

## **FREEDOM & DIVERSITY**

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This past March, I attended the conference for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people at the Florida Nature and Culture Center, including those who support them. As I participated in this conference, and shared experiences and perspectives with the many other people attending, I had many opportunities to reflect on the meaning of diversity and the mission of the youth of SGI-USA.

The idea of respecting diversity is so common that it's almost a cliché or buzzword. But from the perspective of Buddhism, this idea is very important. For example, we know that according to Buddhism, there is no discrimination among our fellow SGI members:

“There should be no discrimination among those who propagate the five characters of Myoho-rence-kyo in the Latter Day of the Law, be they men or women. Were they not Bodhisattvas of the Earth, they could not chant the daimoku” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 385).

SGI President Ikeda wrote in his message to the conference that “Buddhism expounds supreme humanism. All human beings have equal rights. There is no difference whatsoever in their inherent dignity” (April 6, *World Tribune*, p. 12).

Recognizing this and creating a world where this is true are different matters. It is easy to say in principle that all people are equal, but it is very different to confront the discomfort or prejudice that exists within our own hearts.

Similarly, it is all too easy to speak of equality in general terms while refusing to acknowledge specific aspects of people's identity. There are, for example, workplaces which say that no person will be discriminated against because of their sexual orientation, but they are not allowed to talk about their identity. However, to say that a gay or lesbian person should not talk about their life, their families or their loved ones in the same way that heterosexual people freely do is not truly creating an environment of equality. On the surface, it might seem to be equal, but it is equality at a cost: you are equal as long as you try to be just like everyone else.

In the United States today, many youth struggle to understand who they are and how they fit in. This is true for many gay or lesbian youth or youth questioning their sexual identity. But it is also true of many young people for many reasons. They struggle to understand what they have to offer the world. They may feel ridiculed or ignored, unable to express their true selves and true potential.

Among sexual minority youth, drug use, running away from home, suicide and other kinds of self-destructive behaviors are common. This is because for many of them, the fear of rejection or violence and the shame of being “different” that they live with on a daily basis cause so much suffering.

Buddhism teaches that there is a fundamental equality in all people, and it is not an equality that forces all people to be the same. The equality Buddhism expounds is much deeper and richer. It is a concept of equality where each person is seen as offering something beautiful and meaningful to the world. This is expressed in the concept of “attaining enlightenment as we are” and “cherry, plum, peach and damson.” Both of these concepts convey that the unique features of each person—whether it is cultural background, race, gender, sexual identity and their individual

interests and tastes—make us the valuable and precious people that we are.

Our Buddhist practice enables us to see the beauty of our own life, and therefore, appreciate the treasure of others lives as well. The aim of Buddhism is not to force people into some kind of mold, but rather, to allow people to freely and fully be themselves. By expressing our own creativity, character and ability, we not only lead lives where we are happy, we contribute to the happiness and improvement of society.

We practice Buddhism in order to develop strength and conviction in the unlimited power and potential we each possess. Raising capable youth means to create an environment where no young person ever questions, “Do I belong here?” or “Is my life meaningful?”

The SGI, and in particular, the youth division, exist to empower young people, to tell them: “You are beautiful as you are”; “You are welcomed and cherished in the SGI as you are!”; and “You have a tremendous mission in life as you are!”