



SGI President Daisaku Ikeda meeting with Dr. Ved Nanda of the University of Denver (SGI International Conference Hall, September 11, 1997)

Our World to Make

“The key to self-cultivation in Buddhism
lies in altruistic action”

A Dialogue between Ved Nanda and Daisaku Ikeda

The following is an excerpt from *Our World to Make: Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Rise of Global Civil Society*, a dialogue between Ved Nanda, a practising Hindu and prominent figure in the field of international law, and Daisaku Ikeda, a Buddhist thinker and peace advocate, published by Dialogue Path Press in 2015.

COMPASSION AT THE CENTRE

NANDA: Buddhism's gift to us is the spirit of compassion.

IKEDA: One of Buddhism's most admirable features is that it places compassion at the centre of its practice. Shakyamuni beautifully expressed this in one of the earliest scriptures, the *Sutta Nipata*, which has been called the "sutra of compassion":

Just as a mother would protect with her life her own son, her only son, so one should cultivate an unbounded mind toward all beings, and loving-kindness toward all the world. One should cultivate an unbounded mind, above and below and across, without obstruction, without enmity, without rivalry. Standing, or going, or seated, or lying down, as long as one is free from drowsiness, one should practise mindfulness.¹

As you know, Shakyamuni lived true to these words. The Buddhist poet Matrçeta wrote of Shakyamuni, "Your compassion was kind only towards others, ... Towards you alone, O Lord, compassion was pitiless."² Shakyamuni readily left his seat of enlightenment to leap directly into the turbulent reality of people's suffering and anguish. As Matrçeta noted: "Though abiding in deep tranquility, the development of compassion made you take up even the musical art."³ (In other words, Shakyamuni exited his "deep tranquility" to find ways to inspire others toward enlightenment.)

NANDA: This is an inspirational passage.

IKEDA: Some say that we lose all hope when we feel no one appreciates or respects us, not when we learn we have an incurable illness or are going bankrupt. We can find genuine fulfillment in caring for one another, in working for the well-being of others. I believe that in the present age, when egoism and cynicism abound, the practice of Buddhist compassion—the spirit of altruism, of overcoming self-centredness—offers hope in the truest sense of the word.

NANDA: As members of society, we have an obligation to serve the common good. Enlightenment has a greater significance than simply benefiting the individual. Rather, it is fundamentally a consciousness that transcends the individual and inspires one to serve society and all humankind.

This is why I am glad that the SGI grapples with and seeks solutions to society's many problems. Today,

I am pleased to see that the SGI is expanding its movement of "Buddhism in action" in the United States. I am impressed by how the SGI shows people that taking action for the benefit of society is as much a part of the Buddhist way of life as any contemplative practice.

IKEDA: I appreciate your deep understanding of our movement. How is compassion defined in Hinduism?

ONENESS OF ALL EXISTENCE

NANDA: The eternal law, or *sana-tana dharma*, dictates that the most important attitude for human beings is one of compassion toward all creatures. One of the primary duties in Hinduism is to base our charity on a spirit of compassion.

Hindu philosophers understood compassion to mean taking positive action for all creation, including plants, animals, the environment, our ancestors, and even the microscopic life that populates worlds imperceptible to the human eye. This orientation is based on a fundamental belief in the oneness of all creation. A person's charity toward another should come not from a feeling of superiority or pity but just the opposite—the awareness of the inseparable oneness of all existence.

IKEDA: Yes, I understand what you mean. The practice of compassion in Buddhism is based on the law of dependent origination. The *Samyutta-nikaya* says, "It is just as if, friend, there stood two sheaves of reeds leaning one against the other."⁴ As the scripture says, humans can lead better lives through respect, giving, and love for one another based on awareness of dependent origination. An attitude of arrogance and self-righteousness—looking down on other people as well as all other creatures—denies the dignity and worth of others' lives and, by extension, one's own life.

The previously mentioned "sutra of compassion" says:

