

AT HIS DARKEST HOUR
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Brazilian SGI member Jailson Perreira Leite, who lost his right hand in an industrial accident, visits with members in New York. At his darkest hour, he says, the Gohonzon and many SGI-Brazil members supported him.

His screams filled the air of the Brazilian factory. It was a pain no human should know. In one blinding moment his 22-year old life was redefined forever as his mangled right hand was pulled from the whirling machine.

Two years after the 1996 accident, Jailson Perreira Leite visited the New York Culture Center with his chaperone and English interpreter, Joyce Ronkowinski. A New Jersey native, Mrs. Ronkowinski has lived in Brazil for two decades, where she raised two sons. She teaches English to corporate executives and interested Brazilians.

“Brazil is a Catholic country,” says Mrs. Ronkowinski, “so when Jailson told me he was a Buddhist, I was a bit shocked but intrigued at the same time.” It was Jailson’s insistence after a month of tests and treatment at New Jersey’s Kessler Institute for an artificial hand replacement that Mrs. Ronkowinski agreed to venture across the Hudson River from their Livingston, N.J., hotel to locate the culture center.

Jailson is very devoted,” she says. “I see him chant every day and how seriously he takes his religion.”

To meet Mr. Leite is a blurring moment of ritual handshake becoming wrenching reality. Mr. Leite favors his left side to distract focus from his right arm. When he quickly thrusts his left hand in greeting, a stranger invariably looks to his right arm with its molded hand, even as his left takes a firm grip.

It has been said that eyes are windows to the soul. Although Mr. Leite has known searing suffering, it is not apparent in the amber eyes that shine luminously from his clear, open face. Non-English-speaking, Mr. Leite’s eyes survey a speaker’s face closely while he smiles shyly. He seems to try to comprehend what language cannot convey. Only when stumped does he turn to Mrs. Ronkowinski.

Mr. Leite was a teenager growing up in Jo Carei, São Paulo, Brazil, when his parents divorced. His father cut off all financial support to the family — his mother, two sisters and Jailson — and they were unable to find employment. Mrs. Leite had been invited to SGI-Brazil meetings for five years by a friend but she had adamantly refused to attend. Finally, with their desperate financial situation, in 1992 Mrs. Leite and Jailson attended their first meeting.

They began to practice Buddhism immediately. His sincere prayers landed him a job in 14 days. His mother found work within 20 days; one sister in 30 days; and his second sister in 35 days. Their financial fortune increased rapidly and they moved twice into larger houses until they finally purchased their own home for the entire family.

They immersed themselves in Buddhist activities and enjoyed their practice. Four years later Mr. Leite endured the horrific accident.

His company immediately flew Mr. Leite to São Paulo’s Albert Einstein Hospital for special surgery to attach his right hand. The operation was unsuccessful. He was fitted with a prosthetic hand. But his employer, with one of the highest safety records in Brazil, wanted to compensate Mr. Leite, whom they regard as a valuable employee. After researching extensively throughout South and North America, the company paid for him, along with an English-speaking chaperone, to travel to the United States for the most

advanced medical treatment. When Mr. Leite returns to Brazil the company will retain him as an office worker instead of on the factory floor. Mr. Leite also plans to begin his college education.

Jailson is the young men's district leader, caring for eight young men in his district of 23 families.

Mrs. Ronkowsinski says: "Jailson wants SGI-USA members to know that when this accident first occurred he was devastated. But at his darkest hour, the Gohonzon and many SGI-Brazil members supported him. He is very grateful for their efforts. Jailson now feels that overcoming this daunting obstacle, losing his right hand, will help him to lead many young people to take faith in the Gohonzon."

When Mrs. Ronkowsinski explained to Mr. Leite that his experience would be read by thousands of SGI-USA members, his translated response was, "How marvelous!"

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