

PUBLISHER'S COMMENTARY THE NEW MILLENNIUM IS NOW

MANY people have already made plans for New Year's Eve, December 31, 1999. "Millennium parties" and celebrations will be happening worldwide. Some point out, however, that these celebrations are premature—the momentous transition will not arrive until the stroke of midnight, Jan. 1, 2001, one year later.

In our number system based on tens, the change of the highest digit of any number indicates a completion—the last of a set of ten or multiples of ten. Numbers followed by zeros signify a completion, a fulfillment, but not necessarily a beginning. So the year 2000, while marking the last year of the century and the millennium, is not, according to this argument, the beginning of the new millennium.

But there is considerable precedent for viewing the transition to the year 2000 with awe and celebration: The decade called the '90s began in 1990, not 1991—so years ending in zero, including the year 2000, do mark the beginning of a new decade. When people turn 20, 30, 40, 50 and so on, they feel their life has made a major transition. Even when the odometer on our car moves from 99,999 to 100,000, we watch the numbers change as if ushering in a new epoch in our driving life; 100,001 miles seems a bit anti-climactic.

For these reasons, I think we can understand why many people want to celebrate the year 2000 as the opening of a new era, rather than wait for 2001.

The month of June marks the end of the first half of 1999, the last year, at least, of the century known as the 1900s (no matter how you look at it, the year 2000 is no longer the 1900s). While much has happened in these six months, and we have accomplished many things, it seems like only yesterday we were celebrating New Year's.

It also seems the older I get, the busier I get; and the busier I get, the faster time seems to go by. When are engaged in a worthwhile pursuit, we are never bored and are less likely to notice the passage of time. Before we know it, this year, too, will have passed.

And as we get older, it is human to lament the very process of time passing—of aging—a process that seems to accelerate the older we get. Of course, Buddhism describes this as one of the four sufferings of life—the suffering of old age, or aging.

Recently, Herbie Hancock, the world-renowned jazz pianist and SGI-USA member, met and talked with SGI President Ikeda while visiting Japan. In their discussion, which was published in the *World Tribune*, they turned to the topic of aging. President Ikeda shared with Herbie, who had recently turned 59, his feeling that life begins in one's 60s. Herbie, replied, "My 30s were better than my 20s, and my 40s better than my 30s. But whenever I think about turning 60, I couldn't help but feel that things would be downhill from there.... I am therefore very grateful for your encouragement." President Ikeda had pointed out that one's life is enhanced by the time one reaches sixty by the wonderful treasure of life experience we possess. "Each golden day of our 60s," he said, "is spent utilizing this treasure, as we adorn our life in its third stage." He then quoted the Daishonin who wrote, "You will grow younger, and your good fortune will accumulate" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 5, p. 158).

As time marches forward, I am always impressed to see how those who practice the Daishonin's Buddhism glow with ever-increasing vibrancy, wisdom and youthfulness. Without a fresh source of energy and youthful vitality in life, such as that we gain from our Buddhist practice, what hope or joy can growing older bring? While most people try to

enjoy life in spite of the fact they are growing old, we are fortunate in that we practice a philosophy that enables us to take delight even in growing old.

I think this is natural, because Buddhism teaches us to profoundly appreciate each moment, to create the greatest value with each moment. The longer we sincerely practice and study its teachings, the more adept we become at this. President Ikeda turned 71 this year, and has amassed accomplishments in this lifetime that are truly mind-boggling—forging the foundation for our worldwide movement, establishing a university and educational system, holding countless dialogues and forming countless friendships for the sake of peace, and authoring many volumes about Buddhism, humanism, peace, culture and education. Yet he still pours all of his energy into his work, pledging to accomplish a hundred times what he has thus far.

If we can develop this attitude, I believe we can lead the most meaningful and fulfilling of lives. How we treasure and use each moment is our ultimate challenge.

Nichiren Daishonin writes: “If you exert a hundred million eons of effort in a single moment of life, the eternal three enlightened properties of the Buddha will appear within you at each moment. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo means vigorous practice” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 790).

As this passage suggests, when we pray and work as hard as we can for kosen-rufu—for the happiness of self and others—a profound sense of satisfaction and penetrating wisdom will enrich our lives at each moment. In fact, we reap the most satisfying benefits of faith and life only when we work hard, study hard and pray earnestly.

In his writings, Nichiren Daishonin also quotes the following sutra passage: “If you want to understand the causes that existed in the past, look at the results as they are manifested in the present. And if you want to understand what results will be manifested in the future, look at the causes that exist in the present” (MW-2, 197). How intently we live this moment determines the quality of all our future moments. I recently had a conversation with a friend who is suffering from cancer. She told me: “When I wake up in the morning and see that I’m still alive, I feel tremendous joy. I’m still here!” Her great sense of appreciation for every second of life moved me deeply.

Even though each moment of life is a rare and precious treasure, it is unusual for people to feel such appreciation. When the alarm clock rings in the morning, rather than thinking, “Another day of life, what a joy!” and sharing our smile and optimism with the world, we might instead complain inwardly, “Another day of work. I need a break!” Even if no one else notices the difference in these attitudes, each creates results for our future that are drastically different.

While the beginning of the 21st century, the Century of Life, has been our long-cherished target, what that century becomes depends on our determination, attitude and effort at this very moment. Depending on how you calculate it, the new millennium is either about 180 or 540 days away. If we start each of these days with a vigorous gongyo, strong prayer and deep joy and appreciation, each will be a day of progress and a day of victory. And these victories will accumulate to form the foundation for each of our personal 21st centuries—our own “centuries of life.”

So, more important than looking ahead with anticipation or apprehension toward the instant the millennium turns, we can realize that this moment is the 21st century. I hope that together with SGI President Ikeda and all of our fellow members, we can welcome the new millennium celebrating our growth and benefit from the causes we are making today.

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