

HUMAN DIGNITY IS WHAT REALLY MATTERS

Happy New Year to everyone in this Year of Advancement Toward the New Century! The steady efforts of SGI-USA members for peace and happiness at home, school, work and in their respective neighborhoods have resulted in much growth on both personal and societal levels. The SGI's theme for 1997 underscores the ongoing challenge for those of us who practice Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism to continue in such endeavors.

The world is getting smaller, and the future does not bode well for those who demand rigid definitions of national and cultural identities. In the past, the moving force of history was "hard power" in the form of military might, political authority and wealth. In recent years, however, we have witnessed a global trend toward "soft power," such as knowledge and information, culture, ideas and systems. We can inspire our friends and families if we can demonstrate to them how our practice of Buddhism enhances our respect for this trend, for various cultural and ethnic traditions and diverse human relationships.

What truly matters is to cherish human dignity, to respect others and to strive together to improve the quality of life. With these guideposts, we can hone our vision for a future that we can proudly pass on to future generations.

In these days of increasing tension and strife in many communities around the nation, we need the character and gumption to do something about it — to change whatever needs to be changed. Otherwise, it can and probably will get worse.

The issue of diversity is continually being addressed in the media today, especially regarding the workplace. It was reported in New Orleans' *The Times-Picayune* (Nov. 22, 1996) that:

An estimated seventy percent of the largest 1,000 corporations have programs to help diversify the workforce and enable different employees to work well together. Yet most diversity work consists of training sessions that last a day, hardly enough time to change many minds, much less the corporate culture. And management often acts to satisfy laws, rather than out of a true belief in a diverse workplace.

We cannot stand still in a changing age. Under SGI President Ikeda's leadership, the SGI has put forth enormous effort worldwide to developing a climate of tolerance, generosity and forbearance; to putting belief into practice sufficient enough to restore the vitality in people's lives. When unity in diversity can be achieved and maintained, the effect is monumental. Anything can be accomplished under such humanistic conditions.

The present is the best time to soberly question ourselves: What can I do to promote respect for diversity?

As Nichiren Daishonin says in the "Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings": "Cherry, plum, peach or apricot blossoms — all, just as they are, are entities possessing their own unique qualities" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 784).

He also states: "All disciples and believers of Nichiren should chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with one mind (*itai doshin*), transcending all differences among themselves

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to become as inseparable as fish and the water in which they swim" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 23).

On an individual level, the first step is to manifest the courage to admit that we all have our own prejudices and that problems stemming from such prejudices exist in our organization, as they do in society. In this spirit, one step that has been taken to address the concerns about differences among our membership was last year's formation of a committee on diversity. It goes without saying that one further step we can take is to pray for the people around us to live together in mutual understanding and respect, and that sincere dialogue will be followed by sincere actions. Let's be the first to practice what we preach.

As we continue to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we come to deepen our understanding of how precious each human life is. Through the kaleidoscope of SGI-USA activities, we can summon forth the life-condition of Bodhisattva, not only with those we know and like but also with those with whom we may not have much in common. In this way, I am convinced we can help one another rid ourselves of the senseless fear and misjudgment that often arise from diversity.

With this at heart, I wish everyone the happiest of years as we embark together on this new year of change from within.

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