

## Honoring Ourselves Is a Right

THIS month I thought I would continue my exploration of the concept “praying for oneself and for others.” It is a subject that many people I talk with seem to have unanswered questions about. For one thing, people tell me that while the praying-for-others part is easy to do, praying for oneself isn’t. They tell me that their efforts to do so are often blocked by feelings that range from “Praying for myself sounds egotistical” to some people actually admitting, although reluctantly, that deep down they feel undeserving of happiness.

As you can imagine, it really concerns me to hear that members are going through such suffering, especially considering how natural our Buddhist practice ought to be. So I’ve tried to look further into the “why” behind this, in the context of our society.

One thing I’ve found is that many members, myself included, have a running critical commentary in the far recesses of our lives feeding us all kinds of negative messages about ourselves. Things like, “If you do or say so and so, people will think you’re arrogant.”

Or, “What makes you think you can learn to play the piano or learn another language or take up art or surfing or whatever at this stage of your life?”

Or, “You don’t really think your boss is interested in your ideas, do you?”

Or, “Don’t make too big a deal about that, remember you are a member of this or that ethnic group, or a woman or a man or too large or too skinny or too short or too tall or too this or not that.”

And the one I hear most often: “You’ll never amount to anything.”

The clinical psychologists Hal and Sidra Stone have written extensively on this very important subject of self-criticism. Their research has found that these less-than-inspiring messages that play like a broken record in our lives aren’t limited to a particular region or community. The Stones write:

As we traveled around the world and worked with people from many different cultures, we were amazed at the power and universality of the Inner Critic. It might wear a different costume, but it was easily recognizable! Whether ... in Europe, Israel, Australia, or the United States or working with people from Japan, China, or Southeast Asia, we found that the Inner Critic was always present... The great similarity we have noted among all the Inner Critics of the world is their ability to cripple people and to keep them unhappy and ineffective.<sup>1</sup>

Those who usually feed our inner critic and provide it with its images—especially when we are young and most vulnerable—are usually those closest to us. Is it any wonder that many of us grow up feeling that we don’t deserve happiness? Or that it would be unseemly to pray for ourselves?

FORTUNATELY we have encountered the universal truth at the heart of the

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Daishonin's Buddhism—an abiding appreciation and respect for the unfathomable value of each and every human life—yours and mine included, in spite of the ridiculous things our inner critic has been telling us. Just that knowledge alone, made solid in our lives by our practice, has liberated thousands of people from a future of unimaginable suffering and grief. It has allowed us to take actions to create amazing circumstances for ourselves in spite of all the “logical evidence” to the contrary.

Of course, one of the key actions we take is prayer. It is the impetus that allows our lives to move forward. By way of analogy, prayer for ourselves and for others could be thought of as a two-wheeled cart moving us through life. We will make progress if we continue to take action. But if we were to limit the action of our prayers just for others and neglect ourselves, it would be like removing one wheel from the cart. It would then only go around in circles, never making any forward motion at all. The same would be true if we were to only pray for ourselves and neglect considering others. Remember, in Buddhism, we cannot separate ourselves from any aspect of our environment—an environment made up of ourselves and everyone and everything else in it.

Recognizing the central role each of us plays in the symbiotic relationship with the world we live in, SGI President Ikeda wrote in his 1997 Peace Proposal:

I feel a strong interest in and affinity with Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset's idea of life. The theme that he himself said epitomizes all of his philosophical speculation is, “I am myself plus my circumstance, and if I do not save it, I cannot save myself.”<sup>2</sup>

Another way to define the “Inner Critic” that Professors Stone refer to in Buddhist terms is the “lesser self,” an aspect of life touched on by President Ikeda when he delivered an address at the East-West Center in Hawaii in 1995. He said:

The wisdom of Buddhism enables us to break the confines of the “lesser self” (Jp *shoga*), the private and isolated self held prisoner to its own desires, passions and hatreds. It further enables us to contextualize the deep-rooted psychology of collective identity as we expand our lives, with overflowing exuberance, toward the “greater self” (Jp *taiga*), which is coexistent with the living essence of the universe.<sup>3</sup>

On another occasion he said: “This greater, cosmic self is profoundly resonant with the unifying and integrating “self” which Jung perceived in the depths of the ego, and with what Emerson spoke of as “the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One.” He continues, “I am firmly convinced that a wide-scale awakening to this greater self will give rise to a world of creative and symbiotic coexistence in the coming century.”<sup>4</sup>

IN the final analysis, there can be no separation between prayers for ourselves and prayers for others. No more than we can separate ourselves from our environment.

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Or, as the philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset observed, you are yourself and your environment, and "If I don't save it, I cannot save myself."

With the foundation of our lives being the supreme Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, it is ultimately our privilege to be able to so honor our lives by praying to live in health, good fortune and happiness—to have the wisdom, compassion and the courage of the Buddha as we enjoy our wonderful existences along with those around us. As Nichiren Daishonin wrote over 700 years ago, "Since the Law is supreme, the Person is worthy of respect; since the Person is worthy of respect, the Land is sacred."<sup>5</sup>

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1. Hal Stone and Sidra Stone, *Embracing Your Inner Critic, Turning Self-Criticism into a Creative Asset* (HarperSan Francisco, 1993), p. 5.
2. "New Horizons of a Global Civilization," April 1997 *Living Buddhism*, p. 18.
3. Daisaku Ikeda, "Peace and Human Security: A Buddhist Perspective for the Twenty-first Century," March 1995 *Seikyo Times*, p. 16.
4. Daisaku Ikeda, "Mahayana Buddhism and Twenty-first Century Civilization," December 1993 *Seikyo Times*, p. 28.
5. *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 264.