**Self and environment**

**I was talking recently with a couple about the problems they had been having with their noisy neighbours.**

There was often loud music late at night, disturbed sleep and no apology. They had repeatedly tried every diplomatic approach to try and get them to turn the music down, but their polite attempts had just seemed fruitless. No matter how reasonable they had been, the situation had gone from bad to worse. At the start of our conversation they expressed that it seemed that the situation would only resolve if they resorted to legal remedies, or, one of them half humorously suggested, by resorting to retaliation and violence! I asked why they thought they had found themselves in this situation. Naturally they blamed the neighbours and their unreasonable behaviour. At first glance, that did seem to be the issue, but I mentioned that Buddhism teaches the importance of taking personal responsibility for situations, and that we can't point the finger at someone else (anyway, if we do, we find three fingers pointing back!). One of them said that it couldn't be *their*fault that the neighbours were playing loud music late into the night. I said, No, it isn't your fault, but it *is*happening in *your*environment.  
  
In one of Nichiren Daishonin's letters he talks about the significance of where a Buddhist practitioner lives. Describing his home in the mountains in a place called Minobu, he says that although it was a remote, mountainous spot, because he, a votary of the Lotus Sutra, lives there, it must be as sacred as where Shakyamuni Buddha lived. Quoting from a Buddhist text he says: 'Since the Law is wonderful, the person is worthy of respect; since the person is worthy of respect, the land is sacred.'1 I encouraged them: You are both practising Buddhism; you are worthy of respect. If there is disrespect in your environment, rather than looking around the place for an answer, the remedy is to deepen your confidence in your own personal Buddhahood. Before you resort to the legal route, or give up and move home, try the approach of seeing this situation as an opportunity for you to establish unshakeable confidence that you are Buddhas and that your home is the Buddha land. As you do that, either you will automatically get respect from your environment, or you will be more effectively able to demand that respect. The starting point is not to curse the neighbours but to praise and cherish your own Buddhahood. Chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with the confidence that you are Buddhas.2 Why not, I suggested, have a campaign of faith, practice and study to deepen your belief in the fact that you are both Buddhas. In another of his writings, Nichiren Daishonin writes:  
  
*[A Buddhist teaching] states that, if the minds of living beings are impure, their land is also impure, but if their minds are pure, so is their land. There are not two lands, pure or impure in themselves. The difference lies solely in the good or evil of our minds.*3  
  
This quotation teaches us that we are completely responsible for the state of our environment. Our environment is a reflection of what is in our minds, our hearts and our lives. Nichiren Daishonin wrote this at a time when many people were disillusioned with the world they were in, and instead sought a paradise that was far removed from the reality of their daily lives. He taught that such a paradise was unattainable, but we can change the place where we are right now. The most important question for us to ask is 'What is my life-state?' Our life-state not only affects us as individuals, but it also impacts other people and our environment. This applies on a personal level as well as on a macro, global level. In recent decades the debate about environmental and ecological issues affecting our planet has developed. Although not everyone involved in the debate agrees on either the causes or the remedies, it is clear that since the Industrial Revolution, humanity has increased the production of carbon-based greenhouse gases from fossil fuels and now the majority of scientists consider these (together with rampant land deforestation) to be responsible for the increase of sea and air temperatures on planet Earth.4  
  
When we first look at this issue we probably see the land or environment as a different and separate thing to the humans who live there. However Buddhism says that while these two phenomena appear to be two different things, in reality they are inseparable. Of course, because human beings will not survive if we are suspended in a vacuum, we need an environment in order to live. We need a place to live, and the environment supports us to live there, providing us with air, water, food as well as a stable place to get on with our lives. The name for this principle of the oneness of the individual and the environment is expressed in Japanese as *'esho funi'. 'e'*is short for '*eho'*, the environment that supports life, and '*sho*' is short for *'shoho'*the independent life entity, or in other words, the self. Since human life influences and depends on its environment, the two apparently separate entities are in fact inseparable. Although they appear to be two things, on a deep level they are not two. This non-duality is the meaning of *'funi' -*which can be translated as 'two things, but not two things'. So our environment and our individual lives are mutually dependent. On a deep level, they are one because the environment and the people living there both emerge out of the source of cosmic life-force.5  
  
Nichiren Daishonin explains that the human body is like a body, and the environment is like a shadow. When the body bends, so does the shadow.6The environment reflects what we have in our hearts. If we are concerned about the state of the environment, the remedy that we are taught in Buddhism, is to do something about the life-condition of the people living there. Of course, this also means educating people about the effects of our actions, what to do about the pollution that we generate, and learning about things like recycling and tidying up, but fundamentally it is about ensuring that more and more people are in the value-creating life-condition of Buddhahood than before. The more people in our environment base themselves on a deep respect for the dignity of life then, to use the language quoted above, the more sacred the land will become. As we aim for ecological integrity, we will improve not only our own doorsteps but the wider planet. Our personal, micro steps will affect the global, macro situation. SGI President Daisaku Ikeda notes that merely acquiring knowledge about environmental issues is not enough, but it is vital for individuals to tangibly perceive the irreplaceable value of the ecosystem of which we are an integral part and to make a commitment to its protection.7  
  
There are a few Buddhist principles which talk of this 'oneness'. While it may be baffling at first, there is great wisdom in the seeming conundrum of 'two, but not two'. We can easily develop a way of thinking which sees separation or difference between ourselves and other phenomena, but when we are encouraged to see the deep, mutually beneficial and spiritual connection between things, we recognise another aspect of how we are linked to other people and our land. When we discussed the principle of 'three thousand realms in a single moment of life', the three realms (the individual, society and the environment) were another expression of the oneness of the individual life and the environment.  
  
Perhaps we can all ask ourselves this question: how is my environment? If the place where we find ourselves is a perfect reflection of our life-condition, and our life-condition is the one thing that we can take responsibility for, then if we are unhappy with our environment, we can change it by changing ourselves. We have already looked at the intricate and complex web of life that connects us (as explained in the principles of 'dependent origination' and 'three thousand realms in a single moment of life'), and as we consider our place in the world it is an opportunity to develop our confidence that the energy of our prayers and determinations to see the Buddha state drawn out of our own lives and in society and our planet will make a positive change.  
  
This principle is also useful when we wonder why our personal determinations do not seem to be resulting in a change. If a person has a determination to fulfil their mission in society in a particular job or role, but no opportunity seems to arise, sometimes it is worth looking at the situation through the lens of the oneness of self and the environment. While on the one hand, a person may be expressing the determination 'I feel that with my personal skills and interests my best contribution to society is to have such and such a job', if at the same time there is a subliminal feeling that 'perhaps there are other people out there who are much more qualified than me' then the strength of the original determination is diminished by the doubt that follows. If we aren't sure about something, then the environment isn't going to be sure either. However, when we express our determinations in a deeply confident way, the environment is confident too and we will find that doors will open to enable us to fulfil whatever it is we need to do. The Buddha expresses his or her prayer in a positive, confident way, and the environment responds; our challenge is to see what we need to do so that we can share the Buddha's confidence.  
  
And what happened to the couple with the noisy neighbours? Positive inner change did lead to external change. As they took responsibility for the situation, and set out on a campaign to deepen their understanding of the dignity of their own lives, they were able to have positive dialogue with their neighbours who in turn changed their behaviour. While we may not all be suffering sleepless nights because of others' disturbance, there are plenty of situations around for us to see the opportunity of applying the principle of the interconnectedness of the self and the environment and so create a happier world.