

Contemporary Civilization and the Restoration of the Poetic Soul

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DR. Krishna Srinivas, in his poem, *The Buddha: Victory of Humanism*, ponders the nature of life and death, eternal human life, and the life of the universe.

Life and Death
Are Expressions of Eternal Flow of Life
And all Individual Currents
Are fused with Elemental Reality
Of the vast Universe
The total Flow
Is a Cosmic Tide—
All ONE and INDIVISIBLE,
All ceaseless functions
Of the Mystic Law,
Cored in depths and Universe.¹

“Where do I come from? Where am I going? What is the purpose of my existence?”—The quest to find the ultimate meaning and reason of life has been undertaken by countless philosophers, following in the footsteps of the masters of the Upanishad and Shakyamuni Buddha of the East, and Socrates and Plato of the West. These eternal questions remain the central theme of philosophy and religion and continue to be asked every time humanity faces an identity crisis.

These most basic of questions have become ever critical especially since humankind entered the twenty-first century. Just before the turn of the century, in his annual peace proposal, Soka Gakkai International President Daisaku Ikeda comments on the dire need to solve this identity crisis as globalization advances rapidly in the modern world.

Unable to keep up with the ferocity and speed of globalization, people withdraw deeper and deeper inward, becoming blockaded within themselves. Buffeted by the storms of dizzying change, they desperately

seek solid ground—a firm basis on which to live their lives. Surely, at the transition into a new century, this bleak spiritual landscape deserves at least as much attention as the steadily mounting accumulation of global problems.²

The ego of modern human beings, grappling in the dark depths of uncertainty, unable to overcome the rough waves of globalization, are repeatedly torn apart from other people, society, and the environment, reduced to a small isolated self. Furthermore, they are severed and separated from things eternal that lie at the base of existence, and float freely about like rootless plants in the overwhelming currents of today's materialistic civilization.

Separated from others and lacking a firm foundation, it is easy for the modern ego to tend toward loneliness, isolation, and stagnation, which breeds malice, loathing and hopelessness, grief, insecurity, and fear, and in turn leads to war, conflict, intolerance, and discrimination. In addition, greed for material things, authority, honor, and fame run rampant, setting the stage for the exploitation of others and the environment.

In this aspect, the identity crisis of the ego and the various global problems faced by humanity are contiguous, and the embattled ego is caught between the two, forcibly detached from all things, racked with uncertainty, leaving one feeling as if they are standing alone in a vast but empty world.

The crucial prerequisite to overcoming this identity crisis and becoming enlightened to the reason of life and death is to battle against the powerful energy of separation that overruns our civilization of materialism, and fight to rejuvenate the connectedness between oneself and the outer universe which includes others, our families, humankind and the environment. At the same time, we must seek the inner universe to realize the fusion of our life and the life of the universe which is the basis for our existence.

Poetry — the theme for this symposium — is the means by which fusion of the outer and inner universe of the self is achieved, and the means by which our mission entrusted to us from the greater cosmos is transmitted. The power of poetry will fulfill this praiseworthy task.

In an essay honoring Dr. Srinivas, Ikeda defines poets as those who “see the eternal,” who “stand on the horizon of time without beginning,” who “as seekers of the invisible laws of the universe, see all things as expressions of the wonder of life,” and “know that the eternal permeates every aspect of our so-called ‘ordinary’ lives,” and continues, “Poets are also fighters... The inhuman treatment of even a single person, any-

where in the world, is unendurable to them.”³

Eternity, horizon of time without beginning, wonder of life, and aspect of the eternal mentioned in these passages are what Dr. Srinivas refers to as the mystic law, or the life of the universe itself. Poets continuously feel, through their rich senses, the truth of eternity and the law (Dharma), and verbalize their feelings. Poets have insight that within all vibrant and dynamic phenomena, the life of the universe and the Dharma are present, and find words to convey the wonder and awe they feel. That is why poets are able to open up the lives of those who have a weakened and isolated ego, and infuse their hearts with things eternal. The life of the universe works to expand the shrunken ego and gives courage, joy, and meaning through the workings of compassion, wisdom and willpower contained within the law. In this way, the words and actions of a poet link a person’s heart to the original life of the universe, leading them down a path of rejuvenation.

When the once-severed pathways become reconnected to the universal life, the closed heart can begin the task of strengthening good will and expanding, supported by the life-breath of the eternal. As a result, empathy for others, the power of compassion, the wisdom to live in harmony with others, the power to restrain one’s desire to hurt others become manifest, restoring and strengthening trust of others. The weakened ego, which was suffering from uncertainty and distrust of others and other various delusions, begins to open its heart to others as good will strengthens, and expands its exchanges with family, ethnic group, state, humanity and nature. Good will is the key to reestablishing the once-severed ties between family, society and nature.

At the same time, the good will found in the poetic heart opposes the forces of separation that work to sever the ties between individuals, society, nature and the greater universe through the delusions of violence, discrimination, prejudice, and greed. Good will demolishes the divisive energy in society, and seeks to aid others in overcoming their sufferings together. Compassion, nonviolence, trust and the wisdom of symbiosis promote empathy and sympathy toward others, and this in turn, expands the network of goodness to fight against the delusions that pervade society. This is why the poetic heart is one of eternal compassion as well as one of courage to fight against evil.

In this way, those who have devoted themselves to poetry continue to work to expand the ego through rich exchanges of compassion, wisdom and courage of the inner and outer cosmos, and help give meaning to our existence and the mission that lay before us as human beings.

The first and second presidents of the Soka Gakkai, Tsunesaburo

Makiguchi and Josei Toda, respectively, were both imprisoned during World War II for protesting against Japan's militaristic policies. Although Makiguchi passed away in prison, Toda not only lived through the experience, but discovered a profound state of life during his imprisonment. He attained a state of enlightenment by manifesting the universal life, through a deep reading of the *Immeasurable Meanings Sutra* and the *Lotus Sutra* and the chanting of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo two million times. First, he came to a realization about universal life, stating, "Buddha is both life itself and an expression of life. It does not exist outside ourselves, but within our lives. No, it exists outside our lives as well. It is the life of the entire universe!"⁴ Next, he comes to the realization of a mission in life entrusted to us from the eternal universal life — the mission of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, who appear in the *Lotus Sutra*.

In the *Theory of Compassion*, Toda talks about universal life in these terms, "the universe in its entirety is the substance of the Buddha, and all phenomena in the universe are the workings of compassion. Therefore, compassion is the inherent nature of the universe."⁵ As recipients of life from the universe, Toda also explains what he believes is the mission of humanity,

"Since the universe itself is compassion, that of course means that our daily activities naturally constitute the workings of compassion themselves. Because we lead privileged lives as human beings, we must not descend to the same level as animals or plants. Carrying out more exalted activities is the attitude of those truly dedicated to serving the Buddha,"⁶ and also advises us, "to live with an awareness of true compassion."⁷

The workings of the greater cosmos are a manifestation of the compassion of the universal life and of the law (Dharma). The light of mystic compassion and wisdom of the universal life shine in the movement of all living things. Poets and artists discover within life, the beauty of creation of the mystic Dharma, and are moved by it, thereby causing them to find ways to express this feeling so they can share it with others. Religious people, while demonstrating the dignity of the universal life, put into practice the universal mission of life that was bestowed upon humanity by the greater cosmos. In this light, poets, artists, and religious people all overflow with a poetic heart, as they all have their foundations in the workings of the universal life. The poetic heart is what helps drive one towards fulfilling their universal mission. In Buddhism, "bodhisattva" is the name given to those who participate in the compassionate working of the greater cosmos, and work to expand its effects.

The *Lotus Sutra* describes many bodhisattvas such as Medicine King, Wonderful Sound, Perceiver of Sounds, Universal Worthy, Manjushri, and others who appear in other sutras, as well as a type of bodhisattva that appear exclusively in the *Lotus Sutra* and serve as main characters within the text. These bodhisattva are called the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, and are so named for the way in which they appear by splitting the ground and rising up, symbolizing their direct lineage from the universal life.

In the fifteenth chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, Emerging from the Earth, their appearance is described in the following way,

When the Buddha spoke these words, the earth of the thousand-millionfold countries of the saha world all trembled and split open, and out of it emerged at the same instant immeasurable thousands, ten thousands, millions of bodhisattvas and mahasattvas... Previously they had all been dwelling in the world of empty space underneath the saha world... Among these bodhisattvas were four leaders. The first was called Superior Practices, the second was called Boundless Practices, the third was called Pure Practices, and the fourth was called Firmly Established Practices. These four bodhisattvas were the foremost leaders and guiding teachers among all the group.⁸

T'ien-t'ai of China, in his commentary, *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*, interpreted "dwelling in the world of empty space underneath the saha world" as "in the depths of the Dharma nature, the ultimate region of the profound source."⁹ In other words, "empty space" indicates the fundamental truth that underlies all phenomena, pointing to the law (Dharma) of universal life in the depths of the ultimate teaching.

In *The Record of Orally Transmitted Teachings*, Nichiren writes, "fire is that which burns things. Water is that which purifies things. Wind is that which blows away dust and grime. The great earth is that which nourishes plants and trees,"¹⁰ showing how the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind manifest the creative compassion of the greater cosmos and the truth of the universal life.

Fire functions to burn and provide light, water functions to purify, wind blows away dust, and the earth functions to nourish living things. These four elements which make up the greater cosmos are a natural endowment that continuously functions to manifest compassion.

Just as the universe manifests compassion using these four elements, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth likewise take actions that resonate with the workings of the universal life through the use of their own lives. They

appear from the “great void” of the universal life and make the creative workings of compassion of the four elements their own.

Also in this work, Nichiren relates the four elements to the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth,¹¹ quoting *The Supplement to “The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra”* which correlates these four leaders, Superior Practices, Boundless Practices, Pure Practices, and Firmly Established Practices to the four virtues of true self, eternity, purity and happiness. The four virtues are virtues contained within the life of the Buddha.

... the explanation given in volume nine of *Words and Phrases*, says, “The four leaders described in the sutra passage here represent the four virtues. Superior Practices represents the virtue of true self. Boundless Practices represents the virtue of eternity. Pure Practices represents the virtue of purity. And Firmly Established Practices represents the virtue of happiness. There are times when a single person possesses all four of these principles.”¹²

Looking more closely at the concept of a single person possessing all four virtues, we see that Superior Practices represents true self. The self that is referred to here is the “greater self” that is at one with the universal life. It does not refer to the “lesser self” of contemporary humankind that is isolated and cringing with fear and uncertainty. It is the greater self that has connected with the law (Dharma) of the greater cosmos, internalizing its rhythm of compassion and wisdom. This greater self transforms the fire of the delusions of society, into a bright light that shines onto the darkest corners of civilization by fighting against evil, overcoming it, and turning it into a force for good. It is the principal agent that carries out the universal mission to save the common people—a mission entrusted to us from the universal life. The greater self, which has broken through the shell of the lesser self, spans bridges of compassion and wisdom connecting the self to others, to family, to members of the same race, to the nation, to humankind, and to nature, raising the consciousness from one which is human-centered to one which is life-centered. I feel this character of the greater self is a superb model for what we call today, “the global citizen.”

The greater self of Superior Practices manifests “eternity” of Boundless Practices. Eternity, like the component of wind, blows away all obstacles, and in respect to time and space, gives rise to freedom to take action. This quality of freedom of Boundless Practices forms the basis of freedom in a Buddhist view of human rights. Various restraints in

society arise from the evil of authoritarianism such as political, societal, and ideological oppression, but the greater self is able to rise above those restraints by manifesting a degree of freedom that spans the entire universe.

In addition, the greater self of Superior Practices manifests the quality of “purity” of Pure Practices. Purity serves as a basis for the protection of collective human rights, overcoming discrimination, prejudice, greed, exploitation, and obsessive attachment in a myriad of areas such as race, gender, culture, religion, money, social status, and occupation.

Purification on a societal level involves creating an equality of basic needs such as education, healthcare, water and food, as well as a system of fair distribution of wealth. In order to create such a society, bodhisattvas must lead by example, and purify themselves of their own discrimination and prejudice, and then help society as a whole purify itself and establish a sense of equality. The virtue of purity practiced by Pure Practices includes the avoidance of the influences of the delusions of discrimination and prejudice, while at the same time working to purify society of these delusions.

The greater self of Superior Practices, along with the qualities of freedom and equality mentioned above, seeks to build a state of life of “joy” for oneself and others as the virtue of happiness is manifested by Firmly Established Practices. Creating the state of joy involves securing stability on the individual level as well as stabilizing society and the nation. Presently, civilization is built on a foundation of structural and cultural violence derived from a deep sense of inequality and oppression, breeding a cycle of hatred which leads to direct forms of violence such as war, conflict, and terrorism. This violence not only affects human society, but destroys nature and the ecosystem as well, creating the conditions for global warming and irregular weather patterns that negatively affect life on the planet.

The virtue of happiness by Firmly Established Practices as contained in the greater self manifests as the spirit to fight against evil and delusions, ridding society of fear and insecurity, and creating stability and peace in its stead. On the individual level, the virtue of happiness manifests as a well-adjusted personality, and the balanced happiness that comes from this harmony of the mind and body is completely different from the shallow happiness of over-indulgence. Also, as the Buddhist wisdom of dependent origination teaches, individual happiness cannot be established without simultaneously working for the happiness of those around that individual. Therefore, those that seek to achieve individual fulfillment must also take action to bridge the distance between

themselves, others and society and oppose the fear, hatred and animosity that abound.

This is why the network for good is a necessity in order to create happiness for oneself and others. The virtue of happiness calls for peaceful co-existence in society, humankind, and nature, and serves as a basis for the human rights of peace, the right of sustainable development and the right to develop, environmental rights, and most of all, the right to create a network for better living.

To sum up, the virtue of the greater self of Superior Practices, the virtue of eternity as expressed as the workings of compassion of Boundless Practices, the virtue of purity of Pure Practices, and the virtue of happiness of Firmly Established Practices and the effort to manifest those virtues in one's life and in the lives of others serves as a model for a global citizen rich with a poetic heart.

In 1992, Ikeda penned a poem to the SGI members of India, urging them to break the shell of their lesser self, overcome the sufferings and delusions that derive from the energy of separation, and manifest the greater self that can deeply sense both the truth of the universe and the life of the universe, and also span bridges of co-existence between themselves and others,

According to Tagore
in Sanskrit, birds are
Described as being “twice born” —
“once in their limited shell and then finally
In the freedom of the unbounded sky.”

That is exactly true —
True also for the human being.

Born into this world
We must break the closed shell of
The “lesser self”
To be born anew,
To fly in open skies of the “greater self.”

This is the goal that the essence
Of Buddhism seeks —
That spirit's shining renaissance.¹³

India, the great land of the spirit, is a society imbued with the poetic

heart. It is the land of origin of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth depicted in the *Lotus Sutra*—global citizens who vow to appear in the world filled with delusions and evil karma. I would like to share my hope that from India, a spiritual renaissance for the new century will send out waves of change across humankind—a message of coexistence based on the manifestation of the greater self and the four virtues of eternity, happiness, true self and purity. And with this wish, I close my remarks.

Notes

¹ Krishna Sirinivas, *The Buddha: Victory of Humanism* (New Delhi: Gandhi Media Center), p. 58.

² Daisaku Ikeda, *Toward a Culture of Peace—A Cosmic View* <http://www.sgi.org/about/president/works/proposals/peace1999.pdf> [accessed on 2 September 2007]

³ Daisaku Ikeda, *Wonderful Encounters: Recollections of Meetings with Unforgettable People from Around the World* (Malaysia: UKM Press, 2003), pp. 147–8.

⁴ Daisaku Ikeda, *The Human Revolution, abridged edition* (Santa Monica, CA: World Tribune Press, 2004), vol. 4, p. 409.

⁵ Translated from Japanese. Josei Toda, *Toda Josei Zenshu* [Collected Writings of Josei Toda] (Tokyo: Seikyo Shimbunsha, 1983), vol. 3, p. 44.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48

⁸ *The Lotus Sutra*, translated by Burton Watson. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 213–4.

⁹ Nichiren, *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings*, translated by Burton Watson (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 2004), p. 119.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 118

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹³ Translated from Japanese. Daisaku Ikeda, *Dawn of India: In Praise of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth* in *Ikeda Daisaku Zenshu* [Collected Writings of Daisaku Ikeda] (Tokyo: Seikyo Shimbunsha, 1994), vol. 41, pp. 390–391.