

**BUDDHISM IN A NEW LIGHT
THE WAY WE SEE OURSELVES
BY SHIN YATOMI
SGI-USA VICE STUDY DEPARTMENT LEADER**

An important aspect of what we call “enlightenment” or “human revolution” is to change the way we see ourselves—to see the unconditional value of life within us, which neither requires comparison with others nor depends upon our transient appearance. It is a simple idea yet requires a difficult change of perspective since we have been trained for most of our lives to judge ourselves by how well we fulfill our socially prescribed roles in comparison with others. Those roles are often related to status or gender but rarely to our individual uniqueness.

As early as our social life begins, we start learning to judge ourselves in terms of others: “I’m not as smart as other kids” or “I’m not as slim as other girls.” Later in life, we still judge our worth in the same way: “I’m a loser because I don’t make as much money as most successful men do” or “I’m miserable because I’m not married as all happy women should be.” With subtle yet repeated reinforcement and censure from society and media, we learn to live our lives through the eyes of others, to think of our happiness in terms of the ideas borrowed from or imposed upon us by others. In America, people are free to express their thoughts, but not many seem to have thoughts or even feelings of their own.

Nichiren Daishonin explains our innate Buddhahood as an absolute value of goodness, often describing it with ex-pressions such as “unmade” (Jpn *musa*), “originally endowed” (Jpn *hon’nu*) or “eternally dwelling” (Jpn *joju*). Buddhahood, in other words, is good in and of itself, not because of external conditions or circumstances. To awaken to this treasure within us is happiness while our ignorance of it spells suffering. As the Daishonin states, “When deluded, one is called an ordinary being, but when enlightened, one is called a Buddha” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 4).

The sad irony of modern men and women who have lost touch with their own lives is echoed in the Daishonin’s following words: “If you seek enlightenment outside yourself, then your performing...even ten thousand good deeds will be in vain. It is like the case of a poor man who spends night and day counting his neighbor’s wealth but gains not even half a coin” (WND, 3). All the hard work we do for our “success” and “happiness” would be wasted if those ideas were simply imposed on us from the outside and naively accepted without critical thinking and reflection.

Deriving self-worth by comparing ourselves with others is one of our most destructive habits. It may be even described as a form of self-inflicted violence since it weakens us by *de*-centering our existence—in the sense that it shifts the center of power to decide the meaning of our lives to the outside. We let others decide what our happiness is, instead of deciding for ourselves. With the power of self-determination lost to external authority, we are no longer free nor independent. Since we live in a competitive society where this sort of comparison is encouraged and often unavoidable, it is a difficult habit to break, but to do so is crucial to our genuine happiness and freedom.

It is ironic that the original meaning of the word *compete* derives from the Latin *com*-“together” and *petere* “to seek” or “to strive.” Competition did not originally connote comparison; it meant “to strive together after shared goals.” Just as the Daishonin characterizes the state of Anger with “contention and strife” (WND, 100), competition in society often gives rise to anger, overt or suppressed.

To judge self-worth by comparing oneself with others is essentially an authoritarian way of life in which one seeks comfort and security in the approval of an external power. To unlearn such an authoritarian orientation and build a society in which people may live true to their unique identities is certainly an aspiration of our multifaceted Soka Spirit movement, which aims for the liberation of individuals from all forms of authoritarianism, both within and without.

One way to overcome our tendency to compare ourselves with others is through learning how to praise ourselves for our unique, intrinsic value. A common concern about self-praise is that it may cause arrogance, probably due to our Judeo-Christian tradition in which self-humiliation is often regarded as a necessary virtue to praise God, while self-praise is deemed as a sign of pride, which is one of the seven deadly sins. It should be noted, however, that arrogance is a defensive posture caused by a tendency to assume a sense of superiority or inferiority by comparing oneself with others. Therefore, so long as we praise ourselves solely for who we are and for our innate Buddhahood, we will never become arrogant, though we may at times *seem* arrogant to arrogant people. Indeed, the greatest way to praise ourselves is prayer that sincerely affirms our supreme potential as the Daishonin states, “When you chant *myoho* and recite *renge*, you must summon up deep faith that Myoho-*renge-kyo* is your life itself” (WND, 3). As we praise ourselves in this way, we will grow confident yet humble because we start to recognize the same quality of Buddhahood in others as well. Appreciation for oneself leads to appreciation for others, which further strengthens self-esteem. The way we see ourselves is not only the way we live our lives, but also the way we relate to others.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT:

- Some may feel that self-praise undermines self-discipline. Strictness, however, may stem from either compassion or hostility. What is the benefit of being strict to ourselves out of confidence, rather than self-loathing?
- Competition drives society. But why are some competitive people successful yet insecure? What is the weakness of a life built upon a sense of superiority? How can the faith in one’s own potential be a driving force for living as well as for society?