

Alive and Well in the People

In India, during a 15-week festival some 10 million Hindus plunge into the Ganges River with the belief that the waters will cleanse their souls and free them from the cycle of birth and rebirth. In Saudi Arabia, 3.1 million pilgrims descend on the holy city of Mecca in the annual *hajj*, a requirement of all able-bodied Muslims who can afford the trip.

For many religions, the concept of a pilgrimage to a sacred place is an important aspect of faith. In the SGI, too, in years past, we looked forward to traveling to the Head Temple Taiseki-ji, where we could worship together with fellow believers from around the world. Herein lies an important criteria of so-called sacred places in our religion: people. Places aren't sacred in and of themselves but derive their significance from the purity of the people practicing the Law. As the Daishonin writes: "Since the Law is supreme, the Person is worthy of respect; since the Person is worthy of respect, the Land is sacred" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 264).

With this month's news of Nikken removing the Dai-Gohonzon from the Sho-Hondo, the High Sanctuary of the Daishonin's Buddhism, many members are recalling fond memories of their trips to Japan to pray to the Dai-Gohonzon. One of the main purposes of these pilgrimages was for members to refresh their faith and make new determinations. In this sense, visiting the head temple in those days was a means to strengthen faith.

Such visits were not an end in themselves. No benefit ever accrued from merely being in the presence of the Dai-Gohonzon. As the Daishonin says, "A poor man cannot earn a penny just by counting his neighbor's wealth, even if he does so night and day"(MW-1, 4).

As the Daishonin teaches, it's through faith that we attain enlightenment. It was the seeking spirit and personal effort of the members themselves that brought about any benefit. In the Daishonin's day, a person who made such sincere efforts to visit the Daishonin was the elderly Abutsubo. By braving the treacherous journey to the remote Mount Minobu, he earned the praise and gratitude of the Daishonin. Yet the Daishonin also made it clear that Abutsubo's wife, Sennichi-ama, who stayed behind, received just as much benefit by virtue of her strong faith.

A pilgrimage to see the Daishonin was therefore a great cause but not a requirement to attain enlightenment. Nevertheless, the temple today teaches that pilgrimage to Taiseki-ji is what allows people to "expiate their negative karma and attain fortune in this life and the next." For the priests, the place, and not faith, is what's most important.

In addition to praying to the Dai-Gohonzon, a course of study organized by the Gakkai was always a part of any pilgrimage to the head temple since the days of second president Josei Toda. Studying the Goshō, sharing experiences, seeking guidance in faith—all these contributed to members' deepening their understanding of Buddhism and strengthening their determination to practice through the pilgrimage.

Today, in addition to our regular activities, we in the SGI-USA have opportunities to attend various special seminars within our regions and regularly scheduled conferences at the Florida Nature and Culture Center. Many people who have attended these conference note how their time at the FNCC helped them refresh their faith and practice. Here, too, we see how the spirit of people coming together to seek the Law results in a positive and hope-generating experience. It's not the buildings or the Everglades or the balmy Florida evenings that make it happen. Though the beauty of the setting relaxes and rejuvenates, it is the beauty of the members' faith that most inspires.

Within the people, we find the Daishonin's spirit alive and well.

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Ultimately, of course, the High Sanctuary is wherever the Gohonzon is enshrined and people chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with faith. We need go no further than our own living rooms or local community centers. The blessings we attain depend solely on the strength of our faith, the sincerity of our spirit, and not on the place where we practice it.

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