

WHAT A CONCEPT: The Oneness of Life and Its Environment ('Esho Funi')

Not About Self-Blame

By LISA JONES, Staff Writer

Buddhism teaches that the self (or life) and its environment are two but not two; that is, two in phenomena but one in essence. From the standpoint of what our five senses tell us, self and other are two separate things — at one level, this is true: The world is “out there,” external to us, relevant to us only insofar as it affects our immediate experience.

But on a deeper level, Buddhism teaches that we're connected to others in a complex web of interrelatedness. Ultimately, we're one with all things — including sunlight, water, rocks and sky. As Nichiren Daishonin wrote: “Since the Law is supreme, the Person is worthy of respect; since the Person is worthy of respect, the Land is sacred” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 264).

Although self and environment — or subject and object — are two integral expressions of the same ultimate reality, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, this oneness does not imply stagnancy. Rather, there's a constant interplay between self and environment. And this interplay could be called the creative dynamism of life.

SGI President Ikeda explains: “The oneness of life and its environment means that even though life is shaped by the environment, and the influence of the environment on life must be reckoned with, it is life, in particular human life, that is the transforming protagonist without which the environment could not exist. The role of human will is thus central to this dynamic relationship.”

Although we are powerfully affected by our environment, our power to affect our environment is greater still. Buddhist practice allows us to perceive, cultivate and limitlessly expand our inherent, transformative power.

In the past, some of us may have interpreted *oneness* thus: “All the bad stuff that's happening to me or around me is a reflection of all the bad stuff inside me. Unless I get rid of my negativity, my environment will never change.” This oneness is not about self-blame, though. Nor is it a rationalization for inertia (e.g., “since my lousy job is a reflection of me, I'll simply chant to change my karma rather than look for a better job or gain more skills”).

Granted, our inner life *is* mirrored in our environment. But more significant is our ability to choose what we assimilate from our environment and what we boldly oppose in it. It's probably safe to say that most of us want a mutually beneficial relationship with others and our environment — to gain maximum benefit as well as to give it. External victory in this regard, though, is determined by our inner resolve to strike a balance between a strong, responsible will to transformation and a warm, loving embrace of others.

In our personal relationships, *a warm, loving embrace* means seeing and respecting the Buddha nature in others and taking compassionate action on their behalf. And *will to transformation* means taking action for value creation, doing what needs to be done, saying what needs to be said — based on wisdom, of course, which is ultimately inseparable from compassion and the Mystic Law.

In a sense, the practical application of the oneness of life and its environment is this: determinedly living with appreciation for ourselves and our world while actively transforming ourselves and our world for the better.

Twelve in a series

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