

EDITORIAL: Better Living Through Chemistry?

This is germ warfare: Anthrax spores are dispersed into the air. A victim breathes, inhaling the deadly bacteria. Once inside the victim's lungs, the anthrax is carried to nearby lymph nodes where the bacteria multiplies and produces poison. The result is vomiting, fever, shock and death by gradual suffocation.

Two pounds of tiny anthrax spores could conceivably kill millions of people in this way.

The pain and suffering that can be inflicted by chemical and biological weapons are truly monstrous. Yet perhaps more horrifying is the fact that people — in Iraq and many other “civilized” countries — are working hard to perfect the means by which these weapons may be used. Scientists and researchers are applying all their ingenuity to the task of mass killing. One has to wonder what goes through the mind of a young technician, wearing a lab coat and sneakers, whose job it is to grow the bacterial cultures that will become those two pounds of anthrax capable of visiting so much misery on so many people.

Maybe it's just a job, like flipping burgers. Or maybe it's forced labor, performed under threat of violence. Or maybe the technician sees it as a noble vocation, a chance to arm the forces of “good” with a powerful tool.

It's not possible for us to know exactly what goes on in the hearts and minds of the people who produce biological weapons. But we do know that they're human beings, not cartoonish villains or stereotypical mad scientists. They may have created or involved themselves in a terrible situation, but they are people.

And that is cause for hope.

As Nichiren Daishonin writes, “Even a heartless villain loves his wife and children” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 53). Just as we all have the capacity to manifest the profound ugliness of the lower worlds, we all have the capacity to care about and love others.

But most of us can think of one or two cases in the news recently of heartless villains who certainly didn't act as if they loved their spouses, children or anyone. And terrorist attacks by suicidal fanatics appear to be happening more frequently. It seems almost naive to hope that “the better angels of our nature” as Abraham Lincoln called them — or our Buddha and Bodhisattva natures as Buddhism calls them — will ultimately prevail.

That, perhaps, is one reason why the United Nations finds it necessary to send special inspection teams to Iraq and other countries to monitor the production of weapons. Without the United Nations nosing around, who knows what stockpiles would be amassed?

But, as the current situation in Iraq illustrates, U.N. inspectors by themselves cannot prevent the proliferation of chemical and biological weapons. If people really want to cultivate anthrax, whether in a government lab or a suburban basement, they'll probably do it.

Buddhism teaches that we can change our karma through chanting. Buddhism also teaches the profound interconnectedness of all life — the changes that we make in ourselves will inevitably be reflected in others. As we would chant for the victims of terrorism and biological weapons — and as we would chant for ourselves and our loved ones — so should we chant for the manufacturers and perpetrators of germ warfare: for their happiness and for their suffering to be eliminated.

This is not to say that we don't stand up against evil where we see it. We can chant for Saddam Hussein's happiness, but that won't necessarily put an end to chemical and biological weapons. Vigilance and speaking out on behalf of ordinary people are crucial

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when it comes to confronting evil. So in addition to our prayers for the individuals complicit in the evil of chemical and biological weapons, we can support the United Nations and its inspectors. Destructive schemes and rulers who thirst for power at all costs must not go unchecked.

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