

PERSPECTIVE: Emancipate Yourself
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Chicago

In 1970 I learned my ABCs in one of the first integrated kindergarten classrooms in small-town Tennessee. My best friend was Patrick. When everyone exchanged tiny school pictures, Patrick and I exchanged two. It wasn't until years later that I began to notice Patrick being treated differently, especially by the teachers and other adults. As my education continued, factions formed. Slowly I learned the subtle code of racism.

Many years later, in Chicago, I was introduced to this practice by a black woman. We also became friends. She told me that I had to be the one to challenge people when they made racist remarks or jokes.

One summer she invited me to a Juneteenth picnic on Chicago's lakefront. Juneteenth is a celebration held in many Southern states that marks the date when emancipation became a possibility. Over the years, as former slaves migrated north, the celebration came with them.

Although Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on Jan. 1, 1863, news did not travel fast. Television didn't browbeat everyone with videos of honest Abe cutting chains. Legend has it that freed slaves on mules traveled from plantation to plantation spreading the word. It wasn't until June 19, 1865, that the last slaves were forcibly freed when Gen. Gordon Granger took back the port of Galveston, Texas, the last city held by the Confederacy.

The news of freedom, however, did not equal freedom. In many instances, sharecropping, poverty and continued oppression took the place of slavery. One inhumane system was replaced by another. Still today there is disparity in the distribution of resources. Although emancipation is a possibility, in the public housing projects of Chicago and the boxtowns of Tennessee it is far from reality.

Buddhahood is also emancipation. Like freedom from slavery, it takes action to manifest. The declaration of absolute freedom and the actuality are two very different things. Just like the freed slaves who traveled from town to town bringing the word of a new day, we are charged with the task of informing individuals, one by one, of the greatness that lies within when we take up the battle and fight off the oppressors of greed, anger and ignorance.

In 1990, speaking of the power of gongyo, SGI President Ikeda said:

Through that practice we can acquire wisdom and good fortune, and glow with the energy to overcome any obstacle throughout the four seasons, 365 days a year; we can enter the way to the eternal happiness and attain eternity, joy, true self and purity.

Gongyo is a practice that calls forth and activates the infinite power that the microcosm inherently possesses. It transforms your fate, breaks through any apparent dead end and converts suffering into happiness. It creates a transformation, a revolution of the microcosm. It is a diagram in miniature of kosen-rufu in our lives.

The kosen-rufu that is our aim is a movement to transform the universe, the Earth, and human society into a world of peace, comfort and harmony in accord with the rhythm of the Mystic Law.

In 1970 my friend Patrick and I knew no hatred. It was something we learned. Year after year, we saw people being treated differently. We heard shouts and whispers. We felt the unspoken tension on the bus or at the basketball game. Now after 27 years, that hatred is

something I am determined to unlearn.

Emancipation is freedom — freedom from oppression but also freedom from prejudice. This year as I start leaving my coat at home and basking in the sun as another summer finally arrives, I look forward to picnics in the park and the laughter of friends both black and white. I am confident that emancipation is a possibility. And I am determined to work to make that possibility a reality.

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