

PERSPECTIVE: SET YOURSELF FREE!
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Each of us is poised like runners, at the starting gate of a new year — January 1999 — ready to launch into the challenges ahead. We have goals, determinations and the ebullient feeling that “this year will be different — better!” We have all the ammunition we’ve stored up over the past year to fuel our vision for what is to come and the lives we desire to lead. In this way we are experiencing freedom. The freedom to change and dream big. The freedom to visualize our futures as brighter, sharper, more consistent than they have been in the past. The freedom to transform discord into harmony. Defeat into victory. Bondage to old beliefs, ideas and behaviors into broad new vistas of thought and action.

This freedom we are experiencing is absolute, an inalienable right, just as our Constitution declares it to be. In addition, we are “free” to experience this every day, moment to moment. Deeply grasping this truth causes us to feel joyful, confident and move on behalf of others spontaneously, because it’s all we can do to contain this powerful sense of freedom — we want to share it. We feel compelled to share it, because freedom of this nature has no limit, it spills out of our lives seeking out other people and places where it can flourish. This freedom has an overwhelming electrical charge to it. It doesn’t need to be justified or quantified. When we engage in the practice of freeing ourselves, we are simultaneously taking responsibility for the happiness of the world in which we find ourselves. We are exercising our ultimate right as human beings.

In America, we consider our freedom to be an inalienable right. Our Constitution proclaims it and our practice of democracy affirms this truth to be “self-evident.” Yet, as we arrive in the 21st century, our notions of freedom are being tested at every level. Some contend that America has often misinterpreted the word *freedom* to mean “license.” That we have misused and even abused our freedoms to such an extent that the very beliefs upon which this country was founded have become a poor parody of their original intent. These contentions are mirrored in the ongoing impeachment proceedings against our current President and the rising furor that decries our military agenda in Iraq, along with our perceived failure to address the grotesque escalation of hate crimes, such as the recent murder of a Laramie, Wyo., youth. Our freedom of speech and religion, our right to bear arms and our mandate of free enterprise have all come under scrutiny as we search to define the code by which we live. There are many factions and as many dissenting voices when it comes to the definition of freedom. All agree we must have it — few agree on how much freedom, for whom and for what purpose.

As members of the SGI, we are ordinary people who have freely chosen to embrace our mission as world citizens in all our varied shapes and forms. With all our diverse backgrounds, educations, power and influence, we are simultaneously of one body and one mind. How remarkable! “Those who are capable of embracing the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law relinquish their claim to the pure land and out of pity for living beings are born here. Know that persons such as these freely choose where they will be born, and choose to be born in this evil world so that they may broadly expound the unsurpassed Law” (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 163).

Almost 2,000 years later, Nichiren Daishonin echoes this statement: “Two thousand years of propagating Buddhism during the Former and Middle Days of the Law are inferior to an hour of propagation in this, the Latter Day of the Law. This is in no way because

of Nichiren's wisdom, but simply because the time makes it so" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 4, pp. 272–73). We are practicing in this time, this age, and at the beginning of a colossal transition into a new millennium.

Nichiren Daishonin's state of mind defines absolute freedom and provides us with irrefutable proof that our freedom does not depend on circumstances outside ourselves. As we pursue our practice, deepen our faith and unfetter our minds and hearts from our doubts, fears and dillusions, we stand to inherit this same state of mind. In "The Opening of the Eyes," Nichiren concludes on an exultant note: "For what I have done, I have been condemned to exile, but it is a small suffering to undergo in this present life and not worth lamenting. In future lives I will enjoy immense happiness, a thought that gives me great joy" (*Learning From the Gosho*, p. 70).

Our freedom is not defined by our race, sexual orientation, income, education, or any other measure we have devised as a society to imprison ourselves. Nor is it defined by the rights bestowed on us by others. Our freedom remains in our own hands. Resides in our own hearts, can be reached in an instant, attained in a moment — the moment that we choose to free ourselves. Conceiving of the idea to free ourselves is frightening, it carries all the trepidation of a dark cellar or a sudden fall. The word free may indeed set our hearts pounding — in fear, not exhilaration.

Our practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism does not egotistically aspire to a world where everyone is free to "do as they please," but instead, strives to create an authentic experience of personal freedom that offers the key to freedom for all. In terms of cause and effect, setting ourselves free becomes the most courageous act of compassion we can undertake. "We hold these truths to be self-evident," and if we translate "self-evident" to mean "existing within ourselves," then it is clear that we must be the ones to set ourselves free.

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