

IN MY LIFE: SPEAKING UP FOR WHO WE ARE
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If in this present existence I am so fearful for my life that I fail to speak out, then in what future existence will I ever attain Buddhahood? ... I decided that I must begin to speak out. ("Repaying Debts of Gratitude," The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, vol. 4, pp. 253–54)

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this treatise upon retiring to Mount Minobu. He wrote it in gratitude to his first teacher, Dozen-bo, who was chief priest at Seicho-ji, the temple Nichiren Daishonin first came to at age 12.

Nichiren Daishonin sent this to Joken-bo and Gijo-bo, who were senior monks at the time he came to the temple. He asked that this writing be read at Seicho-ji as well as at the tomb of his late teacher.

When he says in this treatise that "I decided that I must begin to speak out," he is expressing his determination to spread the truth of this Buddhism — that we are all potentially Buddhas — and to attain his enlightenment. One lesson I take from this is how important it is to respect ourselves.

I have been into the Gothic sub-culture of music, art, literature and fashion for almost 10 years. Even though I am in graduate school and have gone through many personal changes, I feel comfortable saying I'm someone in this sub-culture.

I have struggled to be who I am. Buddhists and many more non-Buddhists over the years have told me to wear more color and listen to music I do not care for. In other words, to change — because I didn't fit their image of what I should be. Maybe I didn't fit their image of what a Buddhist should be.

Over the years, this berating wore me out, and I started to not like who I was. I wouldn't speak out and defend myself anymore.

When Nichiren Daishonin says that we should speak out, this means that we should not only stand up to injustice, but we should defend ourselves and others when attacked. That means we should respect ourselves, ultimately. After all, we all have a Buddha nature.

SGI President Ikeda once told someone who had gone through many struggles: "I know about you. Don't ever change who you are!" I never forgot that.

President Ikeda had the courage to tell this person that it was all right to be who he was. I thought about what he said every time someone called me names in high school (or even more recently than that).

Buddhism has always said that we should be who we are. Shakyamuni Buddha, for instance, renounced the caste system of his day in India. This system discriminated against people based on their social class.

His condemnation was radical for his time, as this social system was deeply ingrained in Indian culture. He stood up for all people to be who they were and condemned a system of oppression so ingrained in people's lives.

We are told in our culture not to discriminate against someone based on race, ethnicity, religion, class, etc., yet people are still discriminated against for what they wear, the kind of music they like and what kind of art they enjoy. Speaking out against this kind of intolerance is another step in respecting the Buddha within us all.

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