

Thoughts on Nov. 18
What It Means To Be a Buddhist
By TERRY ELLIS, Contributing Editor

I snatched myself a morning walk on the beach the other day — a retreat from my usually hectic morning routine. It was a perfect day, calling me to do the one thing that always gets left out (exercise). No excuses today: The Florida sun had mellowed, and a pleasant breeze was blowing in off the Atlantic. Thirty minutes for me, alone with the ocean.

Or so I thought. Linda was heading down to the sand at the same time, and our pace eventually brought us alongside each other. She made some friendly opening conversation, and soon we were getting to know each other.

Buddhism came out quickly and quite naturally as a topic of discussion related to keeping both physically and spiritually healthy. Turns out she had been introduced to Buddhism more than 25 years ago and still chants sometimes because she recognizes daimoku as a “strong centering force.”

As our journey down the beach progressed so did our discussion, more and more frankly. By the time we turned back, she was telling me what turned her off about the old SGI-USA organization — that community of believers through which she had been introduced to Buddhism. To her eyes, it appeared hierarchical. People seemed almost co-dependent in their relationship to the leaders, she said. And there seemed to be little respect for the life-experience of people new to the philosophy; what they had to offer in the way of wisdom.

I acknowledged all that. So we talked about how difficult it is to create a religious organization which, while trying to share its point of view, doesn't fall back on the use of authority or position. I also was glad to explain to her that for the last seven years, the SGI has been struggling to establish for itself an identity separate from the extremely hierarchical priesthood, that we're on the path of building an organization free of those influences.

After all, as I explained to her, Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, from the beginning cautioned people to follow the Law, not the person. Even Hollywood shed light on this principle recently in the movie *Seven Years in Tibet*: At one turning point, we hear the youthful Dalai Lama caution his European friend not to follow him, to follow the Law. But for all practical purposes, the rituals surrounding Buddhism, even in this movie, seem to communicate a different message.

People keep seeing Buddhists praying and following something outside themselves. And Buddhists themselves have made the same mistake. But the fact remains that from the time of Shakyamuni to the present age, Buddhism has always been a struggle by individuals to awaken the Law in their lives. There are no shortcuts, and there is no person who can guarantee that enlightenment. As a leader in the SGI-USA, I said to Linda, I always remind myself of that fact. But people also have to be ready to hear it and take responsibility for their lives.

There beside the ocean, I remembered it was almost seven years since I first realized I had joined a religion with a corrupt priesthood. ME — a person who had scorned religion for just that reason, but who had set aside reason because I believed I had found a true religion, one that would prevent such a thing from happening.

My reasoning was too simplistic. And looking back now, I see that I too easily laid aside responsibility for my life by believing in a special or secret “heritage of the Law” that could only be passed down among priests. In a sense, I let down my guard and turned my life over to someone else.

Since 1990, as I have studied Buddhism with a new passion, I have realized that I should

not have been surprised by what has happened in recent history. After all, going back at least 2,000 years, it was monks who destroyed Buddhism in India. After Shakyamuni's death, those who had left their homes to follow him at first built stupas to hold his ashes in and commemorate his life. But within 500 years, they were carving and painting Buddhas that looked an awful lot like themselves. (It's no wonder that the most famous Buddhist in India after Shakyamuni was a lay leader, King Ashoka. He united India and ruled peacefully using Buddhist ideals — and protecting the religious freedom of all people.)

Like Shakyamuni before him, the great Buddhist teacher in China, T'ien-t'ai, was born into the secular world. He entered a Buddhist temple at the age of 18 to study soon after his parents died. He is said to have reached enlightenment at age 23 by studying the 23rd chapter of the Lotus Sutra. T'ien-t'ai's teachings spread to Japan, through priests like Dengyo, but his followers in China soon distorted the teachings. In Japan, too, Buddhist teachings became a tool associated with feudal power, and the spirit of Buddhism was lost until Nichiren Daishonin's appearance in 1222.

Understanding the history of Buddhism, Nichiren wisely inscribed the Dai-Gohonzon and told his followers that while this was the object of veneration — the heart of his teachings — it existed in faith alone. Each person still had to awaken to the Law through practice and study.

The history of the priests who followed Nichiren both while he lived and after he died shows that some understood this principle and some did not. It's thus clear to me why it was Tsunesaburo Makiguchi — a teacher concerned about the happiness of his students — who brought Buddhism back to life in this century. At that time of war, Nichiren Shoshu priests lacked the courage and conviction necessary to protect Buddhism from military authorities who demanded obedience to a nationalistic religion.

I realize that even the SGI, especially as it grows into a larger religious organization, isn't immune to corruption. For instance, given the personal greatness of someone like SGI President Ikeda, it's easy to think those who are closest to him are the most enlightened. But President Ikeda's greatness comes from his intense struggle to fuse his life with the Law — just as did the greatness of all Buddhists in history. If Shakyamuni and T'ien-t'ai and Nichiren couldn't guarantee enlightenment to anyone, wouldn't we be foolish to think our age is any different?

Just stopping at this, with all the facts of history in clear view, I ask myself why we're trying to build an organization at all. Why have Buddhists throughout history continued to build communities of faith despite the obvious pitfalls?

When my life-condition is high, I can feel the answer clearly in that image from the Lotus Sutra of jewels intertwined in a web, reflecting and magnifying one another's beauty. And I don't have to worry that I'll be sucked in and made insignificant. I feel this web growing to fill the entire universe and catch a glimpse of the wisdom of all Buddhas — that life itself is a joy. When my life-condition isn't so high, I feel like being alone with the Law, as I did when I went for that walk by the ocean. That's when someone usually comes along to reach out to me, and remind me what it means to be a Buddhist.

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