

The Heart of Buddhism — Humanity

SGI President Ikeda spoke at the SGI Representative Leaders Conference held on day one of the 22nd SGI General Meeting, in Hong Kong, Feb. 19.

Congratulations on the start of the SGI General Meeting! We are all members of an eternal family. I warmly welcome all of you gathered here from around the world — many having traveled very long distances. Nichiren Daishonin writes, “The length of the journey traveled in pursuit of the Law represents the strength of seeking spirit” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1223). Each of you embodies such lofty seeking spirit. Your good fortune and benefit are immeasurable.

I also express my deepest appreciation to the Hong Kong SGI members, who always welcome and shower such warm hospitality on the many overseas SGI members on occasions like these. *Duo xie! Duo xie!* (Thank you very much.)

Here we are, representatives of the global SGI family, assembled under one roof and sharing a festive and meaningful evening of heart-to-heart exchange. This gathering itself is a microcosm of world peace; it represents the solidarity of humanism and the quintessence of Buddhism.

I would like each of you to thoroughly enjoy life. Life is meant to be enjoyed. Happiness is life’s purpose. When you tally up all the joys and all the sufferings at the end of your life and subtract one from the other, what do you get? If there is more joy than suffering, then you are happy. If there’s more suffering than joy, then you are unhappy.

Moreover, the wise, the truly strong, can surmount even the most painful times with courage. In contrast, the pessimistic, who weakly wallow in their problems, unable to move on, tend to agonize and suffer over the smallest things. I hope all of you will be wise people who can live with joy.

Shakyamuni’s Warm Consideration for Each Person

There is an anecdote about Shakyamuni and his disciples being invited to dine with the people of a town on the Ganges River. After the meal, as was customary, Shakyamuni would preach the Law as a token of his appreciation.

A farmer wanted to attend the gathering to hear Shakyamuni speak. However, as he was about to set out that morning, he discovered that one of his cows was missing. As eager as he was to see Shakyamuni, it was of greater urgency that he find the cow, on which his livelihood depended. By the time he found the animal and returned it to the field, it was close to nightfall. He was starving, not having eaten all day and having wandered far and wide in his search. But he hurried off to the gathering.

He arrived just as everyone had finished eating and Shakyamuni was about to begin preaching. Shakyamuni, however, immediately perceived the great struggles the farmer had gone through to join them. Only the Buddha understood, with mirror-like clarity, how exhausted and hungry the man was and how sincere the seeking spirit that had brought him here. Shakyamuni asked one of his hosts to prepare a seat for the farmer and serve him a meal. He then waited for the man to eat and feel restored in mind and body. Only after that did he begin to preach.

Deeply touched, the farmer naturally listened with even greater joy and earnestness to Shakyamuni’s preaching and was deeply content. Bringing contentment to people is the very hallmark of a Buddha.

There were, however, some monks among Shakyamuni's disciples who frowned at the Buddha's special consideration for the man, complaining, "Why are you making such a fuss over one poor peasant?"

But Shakyamuni replied simply: "If you preach to people whose stomachs are empty, they cannot really appreciate what you are saying. Nothing is more unendurable than hunger." There was nothing authoritarian or officious in his manner. He was warmly humanistic throughout.

What a contrast to the priests of the Nikken sect! They have angered many by their complete lack of the compassion and concern that characterized the behavior of both Shakyamuni and Nichiren Daishonin!

Shakyamuni fought dauntlessly throughout the "nine great ordeals," the major hardships he suffered during his lifetime. He fought against the evil machinations and vicious slander of the treacherous Devadatta and others who were out to destroy him. Even in the midst of such onslaughts, Shakyamuni showed the greatest respect for each person and, with steady and sincere efforts, created a beautiful, harmonious community of individuals bound by shared aspirations.

Leaders must always remember that everything starts with humanistic behavior — for instance, warmly welcoming all who attend meetings and sincerely expressing your gratitude for their efforts. As leaders, you must use your hearts and your heads so that everyone can advance joyously and courageously.

In the West, ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle valued hospitality as the virtue of a generous, humanistic spirit. Kant, whose works the first Soka Gakkai president, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, read with great interest in prison, also viewed hospitality as an indispensable element in what he called "cosmopolitan right," or the rights of global citizens, a cornerstone of his formula for achieving perpetual peace.¹

Today, with the 21st century just over the horizon, we of the SGI, placing supreme value on the individual, are creating an ever-expanding network of global citizens, transcending differences in nationality, ethnic background and language. And the most humanistic center of that network is surely here in Hong Kong.

A Scholar's Assessment of the SGI

I would like to share some comments about the SGI and its activities by Dr. Bryan Wilson [Reader Emeritus at Oxford University], a respected researcher on the sociology of religions and the first president of the International Conference for the Sociology of Religions. Dr. Wilson, with whom I published a dialogue [*Human Values in a Changing World*], has studied the SGI movement from a scholarly viewpoint.

He summarized what he had found to be SGI's main sources of appeal as follows: 1) It is a lay movement comprised of ordinary people. 2) It is pragmatic and focused on practical everyday affairs. 3) It offers multiform conceptions of salvation. 4) It is "world-affirming," endorsing positive attitudes to social experience. 5) It emphasizes religion as an instrument of benefit, not as a compensation for suffering. 6) It sets aside much of the apparatus of conventional church organization. 7) Its local groups operate as support groups for individuals. 8) It is an outgoing religion, sponsoring a wide variety of cultural and social activities. 9) It has a strong activist orientation, in terms of sharing its philosophy. 10) Its whole ideology legitimatizes well-being and does not employ guilt feelings.²

Let us continue to take action and make even greater contributions to society, to culture and to human happiness.

The New Millennium

The Daishonin writes: “What does Fukyo’s [Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s] profound respect for people signify? The real meaning of Shakyamuni Buddha’s appearance in this world lay in his behavior as a human being” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 2 [2nd ed.], p. 240).

The new millennium will be the time when the humanistic ideals of the SGI will be put into practice and validated on an unprecedented scale. Please bring hope and confidence to your families and fellow members through unflagging optimism, courage and sound common sense. And please lead magnificent lives of mission as champions of humanity. I am praying with all my heart for the prosperity and happiness of your respective countries and territories.

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1. Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays on Politics, History, and Morals*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1983), p. 118.
2. Summary of points made in a speech by Dr. Bryan Wilson at the Boston Community Center, April 7, 1996.

Title: The Heart of Buddhism--Humanity
Subject: World Tribune 03/07/97 n.3129 p.9 WT970307p09 02/19/97
Author: Daisaku Ikeda
Keywords: 02/19/97 Attitude Consideration Guidance Heart Humanism Humanity Messages President
Speech Speeches