

## Winning in Life: Striking a Balance

By JEFF FARR

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Mahatma Gandhi had a tremendous spirit to work for the people. He once said, “[It] is impossible for us to establish a living vital connection with the masses unless we work for them, through them and in their midst, not as their patrons but as their servants.” Shakyamuni, Nichiren Daishonin and the successive presidents of the Soka Gakkai have all embodied this spirit.

But these men seem to be leaders of a special stock, who have no desires, who were born of a mission to give others their very lives. “It would be great to be someone like that,” we may sometimes think, “but I am just an ordinary person.” Most of us want to help others — but we also have personal desires we want to fulfill. And often those come first.

All the great Buddhist leaders, while selfless, have fulfilled what Nichiren Daishonin calls practice for oneself and practice for others. This is actually not two separate kinds of practice but a single practice that benefits both oneself and others.

Through serving the people, our leaders have also developed their lives.

Participating in the SGI-USA organization allows us to do the same thing. SGI-USA activities, such as district meetings, may not seem spectacular, but here we learn something spectacular: this interrelatedness of helping others and developing ourselves. We need both.

Linda Johnson, a women’s division secretariat member, says that “whenever I take the time to encourage another person — even if it’s just by phone — my day goes better, my life seems to be in a much higher rhythm and I am much more effective, period.” When she does not make that effort, she finds it easy to get swayed by the ups and downs of her life. Particularly the downs. “I desperately need the members because they continually force me to grow,” she says. “They force me many times to give when I don’t want to, when I’d rather stay in the house. In essence, there is no doubt in my mind that the reason I have grown over my 21 years of practice is the members.”

Another women’s division secretariat member, Theresa Hauber, realized how crucial it was to care for others when she had achieved all her dreams. “Then there is a tendency to take the fact that you are going to overcome everything for granted,” she explains. “But without actively thinking about how other people are doing — even though my life is very comfortable, with no problems — I totally lack joy.”

Sometimes we think of others as separate from us, other times we think of them as deeply connected to our lives. The second is the Buddhist view. The profound Buddhist concept of dependent origination sets forth how our individual existence is intrinsically linked to all other human lives.

The *New Yorker* writer Joseph Mitchell had this spirit to see others as linked to his life. Mitchell, who died last year, wrote profiles on the common people he met in the Bowery and Village, celebrating their triumphs and sharing their woes. Looking back over his articles once, he said, “It turns out, when I look at these things, just about everybody is me.”

Doing Buddhist activities with this spirit is a clear path to our personal growth. Activities and personal growth — they go hand in hand.

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