KILLING THE WILL TO KILL
A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE ON THE ETHICS OF LIFE
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Americans are experiencing a collective awakening of a new kind. We are sensing that our lives are connected in human fellowship. We are beginning to think of people and of peace beyond the boundaries of nationality, religion, and culture. While the old trumpet of war and retribution is vigorously sounded, more and more Americans are straining to hear the quiet melody of life's universal dignity. We are beginning to realize that our "homeland security" is no longer possible unless peace and security encompass the world beyond our national borders.

The Oneness of All Life

Certainly, this idea that our lives are connected is not new. In modern America, in 1963, while jailed in Birmingham, Alabama, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote on the margin of a newspaper, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."1

Dr. King was referring to the human-rights violations against African Americans in the South and the pervasive indifference of people who were not directly affected by racial oppression. Today, his words have taken on a new meaning as the U.S. military campaign continues in Afghanistan, reports on anthrax exposure flood the airwaves, and we adjust our lifestyles to the need for greater security at our airports, office buildings, and even our ballparks.

In 1260, witnessing the profound sufferings of the Japanese from repeated warfare, famine, pestilence, and natural disasters Nichiren Daishonin wrote "On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land." Seven centuries before Dr King said that "whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly," Nichiren Daishonin wrote:

"If marauders come from other regions to invade the nation, or if revolt breaks out within the domain and people's lands are seized and plundered, how can there be anything but terror and confusion? If the nation is destroyed and people's homes are wiped out, then where can one flee for safety? If you care anything about your personal security, you should first of all pray for order and tranquility throughout the four quarters of the land, should you not?"2

In this treatise, the Daishonin suggests that peace begins with people overcoming their selfish view of security as merely a personal concern.

Over time, though many wise teachers have continued to point out the dangers of our tendency toward a selfish detachment from others, we have failed to awaken to our shared humanity. Instead, we have clung to the divisive feelings of "us and them," based on superficial and artificial differences that have prevented us from honest and open dialogue. As we enter "the first war of the twenty-first century," some of us—maybe not many, but enough to make our presence felt—are starting to question our feelings of separateness from others. We are sympathetic toward the plight of Afghan refugees even though we can only describe our sense of connection with them in abstract terms such as "life's dignity" or "shared humanity." The sentiment, however, does not seem to diminish with time; rather, it grows stronger and more real in our hearts. The idea of the interconnectedness of all lives provides a fundamental solution to violence when it goes beyond mere abstract theory and becomes the basis of collective action.

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The Will to Kill

Humanity's efforts to build lasting peace have been unsuccessful largely because we have lacked a philosophical foundation that allows us to see past our diversity and embrace our shared human dignity.

The Buddhist approach to the problem of violence is based on the inner reformation of each individual, that is, an awakening to the supreme potential of Buddhahood both within his or her life and within the lives of others. A decade ago, on September 26, 1991, in the wake of the Gulf War, regarding a Buddhist view on the ethics of life, in his speech delivered at Harvard University, SGI President Daisaku Ikeda said:

"Shakyamuni was once asked, 'We are told that life is precious. And yet, all people live by killing and eating other living beings. Which living beings may we kill and which living beings must we not kill?' To this simple expression of doubt, Shakyamuni replied, 'It is enough to kill the will to kill.'

"Shakyamuni's response is neither evasion nor deception, but is based on the concept of dependent origination. He is saying that, in seeking the kind of harmonious relationship expressed by respect for the sanctity of life, we must not limit ourselves to the phenomenal level where hostility and conflict (in this case, which living beings it is acceptable to kill and which not) undeniably exist. We must seek harmony on a deeper level — a level where it is truly possible to 'kill the will to kill.' More than objective awareness, we must achieve a state of compassion transcending distinctions between self and other. We need to feel the compassionate energy that beats within the depths of all people's subjective lives where the individual and the universal are merged."*3*

The question posed to Shakyamuni is specifically about killing animals. In the Buddha's response, however, such preoccupation with the distinction among species seems to melt away. Furthermore, the Buddhist view of life's sanctity is usually discussed in terms of sentient and insentient beings, as opposed to human and nonhuman beings. The Buddha is said to have compassion for all living beings. In this regard, we may expand the underlying principle of the Buddha's response to include humans, as President Ikeda seems to be doing here. The questioner here is obviously seeking an answer in rule-based ethics, and Shakyamuni's reply points him to the direction of wisdom-based ethics. Instead of giving him a set of rules to follow, Shakyamuni encourages the questioner to direct his gaze into his own life, into his own lust for the destruction of life.

Some may ask, "If we are not to kill, is it permissible then for us to destroy any living being — plants, animals, or humans?" Unfortunately, the task of killing the will to kill is not easy, as anyone who has seriously tried to develop his or her inner strength to do so can attest. To kill the will to kill, that is, to achieve the state of harmony in which we can transcend distinctions between self and other, as President Ikeda suggests, we have to go either down or up the ladder of evolution. We can either descend into the pure animal state in which we feel but do not think, and therefore, have no will of any kind. Or we can ascend to the state of wisdom and compassion in which our lives embrace the environment and all life.

In their purely animal state, sharks sometimes attack surfers (usually mistaking them for a seal or other sea animal) not to kill per se, but to eat for their survival. Sharks are sentient but they are not conscious of self, that is, they are not aware of their own being, actions and thoughts. The Lotus Sutra describes the state of animals such as camels or donkeys: "He will think only of water and grass / and understand nothing else" (LS, 75).

For us to descend into such a state of animal existence is impossible without losing our rational consciousness. So, if we are to kill our will to kill, our only choice is to ascend to a

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higher level of consciousness. We must develop wisdom to see other living beings and the environment as an extension of our own lives; and we must develop the compassion to feel the joys and sorrows of fellow human beings as our own. We must come to appreciate all living beings as a blessing without which our lives are not possible. Even our sincere yet feeble attempt to cultivate such a state of being will, without doubt, dramatically reduce the suffering and misery caused by our will to kill, which now seems rampant.

The Oneness of Good and Evil

The will to kill — a deliberate wish for the destruction of life — is the underlying source of all violence. The Daishonin metaphorically describes such destructive inner drives as demons and devils within us saying that demons "deprive people of their lives, for a demon is also known as a robber of life. Moreover, devils…deprive people of benefits; another name for a devil is a robber of benefit" (WND, 87).

The Daishonin explains that those demons and devils stem from fundamental darkness, or our deep-seated ignorance of our innate Buddhahood. This negative potential exists in the lives of all people, including Buddhas:

"The heart of the Lotus school is the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, which reveals that both good and evil are inherent even in those at the highest stage of perfect enlightenment. The fundamental nature of enlightenment manifests itself as Brahma and Shakra, whereas the fundamental darkness manifests itself as the devil king of the sixth heaven" (WND, 1113).

The Buddhist concept that all people are endowed with both the fundamental nature of enlightenment and fundamental darkness is called the "oneness of good and evil." Here, good means enlightenment, or absolute freedom and happiness resulting from profound self-knowledge, and evil means the fundamental darkness, or life's innate delusion that causes suffering for oneself and others. In the context of the Daishonin's teaching, good and evil are better defined in terms of our innate tendencies, rather than the social constructs of morality or ethics, which are often different from one culture to another. The concept of the oneness of good and evil suggests that we can develop compassion even for people we consider "bad" if we see within them our own potential for wrongdoing. By the same token,when we make mistakes or commit wrongs, we must not only reflect upon our negative aspects, but also see the potential for good within us. Thus, our innate goodness and evil are mutually tempered in our judgment of others and ourselves. So, the awareness of our universal goodness leads to confidence instead of arrogance, and the awareness of our universal evil leads to humility instead of despair or hatred.

According to the Daishonin's teachings, all people are equal in their potential for both good and evil. The Daishonin explains, "There is a fundamental oneness of self and others. Therefore, when Bodhisattva Never Disparaging makes his bow of obeisance to the four groups of people, the Buddha nature inherent in the lives of the four groups of arrogant people bowed toward Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. This is the same as how, when one bows facing a mirror, the reflected image bows back" (GZ, 769). He further explains:

"To separate self from others and say, 'I am Never Disparaging, and they are the four groups of arrogant people' and to make a distinction between good and evil, viewing Never Disparaging as a good person and those arrogant people as evil—this is delusion. When one makes his bow of obeisance, he should do so keeping in mind that Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is the oneness of good and evil and the oneness of right and wrong" (GZ, 768).

As Bodhisattva Never Disparaging demonstrates in his episode in the Lotus Sutra, through

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tenacious dialogue imbued with the courage to speak the truth of life, it is possible to form a constructive relationship with arrogant people and eventually help them reveal their dormant goodness. In the above passage, the Daishonin suggests that Bodhisattva Never Disparaging's success is due to his ability to transcend whatever separates himself from others. He does not regard himself as superior to those around him, viewing himself as always good and others as purely evil. Rather, he sees goodness in others and evil within himself. This awareness of people's connectedness on the fundamental level of life's innate workings enables him to continue his nonviolent engagement with arrogant, hostile people and eventually awaken their inner goodness. (For more on Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, see the August 1999 issue, pp. 8-15.)

America's and our allies' current war on terrorism has been described as "the monumental struggle of good versus evil." The assumption underlying this expression suggests that there are two fixed categories of human beings — either good or evil. The Buddhist teaching of the oneness of good and evil, however, provides us with the wisdom to see that, in fact, the real war is the monumental struggle against our ignorance of the good and evil within.

Only as we become aware of our own evil through honest self-reflection will we be capable of waging a genuine, steadfast struggle against the evil manifested in our environment. We will be victorious when we have recognized and conquered the evil within. In this regard, the Daishonin states, "Although I, Nichiren, am not a man of wisdom, the devil king of the sixth heaven has attempted to take possession of my body. But I have for some time been taking such great care that he now no longer comes near me" (WND, 310). Without self-reflection, we are essentially ignorant of the true nature and force of human evil, which may be understood only through one's resolute inner resistance to it. As fish are so accustomed to living in water that they become unaware of how it feels to be wet, when we do not challenge our innate fundamental darkness, we cannot possibly know what it means to fight the evil manifested outside ourselves. As the Lotus Sutra describes a person in such a state of self-complacency: "He will constantly dwell in hell, strolling in it as though it were a garden, and the other evil paths of existence he will look on as his own home" (LS, 76-77).

It must be noted, however, that the oneness of good and evil does not mean that evil is good. To understand this teaching, it is crucial for us to be aware of the fundamental darkness manifested both within us and within the lives of others. In fact, our Buddhahood is revealed as we challenge our fundamental darkness. In other words, Buddhas are precisely those committed to this unending process of self-reflection and self-improvement. In the "Record of Orally Transmitted Teachings," the Daishonin writes, "A sharp sword to cut through the fundamental darkness is to be found in faith alone" (GZ, 751). Our faith in our innate Buddhahood is a driving force behind our continuous struggle against the fundamental darkness within us.

Prayer Is A Power for Peace

Prayer, when born out of our resolve to challenge our fundamental darkness and tap our inner Buddhahood, becomes a genuine power for peace. Such prayer transforms terror into hope and anger into compassion. Sometimes prayer is misunderstood as inactivity rather than action. To the contrary, prayer is a means to strengthen our faith in the Buddha nature as we pray to have more confidence in ourselves. Prayer can change our reality when our prayer challenges inner darkness and sincerely affirms the power of life. Such prayer transforms the way we see ourselves, the way we live our lives, and the way we relate to others. Through such prayer is born unshakable confidence in life's sanctity that informs our action to create value for life.

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In "On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land," the Daishonin states, "Rather than offering up ten thousand prayers for remedy, it would be better simply to outlaw this one evil" (WND, 15). Some may interpret this passage as denying prayer's efficacy, seeing the Daishonin's statement instead as reliance on the secular authority to legislate what is essentially a matter of one's belief and conscience. However, from the context of the Daishonin's treatise, "this one evil" specifically refers to the teaching of the Pure Land school. The Daishonin was concerned about the Pure Land teaching because, based on the belief that individuals were powerless to help themselves, it promoted one's absolute reliance on Amida Buddha, who was said to live in the Land of Perfect Bliss. The Daishonin understood that the Pure Land teaching was leading its believers astray from a path of self-awakening.

The Pure Land teaching stressed power over people instead of power within people. It was essentially authoritarian in nature, teaching the necessity of submission to an external power or control. In this sense, we can interpret "this one evil" as our tendency to be confused about our inner strength and to accept an authoritarian view that we should rely on an external entity. In other words, "this one evil" is our fundamental darkness that keeps us ignorant of our innate Buddhahood. In light of what the Daishonin meant by "this one evil," we can interpret the above passage from "On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land" as the Daishonin's affirmation that the power of prayer can be manifested only when we seriously challenge our fundamental darkness. The efficacy of "ten thousand prayers" may be realized through our recognition of this one evil and our struggle against it. When we pray to challenge the fundamental darkness within ourselves, we can truly unleash the power of our prayer and transform our lives and the environment.

Prayer is a process of self-reflection and determination in which we recognize our destructive tendencies and determine to transform them into the creative energies to propel our lives forward. In the classical Greek play, "The Eumenides," the angry spirits of vengeance known as the Furies transform themselves into the Kindly Ones through their collective prayer. Encouraged and guided by Athena, the goddess of wisdom, they voice their prayer:

Let not the dry dust that drinks
The black blood of citizens
Through passion for revenge
And bloodshed for bloodshed
Be given our state to prey upon.
Let them render grace for grace.
Let love be their common will…
*Much wrong in the world thereby is healed.*4

In the classical world, Athena was often used as a metaphor for reason and wisdom. In this play, the Furies symbolize the barbaric past in which violent retribution called for further violence, to the point where there was no sense of fairness and justice — only self-righteous claims and counterclaims, much like the cycles of violence we see throughout the world today. Through prayer, however, the Furies begin to listen to their inner voices of wisdom and reason, transform themselves into the Kindly Ones to end the vicious cycle of killings and revenge, and bring about peace and security in the land. As this play suggests, the key to building peace lies neither in the eradication nor in the rejection of the Furies, but in their inner transformation.

Out of the horrendous loss of precious lives on September 11, we are beginning to see each other as human beings, instead of Americans or Afghans, Christians or Muslims. This may be

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one of the good things to come out of such tragedies. We must not allow this feeling to fade away. That would be a tragedy more than we can bear. With earnest prayer and dialogue, we can encourage our growing sense of connectedness to spread across our borders and grow deeper against our own prejudice, until it becomes a global conviction that the most powerful leaders of the world cannot help but to follow.

1. *Why We Can't Wait*, p. 65
2. *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 24.
3. "The Age of Soft Power," *A New Humanism: The University Addresses of Daisaku Ikeda*, pp. 210-11)
4. Lines 976-87, trans. Richmond Lattimore

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