

SOKA SPIRIT THE AMERICAN PURSUIT OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Editor's Note: The following article is a comparative of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and American ideals upheld by the U.S. Constitution. While the article does not deal specifically with the injustice of the current Nichiren Shoshu priesthood, we feel this perspective speaks to the idea that is pivotal to our Soka Spirit movement—freedom (namely, religious freedom). The editors wish to state that opinions contained herein are solely that of the author.

**By Ken Corwin, New York West Region
Student Division Leader**

Life. Liberty. The pursuit of happiness. These are the values held dearest in our civil religion, the pillar of American democratic thought, the meaning of being “the land of the free.”

Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. The sanctity of life. The pursuit of attainable and indestructible happiness for all of humanity. These are the teachings of our faith, the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin, the teaching of absolute freedom.

I decided to write this article while studying the U.S. Constitution and decisions of the Supreme Court. I wondered, what does it mean to be a Buddhist American (or an American Buddhist)? What makes an American anyway, and what does Buddhism have to do with it?

To answer the question about being an American Buddhist, I needed to define the term *American*.

I carefully reviewed the words and phrases of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. I found these documents did not stop at the mere description of a government, but declared the right of a person to live free from unjust constraints by others, to have self-determination and the idea that authority can only be legitimate when it is granted by those who are being governed. In fact, the Declaration declares these rights to be “unalienable,” that is, rights that preempt and supersede any rights of outside authority because they are not granted by any outside authority.

But studying these documents also left me to deal with the reality that the laws and customs of the United States have not always reflected such noble sentiments. Examples would be the paradoxical upholding of slavery by our very same Constitution espousing the aforementioned noble goals, the allowance of child labor, some state laws that declared ownership of a wife by her husband, ad nauseum. However, these laws reflect, I believe, a shortcoming of citizens and their elected legislators in living up to American ideals, rather than a shortcoming of American ideals themselves.

So I arrived at the conclusion that America is a utopia of life, liberty and happiness pursued — and that an American is one who believes in the ideals of this America.

Once emboldened by this prospect that America was a dream to create rather than an imperfect country to accept, the duty of an American became clear: to be a patriot. Well, then what does it mean to be a patriot? Second Soka Gakkai President

Josei Toda struck down the idea of patriotism characterized by blind zealotry. Defending the actions of one's country regardless of the good or evil of those actions is not patriotic. Mr. Toda said that a true patriot is one who works to take his country to a higher standard of justice, peace and prosperity. A patriot strives until the end of his life to make his country a better place, never turning his back on his fellow citizens' suffering (or ignorance).

“So,” I thought, “an American patriot is one who strives to create an American reality that lives up to the American ideal.” Herein lies one of the most heartening aspects of the Buddhism we SGI-USA members practice: it was founded by a man who practiced and demanded freedoms that would be defined as “unalienable rights” some 500 years after his death.

Nichiren Daishonin exercised the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment right of petition of government for redress at a time and place of unquestioned authoritarianism. He exercised freedom of religion, remonstrated with other sects of Buddhism, at the risk of being beheaded or exiled. And his teachings amounted to no less than the declaration that all — male or female, king or footman, priest or child — are inherently, unalienably equal in their right and desire to pursue indestructible freedom.

I recently had the honor of assisting a student division member prepare for a college club presentation on how Buddhism addresses the issue of gay rights. Nichiren Daishonin's writings do not explicitly mention the concept of gay rights, so what could we at least glean from his teachings? Rather than finding the one letter that might be related to the matter, we saw that the Daishonin's entire struggle was one for all humanity. His letters to women, to commoners, even to infants and the illiterate and all his remonstrations with the military government on their behalf were reflective of his demand for universal recognition of the right of all to be free. In fact, both the Goshō and our nation's founding documents reflect this truth: rights are legitimate only when they are the rights of all. The subject of gay rights is addressed in his letters because the rights of all human beings are universal.

So what does this have to do with us? Today, our country is facing an ever-deepening crisis of leadership, from Palm Beach to Los Angeles. The common people are getting little reassurance or signs of wise reconciliation by those charged with furthering the United States on its voyage toward America. If we cannot look to our elected leaders for guidance, then to whom can we look? We can, and must, cultivate the solution within ourselves. We can because we manifest the power and wisdom of Buddhahood through chanting Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō. We must because it is the duty of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth to save humanity from the seemingly unbreakable cycle of suffering.

The United States is surely the place where kosen-rufu must be realized. If it cannot be realized in a land of diversity and religious tolerance, then where can it be? To create kosen-rufu in the land of the free is the task at hand for American Buddhists. It is up to us to finally create America. This is the spirit of the Declaration of Independence. This is the spirit of the Soka Gakkai International–USA.