

Thai Language, Culture Come Together at Monthly Meetings

BY LEONARD LANGBERG & NEIL CITRIN

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More than 13 years ago a handful of people from Thailand began practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in Los Angeles. While actively participating in regular SGI-USA activities, they also began holding Thai-language meetings, and attendance rapidly increased.

Now these vibrant members can pack the San Fernando Community Center, as they did recently in celebration of the Thai New Year's holiday. In addition to the new year, these members celebrated the new lives they discovered when they began chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

Sarina Ann Ng'armklai was one of the early members, joining in 1983. Just before this she had decided to commit suicide with poison. Her suffering had not been ended by the prayers of Hinayana priests or her own prayers to statues of Shakyamuni Buddha.

Before buying the poison, however, she stopped in to see her hairdresser. "I wanted to look beautiful when I died," she explained.

The hairdresser told Ms. Ng'armklai about how chanting could help her change her life, then invited her to a meeting. She forgot all about the poison.

"When I started chanting I began to feel freedom," she said. "My suffering and anger began to leave me."

Looking at Ms. Ng'armklai now, it is difficult to imagine she ever had an angry or negative bone in her body. But she described herself as once being an angry woman. Her anger continued in the early days of her practice, through a storm of obstacles that included the lack of a green card and numerous health problems. With constant encouragement from seniors in faith and by chanting a lot, she never gave up.

"Now," she said proudly, "I'm an American citizen, and I'm healthy and happy."

To show her appreciation, Ms. Ng'armklai supports her members 100 percent. This attitude, common among the Thai members, led to their phenomenal growth.

Not all of them embraced the Daishonin's Buddhism immediately, however. Sam Imla remembers being very skeptical. "I had an ulcer problem," he said. "A friend told me that this Buddhism can change everything to be better. At first I didn't believe it. I tested it on my problems and bad habits."

Within a short time Mr. Imla stopped smoking and his ulcer got better.

"Now it is gone," he said.

Mr. Imla feels chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo helps people of different nationalities get along. Still, many of the Thai members do not speak English well. To provide them with proper encouragement, the leaders decided to have monthly meetings.

With support from Ted Morino, the SGI-USA Study Department chief, and Sachiko Nakabayashi, the L.A. #2 joint territory vice women's division chief, Thai members from throughout the Los Angeles area gather to learn about the Daishonin's Buddhism.

"Most of the meetings are in Thai," said Mr. Imla, "but if we have a leader like Mr. Morino [who doesn't speak Thai] we will translate."

Meeting organizers plan in advance, using material from general lectures and other sources. They are organized just like the monthly discussion meeting, with a question-and-answer session for guests.

"We always have guests," Mr. Imla said.

Armed with this monthly encouragement, the Thai members return to their regular districts. Pim Bomrungchati finds these meetings valuable.

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“It’s great because you know your culture,” she said. “Understanding a person’s culture helps you know where they are coming from, and you can share things. You can learn about them and help them.”

Ms. Bomrungchati benefited from this support personally, while fighting cancer.

When she was younger, however, she did not have this support. She faced a lot of obstacles with her friends. During that time her rock of support was her mother.

“My friends always picked on me,” she said. “They were jealous of me. I would go home and chant and cry and chant and cry. Overall I changed my karma with my friends. Now I have wonderful friends, and we share our lives’ challenges together.”

The Thai members look forward to the 1998 Thai New Year’s. It will be celebrated by Los Angeles area members at the World Culture Center’s World Peace Ikeda Auditorium in Santa Monica, Calif.

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