

**BUDDHISM IN A NEW LIGHT**  
**VIOLENCE IS WEAKNESS, PRAYER IS POWER**  
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It is hard to tell what thoughts were running through the minds of the terrorists as they plunged airplanes into the World Trade Center towers, the Pentagon and a field in western Pennsylvania on Sept. 11. Judging from their irrational acts, however, it seems that they surrendered their own power of reason and human decency to a higher power of their imagination—whether it was their political ideal or God. Such perversion of philosophy and religion occurs when people subordinate the sanctity of life to ideology and dogma. As Nichiren Daishonin admonishes, “Life is the foremost of all treasures” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 1125).

What we saw on that day was the destructiveness of the human tendency to give up oneself to external authority. This deep-seated human weakness is called authoritarianism, which many people, if not all, share to some degree. As the recent tragedy illustrates, violence is often an outcome of an authoritarian orientation—a willingness to give up our freedom and independence to external authority in exchange for the false, temporary sense of security that may be felt upon our release from the burden of responsibility to seek self-knowledge and shape our own destiny, as Erich Fromm suggests in his *Escape from Freedom*.

### **Violence**

Violence is a deliberate wish for the destruction of life; it is a symptom of the weak, passive self that seeks to validate its existence through dominating and destroying other lives or things of value to others. Violent people are weak, for they cannot find the inner strength to overcome their insecurity of aloneness and, therefore, must destroy others so that they may feel empowered. Their power, however, is an illusion since it is *over* others, not from *within*.

Power derived from subjugating others is merely a fancy because it requires others and is dependent on them. On the other hand, power from within is genuine because it is independent and free. Despite their aggressive appearance, violent people are passive at the core of their existence because violence is essentially an easy escape from an overwhelming sense of inner powerlessness and isolation, from the responsibility and effort required to make personal change. It is easier to hurt someone else than get real about oneself. A person who resorts to violence as an escape from his or her real challenge is not the originator of self-willed action and is passive in his or her mental reality. The sense of power felt by violent people, therefore, is actually a sign of their weakness and passivity.

Moreover, the sense of power derived from destructive acts is short-lived and addictive; it can only be sustained through further destruction. Compelled by their inner powerlessness, violent people continue to destroy, and when they find nothing more to destroy or find themselves prevented from further acts of destruction, they destroy themselves to escape from themselves, which is the source of their powerlessness. In this sense, violence is not a reaction to external objects per se, but rather a destructive drive arising from inner weakness simply waiting for a convenient outlet.

### **Self-defense**

In order for us to better understand the relationship of violence and authoritarianism, it

is worthwhile to take a closer look at the ideas of self-defense and sacrifice. *Pure* self-defense is not violence because it is based solely on the affirmation of life, rather than its negation. It has been reported that one of the hijacked airplanes crashed short of its intended target in an unpopulated area of western Pennsylvania, probably because some passengers struggled with the terrorists for control of the airplane. Their action was courageous and noble; it was not violence but self-defense since they were motivated by their desire to protect and preserve life. Quite often, however, so-called self-defense is disguised aggression in which one's real motive for the destruction of life is suppressed consciously or unconsciously by self-deceptive rationalization.

The difference between violence and self-defense lies not merely in the external circumstances, but more significantly in one's true motive. In this regard, Shakyamuni's injunction to "kill the will to kill" reveals the profound Buddhist insight into the nature of violence (quoted in *My Dear Friends in America*, p. 129). Behind the passionate emotions or seemingly sound rhetoric of self-defense is often hidden the "will to kill." Violence arises from a will to harm, and self-defense from a will to protect although both employ physical force as a means. So it is necessary to look inward and see one's true motive—whether it is solely to preserve life or to harm life. We become capable of self-defense with the ability of self-reflection, to which one of the greatest obstacles is an authoritarian orientation that looks outside for the motive of our action in order to escape personal responsibility.

## **Sacrifice**

Sacrifice is often praised as one of the highest virtues, but we witnessed in the recent tragedy that there are two kinds of sacrifice. One type is motivated by self-denial. Some people make such a sacrifice because in doing so they can lose themselves to an external power and thus become part of what is not *them*. They are motivated by a desire to escape from themselves whom they neither love nor trust. Through making such a sacrifice, however, they lose the freedom and integrity to think and act as individuals. This kind of sacrifice is authoritarian in essence, and it is a sign of one's weakness and inability to freely express him- or herself.

Another type of sacrifice is the complete opposite of self-denial; it is self-expression. Some people courageously choose—instead of being forced by external authority—to sacrifice their physical safety or even their lives as the utmost expression of their spiritual integrity. Their sacrifice is an assertion of individual freedom and will. The line between those two types of sacrifice was drawn clearly in the recent terrorist attacks. While the terrorists were giving up their own power of critical thinking and, with it, their humanity to external authority, it was shown that passengers on the hijacked airplanes and those trapped in the collapsing buildings valiantly faced their final moments in efforts to save others and in their prayers for their loved ones. The terrorists' acts to blow up the huge structures may seem 'active,' but in their innermost reality they are most passive and feeble, while the quiet thoughts and prayers of those who passed away in the attacks—despite their appearance of helplessness and passivity in the eyes of the terrorists—were the greatest expressions of their will and love. In their final thoughts and prayers, they were strong and free.

## **Authoritarianism**

As we came face to face with the destructiveness of authoritarianism, what happened on

Sept. 11 may serve as an opportunity for us to gain deeper insight into the nature of violence and learn the meaning of freedom from those who made a true sacrifice. As violence stems from the authoritarian character of submission and domination, which is in turn a manifestation of the enfeebled self, any attempt to suppress violence with further violence may only be described as foolishness. How many times must humanity repeat the same mistake of trying to cure violence with more violence? In this regard, the Daishonin warns us, “If you try to treat someone’s illness without knowing its cause, you will only make the person sicker than before” (WND, 774). This is the time that we must cure this greatest ailment of human civilization at its root. We must begin to seriously think about ways to empower people not only economically and politically, but also spiritually so that we may control human destructiveness. Each one of us must deeply reflect upon our own authoritarian tendency to give up so easily our freedom and power of reason to external authority.

In one sense, the Soka Spirit movement lies in our efforts to understand the nature of authoritarianism; it is a process in which we develop our ability to both self-reflect and think critically about what is happening in our environment. As we have learned from the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood, even the humanistic teachings of the Daishonin’s Buddhism can become authoritarian depending upon its practitioners’ understanding and action. This important lesson becomes genuine only when we realize that the absence of priesthood does not necessarily mean the end of authoritarianism, and that each of us is responsible to understand and practice the Daishonin’s Buddhism as the humanistic teaching it is intended to be.

Likewise, although the vast majority of religions in the world are founded upon the principles of love and peace, through the recent atrocities and numerous other tragedies in history, we have been repeatedly made aware how easily some irrational zealots can pervert any religion into authoritarian dogma that enslaves people. More than ever, it is crucial for us to reaffirm our commitment to the humanistic tenets of our beliefs and shun the forces of authoritarianism from within and without.

## **Prayer**

One of the most concrete and powerful ways to oppose violence and authoritarianism is prayer that sincerely affirms the power of life—both within our lives and in the lives of others. The ideas of nonviolence and humanism can change the way we live only when those ideas are understood not only intellectually but also felt deeply in our hearts’ core. As Gandhi eloquently said: “Non-violence is not a garment to be put on and off at will. Its seat is in the heart, and it must be an inseparable part of our very being” (*Gandhi on Non-Violence*, Thomas Merton, ed., p. 24). Prayer is our precious tool to discover the dormant dignity of life as the Daishonin states, “One who chants Nam-myoho-renge-kyo enters his or her own palace” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 787).

Prayer is a process in which we transform the abstract idea of life’s dignity into a concrete reality that is felt in the depths of our lives and into our personal conviction that is displayed in how we treat others as well as ourselves.

Whatever faiths we Americans embrace today, our prayers must be united in our love for life and peace. If we are to hate anything, let us hate hatred and violence with a single heart. From such united prayer of true strength and patriotism will emerge a new America that is free of violence. As many people have shown through their courage in the face of the recent tragedy, violence is weakness, and prayer is power.

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT:

- Revenge is an act of violence because its chief motive is to harm, rather than preserve, life, and it is often used merely as an outlet for irrational emotions. What can each of us do to prevent America and the rest of the world from falling deeper into the cycle of violence and revenge?
- Authoritarianism is the abandonment of freedom and integrity to an external authority. Humanism is the encouragement of individual freedom and integrity from within. What can each of us do to make the Daishonin's Buddhism truly humanistic and prevent its potential degeneration into authoritarianism in the future?