



The Conversation We Need to Transform Our Country

The power of genuine dialogue.

the German poet Johann Peter Eckermann once confessed to his longtime friend Johann Wolfgang von Goethe that, although he sought to harmonize with those like him, he had nothing to do with others beyond his circle.

Goethe wrote in response:

It is in conflict with natures opposed to his own that a man must collect his strength to fight his way through; and thus all our different sides are brought out and developed, so that we soon feel ourselves a match for every foe. You should do the same; you have more capacity for it than you imagine; indeed, you must at all events plunge into the great world, whether you like it or not.¹

As the “soul of [our] idealism grieves at the stark realities of racial strife”² in our country, it begs the question: What is missing from American society?

If our country is unrivaled in its economic and human capital, its poverty perhaps lies in the weakness of its social fabric, frayed as it is by our inability to hold dialogue in the truest sense—with those who are different from us and who think differently than us.

In recalling a dialogue, Ikeda Sensei relayed the thinking that, while we are drawn to the headlines that represent



the surface of life, it is the “deeper, slower movements that, in the end, make history.”³ The movement that Sensei ceaselessly pursued was the path of dialogue, engaging with leading thinkers around the world to find solutions to the complex problems of the 21st century. Recalling those efforts, he writes, “In every country, there were people, and I firmly believed that dialogue was the path we should take as human beings to melt the frigid walls of mistrust dividing us.”⁴

In the month of July, which represents the 760th anniversary of the submission of Nichiren Daishonin’s landmark treatise “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land,” a masterwork in how to engage in dialogue, let us review key points on dialogue from the Buddhist perspective, with the aim of integrating these points more deeply into our lives, local organizations, families, workplaces and communities. And in that vein, let us take a profound step forward in the direction of peace.

Dialogue makes us stronger.

“There may well be times when one finds it somewhat challenging to work together with other members, who may have different personalities or backgrounds. Young people, in particular, often find organizations restrictive and

stifling, and many may think it is easier and more pleasant to be on one’s own. There is also a strong general tendency these days for people to try to avoid direct interaction with others. But that trend deprives us of the opportunity to make the most of our differing personalities, to praise and support one another, and to cultivate our capacities for tolerance and understanding. As a result, we may end up being unable to appreciate the pain and suffering of others, control our own anger or patch up even small differences and misunderstandings.”⁵ —Sensei

True societal change requires a transformation in the depths of our lives.

“You must quickly reform the tenets that you hold in your heart and embrace the one true vehicle, the single good doctrine [of the Lotus Sutra]. If you do so, then the threefold world will become the Buddha land, and how could a Buddha land ever decline?”⁶ —Nichiren

“Each of us must be deeply convinced that a transformation in the awareness of a single person can eventually change the whole world. Efforts to enable a reformation in the life of one person will ultimately move the hearts of many people, reforming society and changing the history of humankind.

“To put it another way, as the solidarity of peace and trust among awakened individuals spreads from one person to 10,000, from our local communities to society as a whole, a fresh reformation of the times will become possible.

“What we refer to as worldwide kosen-rufu, therefore, is crystallized within the unrelenting efforts of individuals challenging themselves to open the hearts of others, illuminating them with the wisdom of Buddhism. The power of a great human revolution within the life of a single human being will definitely break the chains of the hatred and violence that bind us—now is the time to spread this message to the world.”⁷ —Sensei

Dialogue requires courage, patience and sustained engagement.

“Genuine dialogue is a ceaseless and profound spiritual exertion that seeks to effect a fundamental human transformation in both ourselves and others. Dialogue challenges us to confront and transform the destructive impulses inherent in human life. I earnestly believe that the energy generated by this courageous effort can break the chains of resignation and apathy that bind the human heart, unleashing renewed confidence and vision for the future.”⁸ —Sensei

Kosen-rufu requires that we not walk away from others because the conversation is difficult.

“At the root of conflicts in the world today lie mistrust and hatred. In order to transcend these, the genuine power of dialogue is indispensable.

“To this end, while communicating our beliefs and convictions clearly to others, we must exert ourselves fully to respect the dignity of people’s lives and endeavor to understand them. Respecting our differences and learning from one another, we must tenaciously persist in talking with others, engaging them repeatedly in discussion.

“We must recognize that the fundamental path to solving these problems exists only in the process of substantial efforts at dialogue.”⁹ —Sensei

—Prepared by the World Tribune staff

NOTES:

1. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Conversations of Goethe with Johann Peter Eckermann*, translated by John Oxenford (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), p. 59.
2. *My Dear Friends in America*, third edition, p. 207.
3. *The World of Nichiren Daishonin’s Writings*, vol. 2, p. 158.
4. May 2017 *Living Buddhism*, p. 17.
5. December 2013 *Living Buddhism*, pp. 30–32.
6. “On Establishing the Correct Teaching,” *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 25.
7. Sept. 6, 2002, *World Tribune*, p. 1.
8. Sept. 28, 2007, *World Tribune*, p. 2.
9. Sept. 6, 2002, *World Tribune*, p. 2.