

Dialogue on Diversity: More Than Just Talk
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Gerry Hall explores how, with equality and compassion as our foundation, discussions of human diversity can become a source of hope.

Since 1996, there has been an awakening wave of interest within the SGI-USA on the subject of human diversity. There were voices of frustration and despair coming from within our membership that had to be heard. They eloquently expressed the need for honest and sincere dialogue that would lead to greater understanding among people.

Members began to discuss the topic of diversity. More often than not discussion has focused on racial and ethnic differences among people, but it also has included gender, sexual orientation, age and physical differences. Since there was no set agenda for such dialogues, there were many different kinds of dialogues and many differing reactions.

Some people expressed concern that members were becoming emotional or discouraged, or that nothing of value was being accomplished without a clear message of faith guiding the dialogues. Others felt that the dialogues provided a valuable venting of pressure and frustration, and that wisdom would be gained.

As challenging as it may be, diversity is something that we each must address. In 1996, when I talked with SGI Vice President Shigeo Hasegawa about this, he offered the following guidance:

Because we all chant, when we discuss difficult issues such as this, the result is that more wisdom comes out and hope is generated. Similar dialogues among those who do not chant can often bring out emotions or conflict. We are approaching the subject with compassion and equality as our basis, so whatever we discuss becomes a source of hope.

Race is such a vital issue. The SGI-USA is a miniature of society. If the SGI-USA can solve this problem we can make a great contribution to society.

My sincere hope is that the Culture Department and the top leaders of the SGI-USA, without avoiding the difficulty, will face these issues with courage.

You are making progress with the issues of race and ethnic differences step by step. But even if you have made a step forward, you may have to take two steps back. Then three steps forward and maybe run into a wall. Then retreat and then advance again.

But SGI President Ikeda asks us to be courageous. We can't afford to give up. We should not give up. It is not an option to give up. If we are cowardly and avoid such issues, no one else will be able to solve them. Repeatedly challenge such issues.

When we reach a solution through dialogue and everyone agrees, it is the Buddha's wisdom. Our motivation comes from compassion and from the heart.

In holding dialogues on human diversity, it's valuable to have some basic guidelines that re-affirm the Buddhist view of life. The following points and suggestions are based on experience gained from dialogues held in the SGI-USA during the past year. I offer them in a humble spirit as one who has just begun his own journey of awakening and understanding.

• **Preface the dialogue with a confirmation of respect for each person.** Dialogue is a common search for a deeper understanding of ourselves and others. If people are initially referred to simply by categories such as whites, blacks, Asians, Native Americans, Latinos, gays, senior citizens, handicapped, etc., there is often misunderstanding and a lack of trust from the start. People have their own self-identities and life-experiences; broad

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categorizations are rarely meaningful. Assert that all people are fundamentally equal and that everyone's expressions will be valued and listened to without judgment.

- **Re-state that all phenomena — all forms of life — are manifestations of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.** All people are profoundly connected on many levels. In our infinite lifetimes, each of us must have lived as a person of every possible combination of race, gender, sexual orientation and physical challenge. We appeared in this lifetime as we are to fulfill a particular mission — to save people who are suffering, whose hearts we alone can touch.

- **Assert that diversity is an absolutely necessary aspect of life and is a great treasure.** Although all life in the universe is one, it is infinitely varied. Nature creates beauty with diversity. Human affairs are also at their most beautiful when we have the wisdom to appreciate and harmonize our diversity. Diversity is a precious resource; this variety of talents, abilities and tastes enables us to meet the challenges facing humanity.

- **Re-affirm that injustice and discrimination have been a part of human history and are still present in our society today.** Often, our history is painful to look at; it can stir up rage and resentment. We have to keep in mind that our purpose is not to place blame or assign guilt; we are learning about our past and present in order to make a better future.

- **Clarify our understanding that the attachment to difference is one of the greatest causes of division among human beings.** Attachment to difference stems from a narrow or partial worldview that fails to grasp the unity of all life and the diversity of its manifestations. Most basically we need to learn the truth of life as taught by Buddhism, but there is no end to the lessons we need to learn about daily life and human relationships.

- **Clarify that Buddhism empowers individuals to challenge and change their circumstances, changing poison into medicine and hell into heaven.** At the same time, Buddhism raises our consciousness and compassion; it calls on us to stand up and fight injustice and discrimination wherever it occurs.

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