

PERSPECTIVE: 'Contact'-ing Humanistic Values
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An exceptional film opened recently. The film, titled *Contact*, was directed by Robert Zemeckis (of *Forrest Gump* fame) and co-produced by its star, Jodie Foster. Without giving too much of the plot away, *Contact* explores what might happen if a direct communication from another civilization in the universe were to be received by scientists here on Earth, and the religious debate it might ignite about the existence of God or a supreme being.

In a scene reminiscent of the Inquisition, Foster as project scientist Ellie Arroway is asked directly if she believes in God. Knowing that her answer may preclude her dream to be sent on the first solo expedition to a distant star, she nonetheless answers honestly: As a scientist, she has no evidence of the existence of God and therefore cannot profess belief.

On the cusp of the 21st century, we face a flowering of technological knowledge that was first planted in the Industrial Revolution of the 1850s. In ways beyond our imagination, human life will advance or decline, according to whether this technology is integrated into our lives, into belief systems and philosophies that allow us to amplify and develop our humanistic qualities. The film presents a hope-filled vision of Earth's place in the great drama of the universe, a drama that is well-served by an open mind and a "well-developed sense of adventure," as Dr. Arroway believes.

Sitting in the fifth row from the front, on my second viewing, I glanced briefly around me at the audience, light flickering off their up lifted faces, and I reflected on the great power of movies to teach, to open minds, to deepen our understanding. As a Buddhist, I felt so grateful for my practice. For years, I'd been reading SGI President Ikeda's books, such as *Life — An Enigma, a Precious Jewel*, and passages in the *World Tribune* and *Living Buddhism* about the ways in which our philosophy intersects with science: That it is corroborated by science and does not fly in the face of scientific discoveries as they unfold.

How often do we really stop to think about just how much President Ikeda and others have been preparing us for the future? In a discussion on the nature of the cosmos and the possibility of intelligent life elsewhere, he writes:

I have no doubt but that Buddhism is a completely universal philosophy and would be applicable in other worlds as well as in our own. Indeed, it is my firm belief that Buddhism must be completely universal, and that eventually all beings everywhere will discover it. From the practical viewpoint, what we ourselves are concerned with at this point is how to create here on this planet the completely peaceful society advocated by Buddhist philosophy and religion. (*Life — An Enigma, a Precious Jewel*, p. 80)

Leaving the theater, so many people stopped to tell others waiting in the ticket line what a great film *Contact* was. In fact, many lingered after the applause died down in the darkened theater and conversed quietly. It offers a compelling vision of what interaction with our interstellar neighbors might be like, and why they might want to contact us in the first place. It is also a fitting tribute to scientist/visionary/author Carl Sagan, on whose book the film is based.

In the opening sequence, where the viewer is made aware of the awesome dimension and beauty of space, I felt such appreciation for my practice, for the Daishonin's Buddhism that teaches us about the universe and the Buddha nature inside ourselves. I am completely confident that ours is a philosophy that will carry us into the 21st century and beyond with a focus on humanistic values and a "well-developed sense of adventure."

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