

Where Buddhism and Psychology Meet

In a message to the American Psychological Association conference, the SGI president calls for more dialogue between Buddhism, the humanistic spirituality of the East, and modern psychology, the humanistic science of the West.

SGI President Ikeda sent the following message to the Aug. 14 opening of the American Psychological Association conference in San Francisco.

My heartfelt congratulations on the holding of the 106th Convention of the American Psychological Association!

It was with great pleasure that I learned that a meeting has been convened on the subject of Buddhism and psychology. I am confident that this will be an event of profound historical significance.

With the continuing advances of globalization, we see increasing integration on the planes of communication and information, as well as increasing economic and political interdependence. Against this background, mutual understanding and a spirit of tolerance among people of different cultural, religious, ethnic and national backgrounds is vital to human survival.

There is clearly enormous value in this preliminary dialogue between Buddhism, which represents the crystallization of the spiritual heritage of the East, and modern psychology, which contains the quintessence of Western insights into the inner life of humanity.

Last September, I had the opportunity to meet in Tokyo with Professor Martin Seligman and discuss with him optimism and other subjects of mutual concern from the perspectives of Buddhism and psychology.

Professor Seligman expressed his view that the psychology he had learned as a student had been very mechanistic in its outlook. Traditional psychology, he said, was focused mainly on the question of how to heal patients and to “change” people. The task of psychology from here on, he added, was how to give people a sense of hope, to help them find and pursue their own source of inner strength.

As a Buddhist, I welcome and offer my heartfelt endorsement of this emerging direction in modern psychology. It has important parallels with the most important lessons of Shakyamuni, founder of Buddhism, as recorded in the Nirvana Sutra, thought to be his final teaching. Put simply, this was “Rely on yourself; rely on the Truth (*dharma*).”

To quote the passage in full: “Be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be ye a refuge to yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast to the Truth as a lamp.” This teaching has become an integral part of East Asian culture, through such famous phrases as “Rely on the light of the self” and “Rely on the light of the *dharma*.”

The significance of this teaching is that one must never be swayed by external threats or temptations. One should forge a profound, robust identity capable of shaping and controlling one’s circumstances. It is on this “self” that one should base one’s conviction and actions.

Thus, the self referred to in this passage does not indicate the restricted, egotistical self easily swayed by and subsumed in the surrounding environment. Rather, it is what Buddhism refers to as the greater self — the self that is one with the principles that guide the functioning of life and the universe. The self to which Shakyamuni referred is the greater self that embodies these principles or truths. It points toward a way of life that is

truly universal.

In the northern transmission or Mahayana tradition of Buddhism, this final admonition of Shakyamuni's was developed and given concrete form and direction as the Bodhisattva Way.

In the Lotus Sutra, a Mahayana teaching widely revered in East Asia, we find the story of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, an example of someone who strives to develop this kind of macrocosmic self through an altruistic dedication to others' welfare. As his name suggests, this bodhisattva refused to despise or denigrate any person; his chosen practice was to bow and express his profound respect for each person he encountered. He persisted in this practice in the face of contempt, verbal abuse and even violence.

He explains the motivation for his behavior in this way: "I would never disparage you, for you are practicing the way and all of you will become Buddhas!" Nichiren, the 13th-century Buddhist reformer whose teachings provide the inspiration for the SGI's activities, gives the following exegesis of this sutra passage: "Bodhisattva Never Disparaging bows and offers his respects to the Buddha nature that exists inherent within all people." In other words, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging always focused on the individual human being, irrespective of cultural or national affiliation, perceiving in each person an inner essence worthy of the highest respect. By expressing his profound, unchanging respect for that inner dignity, he sought to promote the development and manifestation of each individual's potential.

This expanded, embracing sense of selfhood, this state of vast, unforced compassion, this capacity to remain unbowed before any and all difficulties and persecutions, and to meet these difficulties with steadfast, unshaken optimism — these are the elements of the vast life state that is really meant by the word *nirvana*.

Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, by struggling against a variety of obstacles and challenges, strengthened and deepened his sense of self, offering a model way of life that manifests the greater self and is in harmony with the principles (*dharma*) that govern life and universe. I believe that the way of life demonstrated here offers lessons of value to all humankind.

Modern psychology proffers a message of hope and optimism. I feel that this message resonates profoundly with the outlook and values embodied in the Bodhisattva Way, which I have attempted to describe here. I find in this correspondence between these two historically diverse traditions cause for great hope. I believe it will serve as a source of wisdom and light to illuminate our future.

It is also my sincere hope that the new, truly revolutionary psychology being discussed and explored at your convention will provide new momentum in the effort to overcome conflict between people of different cultures, nations and religions; to eliminate nuclear, chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction; and to develop the values of tolerance and co-existence that must be the foundation of a global civilization in harmony with all its elements and the entire biosphere.

With these expressions of my hopes and expectations, I wish you all success in your important deliberations.

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