliatory strikes on the country will aggravate food shortages, and one-fourth of the population — some six million people — will face starvation.

No one has the right to inflict such suffering. It cannot be termed *justice*, nor dismissed as *collateral damage*.

Tolstoy’s Letter to Gandhi

I recall a moving episode that the Russian author Leo Tolstoy included in a letter he wrote two months before his death. The letter, dated September 7, 1910, was addressed to Mahatma Gandhi.

The episode went something like this. There was a test on the subject of religion in a certain girls’ school in Moscow. A bishop had come to the school and was quizzing the girls one by one about the Ten Commandments. When he came to the commandment “Thou shalt not kill,” the bishop asked: “Does God forbid us to kill under all circumstances?” The girls each answered as they had been taught by their teachers. “No, not under all circumstances. We may kill in war or as legal punishment.”

“Yes, that’s right! Correct!” said the bishop.

But then one of the girls, her face flushed with indignation, replied: “Killing is wrong under all circumstances!”

The bishop was flustered and marshaled all his rhetorical skills to convince the girl that there were exceptions to the commandment against killing, but to no avail.

“No,” she replied stalwartly. “Killing is a sin under all circumstances. It says so in the Old Testament. Moreover, Jesus not only forbade killing but taught that we must do no harm to our neighbors.”

In the face of the girl's assertion of truth, the bishop's authority and verbal skill were of no use whatsoever. In the end, he could only fall silent. Tolstoy wrote proudly that the girl was victorious.

In the midst of the struggle for India's independence from British rule, Gandhi also declared that genuine practitioners of the true spirit of Christianity would never colonize other people's lands or wage war on others.

Lessons of the Twentieth Century

Let us amplify the words of that brave young girl—"It is wrong to kill, even in war!"—and broadcast them around the world: "It is wrong to kill!" The twentieth century was a century of war. Hundreds of millions died in its battles. What has humanity learned from that tragedy? In this new century, the twenty-first century, we must make the principle that killing is not acceptable or justified in any circumstances the fundamental ethos of humankind.

Unless we can widely spread and deeply implant among all peoples the principle that violence can never be condoned as a means of advocating one's beliefs, humanity will have learned nothing from the lessons of the twentieth century. The real struggle of the twenty-first century will not be between civilizations, nor between religions. It will be the struggle between violence and nonviolence. It will be the struggle between barbarity and civilization in the truest sense of the word.

Humanity at a Crossroads

More than half a century ago, Gandhi spoke out against the unremitting violence that wracked his times. What distinguishes us from brute beasts, he said, is our continuous striving for moral self-improvement. He declared that humanity was at a crossroads and had to choose between violence, the law of the jungle, or nonviolence, the law of humanity.

The world in fact now has an unprecedented opportunity. We have the chance to open a new page in human history.

It is precisely the time to make the following declaration:

We regard the recent terrorist attacks in the United States as a challenge to the law of humanity. As a result, we refuse to follow the law of the jungle upon which the attacks were based. We declare our determination to find a solution not by military means but through the initiation of extensive dialogue with the Arab world. Instead of pouring oil on the flames of hatred, we choose to douse those flames with a great flood of dialogue that will enrich and benefit all humanity.

This terrible tragedy took place in the first year of the twenty-first century; we will mark that event by making 2001 the first year of a new era of dialogue with the Arab world. This is the best and only choice to assure that such horrors are never repeated, and we believe it is the most fitting way to honor the memory of all those who lost their lives in the attacks.

Such a declaration, put into action, would certainly be met with the unstinting praise of future historians.

When great evil occurs, great good follows. But great good does not come about on its own. Courage is always required to accomplish great good. Now is the time for us to demonstrate the

courage of nonviolence, the courage to engage in dialogue, the courage to listen to what we don't want to hear, the courage to control our desire for revenge and follow reason.

The International Rule of Law

An international judicial system capable of trying terrorists should be established through the initiative of the United Nations.

If a murder occurs within a country, the offender will be arrested, tried, sentenced and punished according to the laws of that country. The aggrieved are not allowed to take revenge directly on the criminal. Killing in revenge is treated as another murder.

This is the rule of law that has been developed through humanity's painstaking efforts over the long course of history. This is the way people behave in a legally constituted state. Why does there continue to be a tacit acceptance of "an eye for an eye" retribution in international settings?

Efforts are being made to establish the International Criminal Court (ICC) as a permanent tribunal to try those responsible for crimes that are a grave offense to the international community, such as genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, including those committed in internal conflicts, and crimes of aggression, etc.

The ICC will exercise criminal jurisdiction over individuals while the existing International Court of Justice will continue to be responsible for adjudicating legal disputes between states.

I have expressed my support for the ICC in the peace proposals I issue each year on January 26 commemorating the establishment of the SGI. Once again, I strongly urge that it be established as quickly as possible.

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court was adopted in 1998. It requires the ratification of sixty states in order to enter into force. The Netherlands became the thirty-seventh country to ratify the Statute in July 2001. Currently, neither Japan nor the United States has done so.

[Editor's Note: Since July 2001, five more countries have ratified the Statute: Yugoslavia (September 6), Nigeria (September 27), Liechtenstein (October 2), Central African Republic (October 3), and the United Kingdom (October 4).]

It Is Possible To Create a Nonviolent State

In her graceful sari, ICCR Director General Sikri said to me: "Nothing is more important for good relations between countries than mutual understanding between their peoples." That is the very reason that the Indian Council for Cultural Relations was established. It is an institution dedicated to cultural exchange. Many of our past SGI youth delegations to India are immensely indebted to Mrs. Sikri for her assistance. She even personally went to the airport to greet the delegations and to welcome each member with a handshake.

A young woman who encountered the ICCR director general on one of these occasions was very moved by her kindness, saying that Mrs. Sikri literally shone: "Wherever she goes, she seems to brighten the atmosphere with her light."

Those who work with Mrs. Sikri say she is always smiling and self-controlled. She is a very talented woman who went directly from the University of Delhi into India's foreign ministry, and she is now serving as India's high commissioner to Malaysia.

In my discussions with Mrs. Sikri, I spoke of my desire to bring the light of India, a land of immense spiritual heritage, to people in Japan. This wish was eventually realized in the form of the "King Ashoka, Mahatma Gandhi, and Nehru — Healing Touch" Exhibition, which was

held in Japan in 1994.

King Ashoka was a wise monarch of ancient India (around the third century B.C.E.). After being struck by the cruelty of war, he converted to Buddhism, deciding that he would base his rule not on military force but on the Dharma, or the principles of Buddhism. When Gandhi was asked whether a nonviolent state was possible, he replied that indeed it was, and he pointed to Ashoka's reign as an example, asserting that the ancient king's achievement could certainly be repeated. Mrs. Sikri also noted that Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence originated in Buddhism.

Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India, was Gandhi's direct disciple. When he visited Japan in 1957, he lamented the increasing violence in the world, saying in one of his addresses that the only truly effective response to the hydrogen bomb was not a bomb of even bigger destructive capacity but a spiritual "bomb" of compassion. This was just one month after Josei Toda, the second president of the Soka Gakkai, made his own declaration calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

Peace Is Born From a Willingness To Listen

As preparations for the "King Ashoka, Mahatma Gandhi, and Nehru" Exhibition got under way, some of the Japanese staff at first had a hard time appreciating the "healing touch" theme that our cooperating parties in India were emphasizing. This may have been partly because *healing* in the broader sense was not as familiar a term in Japan at that time as it has since become. But no theme could be more relevant to the practice of nonviolence. Violence is born from a wounded spirit: a spirit burned and blistered by the fire of arrogance; a spirit split and frayed by the frustration of powerlessness; a spirit dry and parched by a thirst for meaning in life; a spirit shriveled and shrunk by feelings of inferiority. The anger that results from injured self-respect, from humiliation, erupts as violence. The culture of violence that delights in crushing and subduing others by force spreads throughout society, often amplified by the media.

American civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a student of Gandhi's philosophy, said that a person whose spirit is in turmoil cannot practice nonviolence. It was my hope that the light of India — known in the East in ancient times as "the land of the moon"— would help spread the spirit of peace just as the moonlight brings soothing relief from the maddening heat of the day. From a healed, peaceful heart, humility is born; from humility, a willingness to listen to others is born; from a willingness to listen to others, mutual understanding is born; and from mutual understanding, a peaceful society is born.

Mrs. Sikri declared at a symposium on environmental issues in 1992: "The key to solving these problems is respect for the environment, and humility as human beings."

Nonviolence is the highest form of humility and the highest form of courage. Prime Minister Nehru said that the essence of Gandhi's teachings was fearlessness. The Mahatma taught that the strong are not vindictive and that it is the brave who are able to engage in dialogue.

The Future Belongs to Women

As a representative of the Nehru family, Sonia Gandhi attended the opening ceremony of the exhibition. She is the widow of Rajiv Gandhi, the late prime minister of India and grandson of Nehru. Rajiv Gandhi, whom I had the opportunity of meeting in Tokyo (in November 1985), was also a victim of terrorism, killed by a suicide bomber. As I spoke to Mrs. Gandhi of her husband's commitment to peace, I was happy to see that she had inherited and was bravely carrying on his legacy. Her smile seemed to have grown even more gentle and embracing since our first meeting in India.

Many women, including Mrs. Gandhi and Mrs. Sikri, were of assistance in mounting this exhibition. I see a deep significance in this. Mahatma Gandhi predicted that, since violence is the law of beasts and nonviolence the law of humanity, the future would belong to women.

In a discussion I had with ICCR officials and other parties in connection with preparations for the exhibition in 1992, Director Fatima Rasheed Al-Talib of INSHA Associates, an Indian publishing company, remarked that it was due to the influence of King Ashoka's wife that the monarch underwent a 180-degree conversion from an advocate of military force to an advocate of peace and culture. She went on to say that Ashoka's wife converted to Buddhism prior to him and, according to traditional accounts, she influenced him. It was due to his wife that Ashoka thought about peace and nonviolence for the first time.

Tagore's Warning

In closing, I would like to write about Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore's warning to Japan, partly because Tagore's spirit is, I believe, one of the sources of inspiration for the work of the ICCR. When Tagore traveled to China in 1924, one of his Indian friends asked a Japanese fellow traveler why Japan did not cultivate friendly relations with China. Instead of answering directly, the Japanese asked a German passenger also present if he could conceive of Germany and France uniting in bonds of friendship.

Tagore was shocked by the Japanese man's attitude. Did he think that whatever Western nations did was automatically right? This episode clearly underscored for Tagore that the Japanese did not think for themselves, they simply learned by rote the texts they received from their Western "teachers." They parroted the words and mimicked the actions of their "teachers," including their devotion to force. And if they could answer correctly, get high marks and a pat on the back, they were very proud of themselves.

Tagore deplored the fact that the Japanese had abandoned the pacifist traditions of Asia to become the unthinking pupils of the West. He had hoped that they would join with him to help awaken the West from its delusions.

The Japanese were so desperately trying not to miss the Western bus, not to be left out. As a result, they didn't think about what was happening to their country or the world!

Lamenting the Japanese man's response and his evident satisfaction with being able to make an analogy between Japan's relationship with China and that of two great European powers, Tagore sounded a warning that strikes a chord even today: "He failed to realize the fearful implications of the hostility that furiously drove Germany and France toward ruin, in a vicious circle of mutual destruction."

Nine years later, Hitler came to power in Germany, by which time Japan, too, had embarked on the course of war.

(Translated from the September 23, issue of the Seikyo Shimbun, the Soka Gakkai daily newspaper)

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“THIS IS NOT THE WAY TO SAVE HINDUISM.”

The following account of an assassination attempt on Mahatma Gandhi is from the book The Life of Mahatma Gandhi, by Louis Fischer (Harper and Row, Publishers, New York, 1950, p. 503).

A handmade bomb had been thrown at Mahatma from a nearby garden wall.

The next day Gandhi, having walked to the prayer meeting, told the worshippers that congratulations had poured in on him for remaining unruffled during the incident. He said he deserved no praise; he had thought it was a military practice. “I would deserve praise,” he asserted, “only if I fell as a result of such an explosion and yet retained a smile on my face and no malice against the doer. No one should look down on the misguided youth who had thrown the bomb. He probably looks upon me as an enemy of Hinduism.”

The young man, Gandhi continued, should realize that “those who differ with him are not necessarily evil.” He urged supporters of such young people to desist from their activity. “This is not the way to save Hinduism. Hinduism can only be saved by my method.”

Sikhs visited Gandhi and assured him that the would-be assailant was not a Sikh. “What does it matter,” Gandhi asked, “whether he was a Sikh or a Hindu or a Moslem? I wish all perpetrators well.”

An illiterate old woman had grappled with the grenade-thrower and held him till police came. Gandhi commended “the unlettered sister on her simple bravery.” He told the Inspector General of Police not to molest the young man. Instead, they should try to convert him to right thinking and right doing. Nor should the worshippers be angry with the “miscreant.” “You should pity him,” Gandhi said.