

EDITORIAL: Human Rights Are Your Rights

Fifty years ago, the U.N. General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with its oft-quoted opening lines that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”

This declaration, now adopted by all 185 member states, was the first achievement of the United Nations. The president of that General Assembly session expressed his hope in the far-reaching potential of this declaration. “Millions of people, men, women and children, all over the world will turn for help, guidance and inspiration to this document,” he said.

Indeed, in the past five decades much progress has been made to bring freedom and equality to the world’s peoples. “But as we take stock in what has been accomplished, we cannot pretend that the gap has been bridged between aspirations and achievements,” said the current president of the General Assembly at a special meeting to observe Human Rights Day, Dec. 10, 1997.

“We still live in a world where millions are uprooted from their homes and untold numbers arrested arbitrarily or imprisoned without trial,” he said. “Sadly, it remains a world in which torture is still practiced, in which more than a billion people are living in poverty, where children are still exploited, the elderly neglected and women denied their fundamental equal rights. Obviously, such a world is not a place where human rights are being universally respected.”

He then called on everyone to do something about it. “It is now our responsibility,” he said, “to reach all people with this message in order to translate these remarkable principles and norms into tomorrow’s reality.”

Translating ideals into realities is also the work of the SGI, founded this month in 1975. Based on Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, SGI members around the world seek to bring about a better world through the happiness and fulfillment of the people. In one sense, SGI President Ikeda has said, our SGI movement is a movement for human rights.

What makes our efforts so important is that we are not limited to the external world of systems, bureaucracies and governments. Ours is primarily a movement to address the inner realm, to cultivate character and the human spirit.

In his 1997 peace proposal, released to mark SGI Day, Jan. 26, President Ikeda wrote that this attention to the internal workings of human life is crucial if we are to see any lasting change. “Legal and institutional guarantees of ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ as well as ‘peace’ and ‘human rights’ are indispensable, but they alone are not enough to preserve human dignity,” he wrote.

In fact, if we neglect this inner development, he wrote, “the movement to defend human dignity will degenerate into one that casts down and harms humanity.... Freedom and indulgence, democracy and mobism, peace and complacency, human rights and self-righteousness are qualities that are as close to each other as two sides of a coin. To slacken even the slightest in this struggle [between good and evil] is to risk succumbing to the other side of the coin.”

Inner growth, he argued, will build a “bridge of hope” to a new century that will have solved the problems of the present one. “I believe that it is religion (or at least those [religions] that are worthy of the name) that will provide the strong supports and the propelling forces for the building of such bridges,” he wrote.

Human rights as outlined in the Universal Declaration are multifaceted. They include

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the rights to life, liberty, food, shelter, access to medical care, freedom from torture or arbitrary imprisonment, education, freedom of religious belief and thought, freedom of expression...and the list goes on.

The work — the struggle — to guarantee these rights for all must go on and must be waged by all of us. In fact, the goal of *soka*, or value creation, Mr. Ikeda has said, is to develop people of character who strive for peace and who are committed to protecting the dignity of human life.

Our religious practice gives us the perfect foundation from which to work for human rights. As we join in the celebration of the Universal Declaration's 50th anniversary and observe this year's SGI Day later in the month, we can take inspiration from the words of Kofi Annan, the U.N. secretary-general: "Human rights are your rights. Seize them. Defend them. Promote them. Understand them and insist on them. Nourish and enrich them. They are the true reflection of humanity's highest aspirations. They are the best in us. Give them life."

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