

## PUBLISHER'S COMMENTARY TIME TO TEST OURSELVES

“EXERT YOURSELF IN THE TWO WAYS OF PRACTICE AND STUDY.  
WITHOUT PRACTICE AND STUDY, THERE CAN BE NO BUDDHISM”

Take a test, anyone?

It's not an offer most of us would jump at.

But later this month, many of us will be doing just that. The test will be the SGI-USA Intermediate-level Study Department exam, to be held on October 24.

The exam is an opportunity for Intermediate Study Department candidates to step up to the Advanced level. And although our study level is simply a designation—the benefits of Buddhism have nothing to do with position or rank of any kind—the effort candidates must make to prepare for the exam are very meaningful. Making efforts to study Buddhism accords exactly with Nichiren Daishonin's advice to “exert yourself in the two ways of practice and study. Without practice and study, there can be no Buddhism” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 95).

The opportunity and benefit of Buddhist study are enjoyed not only by the person learning for the first time but also by those who help them learn. This is why the Daishonin writes: “You must not only persevere yourself; you must also teach others. . . . Teach others to the best of your ability, even if only a single sentence or phrase” (MW-1, 95). Thus the study of Buddhism must be accompanied by our efforts to share its teachings with others for their benefit and for our own.

By helping the exam candidates study and gain a deeper understanding, we deepen and hone our own grasp of Buddhist principles and our capacity to apply them. In *The New Human Revolution*, SGI President Ikeda writes of the power of teaching Buddhism to others: “Praising and encouraging the children of the Buddha who spread the Mystic Law, speaking about Buddhism, causes joy to well forth from the depths of your life and gives you strength. At such times, the strong life force of a Bodhisattva or Buddha fills your entire being” (vol. 6, p. 215).

When I was practicing as a youth division member in Japan years ago, we each were assigned to assist one individual in preparing to take the Soka Gakkai Study Department exams. Our explicit goal was to ensure that the person passed the exam. I studied with the person to whom I was assigned, praying for his growth and success, and tried hard to explain to him the basics of Buddhism. As I did, I found my own understanding getting clearer. Each time I had to explain a difficult passage, I studied it again and again and prayed to communicate its true meaning to my study partner. I found myself growing more and more confident and deeply appreciative of this wonderful practice.

Study means deepening our understanding of Buddhism through practice and sharing this understanding with others. We study to digest and internalize the Daishonin's teachings—the highest philosophy for living.

The second Soka Gakkai president, Josei Toda, urged members to approach Buddhist study with a spirit like that of a master swordsman seeking to sharpen and hone his skill. In the traditional Japanese martial art of swordsmanship (*kendo*), rigorous and intensive practice is required to develop one's speed, agility and reflexes. In the sword battles of ages

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past, life or death depended on whether the combatant had fully developed those attributes through rigorous training.

Our Buddhist practice is like a form of swordsmanship to challenge and cut through the negative forces and obstacles we face in life. Our aim is of course a peaceful world and our actions are gentle and compassionate, but our resolve and strength must be like those of someone facing a strong enemy. True happiness cannot be achieved without winning against the powerful forces in life and society that cause suffering. We who are intent on real satisfaction in life, on fulfilling our highest potential through Buddhist practice, must prepare and strengthen our lives on a fundamental level. An important part of this strengthening involves gaining a deep grasp of the concepts and philosophy behind each passage of the Daishonin's writings and applying them through practice.

Journalist Gail Sheehy, in a book about Mikhail Gorbachev, writes: "The secret of a leader lies in the tests he has faced over the whole course of his life and the *habit of action* he develops in meeting those tests."<sup>1</sup>

We face many tests in life. The tests we face on paper prepare us for the tests we face in the world and help us prepare our "habits of action" to challenge these.

In this sense, we could say that the first and second Soka Gakkai presidents, Makiguchi and Toda, took the very first Gakkai study exams. Tsunesaburo Makiguchi thoroughly studied the Daishonin's writings. He was ordered by the priesthood at the government's behest to persuade members of the Soka Gakkai to accept and enshrine a Shinto talisman—to effectively subordinate Buddhism to the militarist state religion. But faced with this challenge, he acted as he knew the Daishonin would under the circumstances: He refused, and even admonished the high priest for suggesting it. Imprisoned as a result, along with his disciple, Josei Toda, Makiguchi died a martyr in prison.

Josei Toda had practiced under an excellent mentor and studied the Lotus Sutra diligently in his tiny cell. The summer heat, winter cold, lack of proper nourishment and occasional beatings did not deter him from his quest to seek the essential truth of Buddhism and life.

As a result, he came to a sublime realization, which President Ikeda recently described as "a profound faith in the infinite worth and potential of human life coupled with a strong determination to awaken people to this" (May 1999, *Living Buddhism*, p. 28).

Mr. Toda fully awoke to his own identity as a Bodhisattva of the Earth and the real nature of life itself. Based on this awakening, he expended every last ounce of his energy to liberate millions of people from suffering. We study to broaden our own perspective on life and discover our true nature—our true identity. And grounded on this expanded awareness, we boundlessly expand our capacity through practice—our capacity to help others as well as ourselves.

President Toda made it clear that he was able to persevere through such brutal obstacles because of his study of the Daishonin's Buddhism. Those Soka Gakkai leaders who gave up in the face of oppression during World War II, he asserted, were lacking in their study and understanding of the Daishonin's teachings.

It was for this reason that Mr. Toda began his efforts to rebuild the Gakkai after the war with a program of in-depth study. The growth and advancement of the SGI and the lives of its members have always moved ahead on the two wheels of practice and study. Missing either, we would be like a one-wheeled cart—going in circles.

In this tradition, we will hold our Intermediate Study Department exam on October 24. I hope we all take advantage of this opportunity, and side by side with those taking the

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exam, enthusiastically delve into the study material, which is available at our community centers.

Fred M. Zaitso  
SGI-USA General Director

1. *Gail Sheehy*, "Looking for Mikhail Gorbachev" (1991). *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations* is licensed from Columbia University Press. Copyright © 1993, 1995 by Columbia University Press. All rights reserved.

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