

## Nichiren's Philosophy of Peace

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**C**URRENTLY, the religion which has the most adherents in Japan is a form of Buddhism espoused by Nichiren, a priest of the thirteenth century. The reason why his teachings are so popular is because his way of life offers courage and hope and has a strong humanistic appeal.

Nichiren's claims were often taken as criticism of the state's religious and governing policies, and the established Buddhist schools were highly critical of him. For this reason, his life was one of continuous persecution. He was personally attacked four times, exiled twice, and once he had a narrow escape from death execution. However, with his indomitable life-force and ironclad determination to overcome any difficulty, no matter what the situation, he succeeded in overcoming all obstacles, and his amazing ability in this regard broadened his appeal.

Dr. Srinivas lauds Nichiren in the following poem:

Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism  
Is today blazing as World Religion  
This Universalism  
Is the offshoot  
Of belief in individual,  
Cultural traditions of all countries  
And dedicated work to humanity  
To gain Peace and Prosperity

Today, Nichiren Buddhism has spread to 190 countries and regions around the world through the efforts of Soka Gakkai International. The SGI president, Daisaku Ikeda, has endeavored to hold dialogues with leading world figures for the realization of peace, including many who developed great respect for the SGI organization as a world religion. I was greatly moved by Dr. Srinivas' deep insight and understanding of Nichiren Buddhism as shown in the poem above, and freshly re-determined to continue my efforts to convey Nichiren's philosophy to others. I was encouraged and touched to hear such high praise by a leading

cultural figure of India, and as so I offer my sincerest gratitude to Dr. Srinivas.

Nichiren's appearance on the stage of history can be credited to his submitting of a treatise entitled "*On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land*" to the top leader of the nation at the time. In this work, he warned of the coming perils facing Japan, he also indicated what would be needed to actualize a world of peace. In 1260, Japan had just entered its medieval age, ruled by a feudal government, and Nichiren was 38 years old. Incidentally, Gandhi was also 38 years old when he started the *satyagraha* movement in South Africa.

In the beginning of the treatise, Nichiren writes using a style evocative of classical Chinese poetry:

...there have been unusual disturbances in the heavens, strange occurrences on earth, famine and pestilence, all affecting every corner of the empire and spreading throughout the land. Oxen and horses lie dead in the streets, and the bones of the stricken crowd the highways. Over half the population has already been carried off by death, and there is hardly a single person who does not grieve. (WND, p. 6)

In the original manuscript, this section is composed of ten lines of four Chinese characters each, making for rhythmical reading. This is the product of many revisions and is an example of Nichiren's poetic ability. However, the content of this poem is neither sentimental nor emotional, nor is it merely a superficial expression of Nichiren's sympathy. Instead it describes in most vivid terms the sad state of affairs that existed at that time, reflecting the true suffering of the common people.

Nichiren witnessed this hellish scene in the capital city, Kamakura, with his own eyes. The cause of all this suffering was not war, but natural disaster. Earthquakes, heavy winds, and rains brought about destruction, but then the secondary effects such as epidemics, hunger, and fires struck the common people even harder, interrupting and halting normal everyday life.

When the life of the common person was in danger—for example, when he saw corpses lying in the streets of Kamakura—Nichiren acutely felt the preciousness of life. He once stated, "Life is the foremost of all treasures" (WND, p. 1125). Staking his own life to protect the lives of the people, he wrote "*On Establishing the Correct Teaching*" as a query to the governmental authorities of a state that disregarded its most fundamental component—the people.

The content of this treatise unfolds as a dialogue between an imagi-

nary host and his guest, in ten questions and nine answers. It begins with the lament of the guest of the current state of affairs and ends with the guest firmly resolving to do what he can to change the situation. The lament of the guest is also the lament of the host. The host offers, "I have been brooding alone upon this matter, indignant in my heart, but now that you have come, we can lament together" (WND, p. 7), and the guest replies, "I am not the only one pained by them; the whole populace is weighed down with sorrow" (WND, p. 7). It is clear that the guest and the host both share similar views regarding the current condition. Even if the social standing between the most powerful leader of the nation and a nameless priest is different, or even if two people hold differing views concerning religion, if their wish for peace remains intact then a basis for dialogue can be established. The fact that Nichiren uses the format of a dialogue between a Buddhist and a political leader to present his case, shows his understanding of the power of dialogue as a means to affect change, and the starting point for this treatise is a discussion about peace and how to achieve it.

The reason why Nichiren's arguments are so compelling is because of his focus on the people. He appeals to the leaders of the nation to prioritize stabilizing the life of the commoner. He aptly demonstrates through "*On Establishing the Correct Teaching*" that, no matter what scale a problem may lie, whether it be a social, a national or even a global issue, the common goal of peace for the common person is a universal basis for opening lines of communication and understanding.

In this treatise Nichiren also predicts the occurrence of internal and external strife, and he warns of troubles to come. He bases his claims on his analysis of the Buddhist scriptures, which he pored over meticulously, categorizing tragedies into those that had already occurred and those yet to come. The two calamities still remaining were of military nature. Having a war on top of the natural disasters that already plagued the country, he realized, would undoubtedly be a source of massive casualties to the powerless citizenry, leading soon thereafter to the downfall of the nation. This warning to the leaders of the country can be taken as Nichiren's unequivocal stance against war.

The classical Chinese-style poem at the beginning of Nichiren's treatise is the lament of the guest, who was clearly intended to be Hojo Tokiyori, the leader of Japan at the time. This is an eloquent expression of Nichiren's belief that the mission and responsibility of peace lies with the people in power.

Given the preceding remarks, at this point I would like to explore Nichiren's ideal of a political leader, drawing from his extensive writ-

ings. There are two main aspects that he seeks in the ideal leader: (1) to be a moral person of fine character and (2) to keep the people as the highest priority.

To break down the first of these two qualities into more specific components:

Not to lie; to have virtue; to be resistant to being slandered; to listen to both sides of an argument; to never succumb to corruption, even at the expense of one's life.

To further break down the second quality into more specific components:

To help more people than your subordinates do; to know the sufferings of the people; examine the fact of the matter; become the hands and feet of the people (work for the sake of the people).

Of course, there was a contemporary historical context for all of the individual examples given above, and we need to take these background issues and nuances into consideration. Here, though, I would like to limit myself to introducing the various angles taken up by Nichiren in his construction of the ideal leader.

His writings reflect his lifelong interest in politics, and this interest becomes a unique feature of Nichiren himself. Actions and policies of the government directly affect people's lives, and the people's happiness hangs in the balance. Nichiren states, "if one leader of the people misrules, the people are sure to suffer for it," indicating his recognition of the power government leaders have. The reason he kept such a vigilant eye on political currents was so that he would know what kind of circumstances the people would be facing as a result of decisions made by the government.

When comparing politics with religion, politics functions to remove the external barriers to people's happiness, whereas it is the mission of religion to provide the means to remove the internal barriers. Removing internal barriers involves honest self-evaluation, and with religion a way to establish peace within oneself can be found. However, as for removing external barriers to happiness, people are often at the mercy of the leaders in charge. Especially in cases where people are suffering from a natural disaster, for example, the main priority would be to provide basic necessities for daily living. Even in this one respect, the responsibility of government is very large indeed, and it is because of the magni-

tude of the influence of government that Nichiren speaks out so often. He believed that the shared goal of religion and politics was peace and that, on this point, there should be total agreement between the two.

Looking at the history of Japan and her many wars, Nichiren comments with sorrow and emphasizes the despair that armed conflict brings. His view of looking at armed conflict from the perspective of those who lost their lives and of those who lost the war is an identifying characteristic of his thoughts on war. Regarding Japan's battle with one of the most powerful military forces of the time, the Mongolian Empire, he writes,

As a result, the Mongols were able to attack the commoners, killing or taking prisoners among the men, and herding the women together and passing ropes through holes in their hands to tie them to their ships or taking them prisoner. Not a single person escaped. (WND, p. 530)

In another writing, he viewed the invading Mongols as sages from neighboring lands, describing them as Brahma and Shakra when viewed from a Buddhist perspective. And in yet another text, he comments that the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, and the benevolent deities entered the body of the Mongolian emperor to punish the leaders of Japan.

Nichiren, in contrast to the leaders of Japan, did not view the coming of the Mongols from a political standpoint, so he did not talk of the conflict in terms of winners or losers, attackers or defenders, invader and the invaded. Instead, he focused on the tragedy that occurs on the level of the common people. His view always put the common person first.

It is also noteworthy that Nichiren himself never took to carrying arms or used weapons of any kind.

A disciple of Nichiren who was a warrior once sent a sword to Nichiren. In response Nichiren remarked, "While you wore it at your side, it was an evil sword, but now that it has been offered to the Buddha, it has become a sword for good" (WND, p. 451). Since weapons are tools for the taking of life, he regarded them as evil.

As a matter of course, Nichiren never wore a sword after being ordained a priest. His weapon of choice was not a sword, but the Lotus Sutra. "Employ the strategy of the Lotus Sutra before any other ... The heart of strategy and swordsmanship derives from the Mystic Law. Have profound faith. A coward cannot have any of his prayers answered" (WND, p. 1001). With the eloquence of a determined Buddhist, he states that no weapon is greater than courageous faith.

In actuality, Nichiren was a votary that is, a dedicated practitioner, of

the Lotus Sutra and carried out his practice of its teaching with own life, overcoming numerous severe persecutions during his religious ministry. He reinterpreted the spirit of the Lotus Sutra, which is based on saving the common people, into principles to live by, and became a fighter for the peace of humankind.

I cannot help but to be deeply convinced that Nichiren's philosophy of fighting for peace is invaluable not only for Japan, but also for the entire modern world.

#### References

WND refers to *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, volume 1, published by Soka Gakkai, 1999.

Watson refers to *The Lotus Sutra*, translated by Burton Watson, published by Columbia University Press, 1993.