

## **Soka Spirit – Empowerment of People**

By Peter Lerner,

Area 2 Soka Spirit Representative

We practice this Buddhism to become happy. We cannot become happy without inner strength. In order to develop inner strength, Buddhism teaches us the way to access a power from within. The issue of empowerment of the individual is central to our identity as a nation and as a people. Though we were founded on the principles of equality, justice and fairness the reality of our history has not always lived up to the ideal. Such people as Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Caesar Chavez, who worked for the rights for the immigrant farm workers, the women's suffragettes fighting for the right of women to vote and many others are now generally seen as heroes but at the time of their struggle were vilified by many, and many of them suffered deeply as a result of their taking a stand. The common thread for all of these people is that they fought for the empowerment of those whose power was denied.

Nichiren Daishonin devoted his life to just such a mission. His message to the people of Japan in the 13<sup>th</sup> century was extremely revolutionary. He espoused that all people regardless of external factors could directly connect to the power of the universe without an intermediary. Nichiren Daishonin says in his writing, "Shakyamuni Buddha who attained enlightenment countless kalpas ago, the Lotus Sutra that leads all people to Buddhahood, and we ordinary human beings are in no way different or separate from one another. To chant Myoho-renge-kyo with this realization is to inherit the ultimate Law of life and death. This is a matter of the utmost importance for Nichiren's disciples and lay supporters, and this is what it means to embrace the Lotus Sutra." ("29-The Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life" in *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 216.)

The SGI is in absolute accord with this. The SGI teaches that all people are equal, that all people possess as their essence the Buddha nature, and that we are fundamentally Buddhas. This is something very difficult for me personally to believe, especially when I look in the mirror. Even in spite of myself when I don't believe in my Buddhahood, my good friends in the SGI remind me and encourage me that I am a Buddha.

There is a parallel organization that chants, has a gohonzon, does gongyo, and in many respects looks like Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, in essence looks like the SGI. Yet, they teach that their high priest alone possesses the "living essence of the law" and that we common mortals can only attain Buddhahood by connecting to the law through him. This is in direct contradiction not only with the Daishonin's words but also with his great compassion, his intent to liberate people from spiritual slavery, a cause for which he continually risked his life.

In our country we hold high, not only for ourselves but also for all people of the world the concepts of freedom of religion and freedom of speech. Fundamentally that is why it is so difficult for many of us, myself included, speaking ill of or denouncing what others think or believe. We want to live and let live. I passionately believe in these fundamental rights and have struggled long and hard with what is the right thing for me to do.

The answer I have come up with is that if I practice just for myself I probably don't have to speak up at all. But, if I want to help others to become happy, which actually is the mandate the Daishonin left for me to fulfill as my purpose in life, I must be able to clearly discern the truth and have the courage and wisdom to exercise my right to freedom of speech to clearly denounce that which would rob others of their power.

