The New Human Revolution, Volume 6, Chapter 3

Acceleration

BY HO GOKU – ILLUSTRATED BY KENICHIRO UCHIDA

Translation of parts 1–6 of the 'Acceleration' chapter, as printed in the *Seikyo Shimbun*, the Soka Gakkai's daily newspaper. Ho Goku is the pen name of Daisaku Ikeda, who appears in the novel as Shin'ichi Yamamoto. The events take place in 1962.

Since the start of 1962 — the Year of Victory — propagation had been moving ahead with even greater momentum. The members' united efforts and their confident achievements spread to every corner of Japan. Wherever there were people, activities for kosen-rufu had proudly begun to unfold.

There was nothing extraordinary or glamorous about the members' activities. Working as emissaries of the Mystic Law, they quietly, earnestly went each day to visit the suffering and unhappy, no matter who they were or in what destitute conditions they might be living. True Buddhism and true humanism exist in precisely these kinds of selfless actions. These are deeds of a nobility that lies beyond the comprehension of the pretentious and conceited, obsessed with others' good opinion, or seekers of fame or status whose lives are consumed by vanity.

In a section of Fukuoka City,1 on a tract of reclaimed land jutting into Hakata Bay, there was a shantytown known to locals as Dokan. It was a cluttered jumble of tightly packed, makeshift tin-roofed huts.

Today the area bristles with modern high-rises and there is no vestige of its former state. But in the past, people from surrounding neighborhoods were afraid to set foot there. At the end of the war, the area had been deserted; there were only a few scattered warehouses along the road that ran through the reclaimed land, and a solitary ice-manufacturing plant. At some point, large earthen drainage pipes — called *dokan* in Japanese — were discarded there, and the first inhabitants started to appear. It was from these pipes that the settlement took its name.

People who were homeless or unemployed as a result of the war were carried there by the vicissitudes of fate. The drainage pipes were big enough for an adult, stooping slightly, to enter. People would hang pieces of straw matting at either end of a pipe and call it home. As more and more came to Dokan to live, small shacks made from scrap wood and sheet iron took their place beside the pipe dwellings. Within a few years, shanties of this kind covered the entire area. Naturally, these were illegal, amounting as they did to squatters' dwellings.

The layout of Dokan, meanwhile, could only be described as extremely convoluted. Shacks were thrown together any which way, without the slightest regard for order. Crowded closely together, they were laced by a maze of narrow lanes beneath overlapping roofs that prevented any sunlight from shining through. People there did indeed dwell in Japanese society's shadows, where even the light of government authority did not reach.

The Dokan area was not very safe. Thefts and brawls were everyday occurrences; blood was often shed. From the middle of the day, people would begin gambling or brewing bootleg liquor. Those in agony over withdrawal from alcohol or drugs — mainly the popular stimulant Philopon2 — were a common sight. Wanted criminals were also said to take refuge there to evade capture.

Residents in nearby neighborhoods had to tell their children: "You must never go into Dokan! Do you hear me?"

But the Gakkai's wave of propagation spread even to this virtually lawless wilderness —

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and extraordinary changes began to take place.

The first Gakkai members appeared in Dokan around 1954. About one year before that, a woman named Tatsu Matsumoto, who lived near Dokan, began visiting Dokan residents she had come to have a nodding acquaintance with to discuss Buddhism. Matsumoto was determined to see the people in the area become happy. In the beginning, however, no one would listen to what she had to say.

Many residents had suffered great privation and hardship. Having lost all hope, they had abandoned themselves to despair and self-destruction. The bitterness of past betrayals made them suspicious and mistrustful of everyone. Consequently, Matsumoto's assurances that they could attain happiness through faith in the Daishonin's Buddhism sounded to them like some smooth sales pitch that definitely had to have a catch to it.

But Matsumoto didn't give up. Everyone has a right to become happy, she thought — the Gohonzon guarantees that. Blazing with this conviction, she continued to chant daimoku, persevering patiently in talking to many people about Buddhism. At length, her efforts began to bear fruit and first one, then another started practicing. As they exerted themselves in Buddhist practice, their gloomy, forlorn expressions brightened. They began to experience a variety of benefits resulting from their faith.

Other Dokan residents, seeing this transformation — this proof of the power of faith so close to home — became much more open to hearing about the Daishonin's Buddhism. Members from other areas also came to visit friends who lived in Dokan and introduce them to the practice. As a result, the area's membership rose steadily.

In 1956, there were a total of 30 Gakkai households in Dokan. The following year, there were 60. The year after that, 150. By 1962, Dokan had well over 400 practicing households. Owing to the nature of the dwellings there, most residents were not registered with the local government office,3 so it is impossible to know exactly how many households there were then. But according to accounts from Gakkai members who lived there, by 1962 more than half the households there were Soka Gakkai members.

In the morning, the sound of gongyo and daimoku could be heard everywhere around the shantytown. People could be seen cheerfully setting off to work. At night, discussion meetings were held in several places. Tiny, rough-hewn dwellings overflowed with people and resounded with inspiring experiences in faith and happy laughter.

With the increase in Gakkai members among Dokan residents, the school attendance of their children rose and, more remarkably, crime dropped so much that even the local police were astounded.

Faith had filled lives previously shrouded in darkness with a light of hope, giving people fresh courage to go on living. The Soka Gakkai's greatest undertaking has been going out among the suffering and making it possible for countless individuals to revitalize their lives.

Hisayuki Imura, a Dokan resident who would later become the area's district chief, was one who was revitalized in this way. He took up residence in Dokan in the new year of 1954, when he was 37. He had formerly worked as an accountant for a coal mining company, seeming to have a promising future there. But the asthma that had not troubled him for many years suddenly returned with a vengeance, making it increasingly difficult to work. His attacks grew more frequent; he missed work more often, until, after a prolonged period of absence, he was finally laid off.

He had a wife and three small boys to feed, ages 8, 5 and 2. Out of kindness, his employer allowed him and his family to continue to live in company housing for a while. But there was a limit to how long they could stay and they were soon behind on rent. At the end of the year, they fled in the middle of the night.

The sight of his wife stabbed Imura's heart like a knife: Her neck emaciated from

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hunger, she trudged silently through the icy north wind with no place to go, her head bowed, leading their middle son by the hand, their youngest son on her back. But he no longer had the energy left to even offer her a warm word of comfort.

As the new year dawned they went from one relative's house to the next. Imura wandered dejectedly through the streets of Hakata in Fukuoka, constantly looking for a place to commit suicide. But the image of his children's sweet, innocent faces stopped him. "I have to keep going, for them!" he told himself. Yet the fact remained that they had nowhere to go. The streets bustled with new year's festivity, but every time he passed people dressed smartly in their best Japanese attire, he cast his eyes down.

His wanderings eventually led him to Dokan. Standing in the cold wind blowing off the sea, gazing at the untidy rows of ramshackle lean-tos before him, he felt for a moment utterly lost and defeated. Gradually, however, he thought that he and his family might try living there for a while.

He found a spot there to build a house. Or it could have better been described as a crude shack fashioned from discarded materials he salvaged — wooden beams for the frame, bits of board and straw matting for the walls and iron sheeting for the roof.

Imura, his wife and their children moved into the small shack with a floor area of about 81 square feet, so flimsy that it might be blown away by the first strong wind. Never having so much as held a hammer before, Imura had been a complete novice at home-building. After a while, the structure began to tilt ominously. A child's ball placed on the straw mat–covered floor would roll to one side of the room, at the mercy of natural forces beyond its control. Imura felt that ball was a reflection of his life.

He had to find work to feed his family, but his asthma prevented him from holding down an office job or taking on any physical labor. In the end, Imura decided to open a food stand near the entrance of a motorboat race course4 located near to Dokan. (Incidentally, more than a few Dokan residents had wound up there after gambling away everything they owned on these races, ruining their lives.)

Imura and his wife made a small, portable stand. They assembled a low table from an old sliding door set atop wooden fruit boxes as legs. Then they offered customers *oden*, an inexpensive hot Japanese hodgepodge, as well as *inarizushi*, rice wrapped in thin envelopes of deep-fried tofu. Nevertheless, their daily earnings were meager; they couldn't even afford to buy white rice for their children or proper bedding for them. Even in the dead of winter, all they could do to keep warm was wrap themselves in a blanket. In the summer, a foul smell pervaded the slum, while mosquitoes bred at a remarkable rate in the sewage drainage ditches under the shanties' floors.

Imura's asthma grew steadily worse. He came to feel that it was only a matter of time before one of his attacks finished him off. He became completely spiritless, losing his last ounce of hope. All that issued from his mouth were a persistent cough and weary sighs.

Around this time Imura first heard about Buddhism from one of his customers. At first, he listened with a sardonic smile, but the customer kept on enthusiastically about the greatness of Buddhism.

"You, too, can definitely become happy through this practice," the customer assured him.

Happiness — that was a word Imura had almost forgotten. Just thinking about it made him feel bitter. But gradually the person's confident words touched something inside him. Around the same time, his older brother, who lived in a Fukuoka suburb and had recently joined the Soka Gakkai, came to talk to him about Buddhism. Imura was skeptical, but he told himself that he had nothing to lose. Things could not possibly get any worse. He decided to join the Gakkai and give the practice a try. That was November 1955, almost

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two years after the Imura family had moved to Dokan.

After joining the Soka Gakkai and doing gongyo and chanting daimoku consistently for a while, Imura's spirits began to lift. His enthusiasm for life was rekindled. From the depths of his being, he resolved to become happy. He earnestly applied himself to Gakkai activities and, at the suggestion of his seniors in faith, began actively introducing others in Dokan to the Daishonin's Buddhism.

As Imura threw himself heart and soul into his work and Buddhist practice, he noticed two curious things. First, the chronic asthma that had caused him so much suffering completely disappeared. In the past, his attacks had been particularly severe at the change of the seasons — from winter to spring and summer to autumn — but in the next spring after beginning his practice, and that autumn as well, the usual attacks failed to occur.

The second thing he noticed was an unbelievable increase in sales from his small food stand. In practically no time at all, sales had jumped to many times their original level. Although a number of other food vendors had set up stands in the area, Imura's seemed to attract people like a magnet.

He had changed his menu to specialize in *udon*, thick Japanese wheat noodles served in a clear broth, and tempura. He also employed various innovations to speed up service and looked into improving the dishes' flavor. Due to these efforts, his stand gained a reputation for being "fast and delicious." Eventually, he purchased a small hand-drawn trailer and the business he had begun with some fruit boxes and an old sliding door at last began to look like a real food stand.

"One day, I will open my own restaurant," Imura declared to his family. "I'll accumulate loads of good fortune. I'll do it without fail." He began to dream about the future again, something he had almost forgotten how to do.

He put even greater energy into his Gakkai activities and undertook the challenge of studying Buddhism, too. As he read more and more about the principle of changing one's karma, he felt even more inspired to share the greatness of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism with as many people as he possibly could.

There were many around him who had completely lost hope. There were some who spent all their daily wages on alcohol, drinking themselves senseless, collapsing from drunkenness and sleeping it off in the streets day after day. There were those who gave blood for money to gamble with, while scrounging for leftovers.

Imura was unable to ignore their suffering. "If a Gakkai member doesn't help them, who will?" he thought.

So he continued to exert himself, visiting people and telling them about the Daishonin's teaching. Some showered him with angry abuse — "Get out and don't come back!" But he never flinched. He had awakened to his mission as a noble emissary of the Buddha. Imura's earnest insistence that they could rebuild their lives through faith was greeted coldly by Dokan's people, whose hearts were numb. They had given up on life. One murmured sadly: "No matter what we do, there's no way we'll ever get out of here. It's hopeless...."

Conducting propagation activities in Dokan was in many ways a battle against the apathy and hopelessness of people who had lost the will or energy to go on living.

Imura mustered his courage and earnestly told them: "Don't give up on yourselves so easily! First give this Buddhism a try. There's plenty of time for giving up after that, if you still want to."

Through such persistent dialogue, his ardent concern eventually communicated itself. One after another joined the Soka Gakkai at his urging.

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Membership in the area steadily increased and in his second year of practice Imura was appointed chief of the Nagahama Group, which included Dokan and the surrounding area.

Frequent discussion meetings were held in Dokan. There was only one venue spacious enough for a good-size meeting — an empty warehouse. Aside from that, there was no place larger than about 23 square feet in which to meet. Sometimes members even held discussion meetings outside under the street lights, sitting in a circle on straw mats to talk about Buddhism.

On weekends, a dozen-or-so members from Dokan would routinely make their way to Hakata Station. There, they would catch an overnight train to other parts of Kyushu for propagation activities. These members were all poor, dressed in work overalls, wearing only *geta*, traditional Japanese clogs. Yet they would set off together animatedly talking about their commitment to helping guide those who were suffering to happiness.

When it came to propagation, Imura would gladly go anywhere. He traveled all around Kyushu and even ventured to the Chugoku region,5 located across the water on the main island of Honshu. Even before his appointment as district chief in 1962, he had brought more than a hundred families to the Daishonin's Buddhism. The enthusiasm for propagation among his district members burned ever more brightly, until the Dokan area was alive with the benefits of faith.

In 1966, Imura finally left Dokan to open his longed-for restaurant, a rented facility with living quarters attached, into which he moved with his family. He retained the menu of his outdoor stall — *udon* and tempura — but his business did so well that he eventually also opened a fish shop and a more upscale restaurant serving traditional Japanese cuisine. In time, he purchased a brand-new home and later served as president of his neighborhood association for many years, contributing actively to the local community.

The Dokan members, who had unlocked their infinite potential through faith in the Daishonin's Buddhism, lived out many great dramas. Almost all had fought their way back from the edge of despair. When they spoke of Buddhism's greatness, their words rang with powerful truth and conviction.

One such member was Eriko Okawa, who practiced with Imura and later became Dokan's district women's division chief. One dark evening in 1957, she had stood with her husband and four children on a pier at Hakata Bay. The couple had decided to commit suicide along with their children. It was a bitterly cold day, the wind cutting to the bone like an icy knife.

(To be continued)

1. Fukuoka City: capital of Fukuoka Prefecture in Kyushu, southernmost of Japan's four main islands.
2. Philopon: brand name of a stimulant that was in wide circulation after the war among Japanese. Addiction to it became a serious social problem.
3. Resident registration: Japanese nationals must report their address to the relevant government office in the area they live and notify it of any changes within a set period. The Residents' Basic Register compiled from this information is used in implementing various administrative policies.
4. Motorboat racing: form of legalized gambling in Japan like horse racing.
5. Chugoku region: encompasses the entire western tip of Japan's main island, Honshu, including Hiroshima, Okayama, Shimane, Tottori and Yamaguchi prefectures.

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