

Live Your Own Life

IN preparing for this column, the *Living Buddhism* staff and I were discussing the subject of diversity. It occurred to me that the analogy of the cherry, plum, peach and apricot (Jp. *o, bai, to, ri*) Nichiren Daishonin refers to in the “Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings” is particularly instructive in that it celebrates the unique personality possessed by each of us and that each precious life is irreplaceable.

It was during that discussion I realized, that beyond the Daishonin’s oral teachings, I had no idea of the concept’s historical source. Did Nichiren Daishonin find its origin in some ancient Chinese text? Was it in one of the many sutras he studied? I immediately set about the task to find the answer. Others joined the quest. And though we are still researching, I would like to share what fueled my curiosity in the first place.

In a modern world struggling to understand the diversity that surrounds us, I was moved that it was also a subject Nichiren Daishonin clarified nearly eight-hundred years ago. It also struck me that in the context of thirteenth-century feudal Japan, it is quite revolutionary. It points out the wisdom of acknowledging our diversity; of being able to recognize what is unique about those around us and to appreciate them for who they are and what they have to offer our burgeoning society. I also realized that there are some, perhaps even among our readers, who find it difficult to embrace others when it comes to recognizing the humanity of someone we’ve been taught to hate. Imagine, if you will, how extraordinarily difficult it must have been for the farmers and fishermen and samurai of thirteenth-century feudal Japan. What a brilliant glimpse into the depth of Nichiren Daishonin’s mind. His incredibly perceptive open-mindedness. His cosmic perspective.

SOMETHING else occurred to me as well. And that is the responsibility that goes along with pursuing our individual rights. I think this is particularly relevant in the “Disneyland” of a world painted by mainstream media, replete with its mega-buck media heroes from entertainers to sports figures. I am reminded of an essay by the second Soka Gakkai president, Josei Toda, who wrote:

You may be distressed about your dismal financial state, anxious about the failure of your business, feeling miserable after fighting with your spouse, or even nursing an injury suffered when you tripped over your charcoal heater; but ultimately, these are all your very own personal existences. That is, these are all expressions of the workings of your own life. Carrying this thought a step further, all of the phenomena of your existence are a matter of changes within your own life. Thus, isn’t it crucial that we change our lives for the better and strive to attain a permanent state of happiness? Therefore, live your own life; in fact, you must perceive that there is actually no other way than to live your own life.¹

COMMENTING on the above passage, SGI President Ikeda said: “We must not be unduly swayed by what other people might think, nor by the organization, nor by society. The most respectable way of life exists in being absolutely true to ourselves based on faith under any circumstances.”²

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Author: Fred M. Zaitso

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In a letter Nichiren Daishonin sent in 1280 to Sennichi-ama, a sincere, elderly believer living on distant Sado Island in the Sea of Japan, he wrote:

All the various beings in the nine worlds and the six paths differ from one another in their minds. It is like the case of two people, three people or a hundred or a thousand people: Though all have faces about a foot in length, no two look exactly alike. Their minds differ and therefore their faces differ, too. How much greater still is the difference between the minds of two people, of ten people and of all the living beings in the six paths and the nine worlds! So it is that some love the blossoming cherry trees and some love the moon, some prefer sour things and some prefer bitter ones, some like little things and some like big. People have various tastes. Some prefer good and some prefer evil. People are of many kinds.

But though they differ from one another in such ways as these, when they enter into the Lotus Sutra, they all become like a single person in body and a single person in mind. This is just like the various rivers that, when they flow into the great ocean, all take on a uniformly salty flavor, or like the different kinds of birds that, when they approach Mount Sumeru, all assume the same [golden] hue. (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 6, pp. 295–96)

The philosophy of the Lotus Sutra embraces and harmonizes human diversity. As President Ikeda stated in New York in June of last year: “The Mystic Law is the source that enables us to manifest our unique brilliance against a backdrop of mutual understanding and appreciation of one another’s differences; to create a lush garden of cherry, plum, peach and apricot blossoms.”

The beginning of respecting another person’s life lies in respecting the dignity of our own lives and recognizing that same dignity in others. It is here in the garden of the SGI-USA that we have the unique opportunity to put this ideal into practice.

Fred M. Zaitso
SGI-USA General Director

1. Daisaku Ikeda, *Buddhism in Action*; vol. 7, p. 45.
2. *ibid.*