

PROPAGATION: FOCUS OF THE FIRST QUARTER OF 1999

The World Tribune asked four national SGI-USA leaders to share their thoughts on the topic of propagation, SGI-USA's focus during the first quarter of 1999 (December 1998–February 1999).

Renu Jiandani: At the Central Executive Conference in December, the youth leaders from around the nation made a determination to support the focus on propagation by helping to create joyful monthly discussion meetings and holding youth-sponsored introductory meetings to commemorate March 16.

If we look around us, there are many examples of youth who are suffering or dissatisfied with daily life. I remember a friend who called me with a problem nine years ago. At that time she had two young children, was pregnant with her third child and was having family problems. She wanted to leave. I had no experience with such matters and didn't know how or what I could do to help her. There was only one thing I could say with confidence — I told her about the Gohonzon and shared my own experience. She began to practice. Today she and her children are active in their district. She always expresses deep appreciation for that period during which she was able to encounter the SGI. In watching the growth in her life, I have gained even greater confidence and conviction in my practice and can approach any personal struggle or feeling of dissatisfaction with hope and optimism.

Through this experience, I really came to understand what President Ikeda means in the poem "Sun of *Jiyu* Over a New Land," where he writes: "People can only live fully / by helping others to live. / When you give life to friends / you truly live."

At first I didn't associate this experience of propagation with March 16, but the more I thought about sharing this practice with others, I realize that March 16, 1958, is the day that the mentor handed the baton to his disciples. These 6,000 disciples made a pledge to carry on kosen-rufu. Kosen-rufu since then has expanded into a worldwide movement based on many tremendous efforts to share this practice with friends, family and community.

In another portion of the poem, President Ikeda writes: "My beloved friends, / Bodhisattvas of the Earth / Ready yourselves / for the new century's dawn! / With your own efforts / bring about a renaissance here, / in this 'magnetic land'!"

This is the last March 16 of this century. Like the 6,000 youth in 1958, let's make this March 16 an expression of our solid determination and commitment to usher in the new millennium together with our mentor.

Wendy Clark: It's important to keep in mind that the will of Nichiren Daishonin is to share this Buddhism with as many people as possible. Propagation is an essential part of our personal practice in faith, and it is the mission of our organization to help individuals achieve indestructible happiness through their practice.

An introductory meeting has the components that make an activity successful. First, the most powerful ingredient is prayer. Our united prayer enhances our ability to communicate the Daishonin's Buddhism to others. This is the first step from which all planning and preparation follows. Through each person's prayer (chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo), we can create a warm and comfortable atmosphere in which guests can feel at ease to engage in dialogue.

In these meetings many details have to be taken care of, but most crucial are experiences. The

quality of experiences and the members' ability to relate their experiences back to their practice make the real difference. The content can vary from a simple realization about life to overcoming a major obstacle — the key is connecting it to our faith in the Gohonzon and the chanting of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo. In a closed, cold world, sharing your heart is what moves people. Guests will be able to identify with the struggles of everyday life. It is also helpful to include explanations of the basic practice and the SGI organization on a global scale. There are many ways to present this material, including the use of video. It is natural to conduct a question-and-answer portion. Make sure answers are clear and concise so that guests feel satisfied and inspired. I find that some guests ask about this Buddhism in relation to other religions. Honesty and openness are much appreciated by them.

As *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* (vol. 1, p. 23) states: “When you are so united, even the great hope for kosen-rufu can be fulfilled without fail.”

James Herrmann: In 1986, I was stationed on a U.S. naval ship in the Persian Gulf. This was the height of the Libya crisis. I was 19 at the time, and it was the first time I experienced practicing Buddhism on my own away from home. I was afraid and feared that I wouldn't see my family and SGI friends ever again.

My practice became extremely difficult. My ship had a crew of 5,000 and I was the only practitioner of this Buddhism. I would often do gongyo in my bed or somewhere on the ship. This continued for about four months at sea. One day after finishing gongyo, I came up with the idea that I wanted to enshrine the Gohonzon in the ship's chapel. So I went to the ship's chaplain and explained all about our practice and my desire to enshrine the Gohonzon. He seemed sympathetic to my situation and asked how many practitioners were among the ship's crew.

When I said that I was the only one, he said that he could not allow every person who had a different religion to enshrine their objects of devotion in the chapel. He said that according to ship's policy, there must be at least eight practitioners of a certain religion to justify use of the chapel. Eight? Why eight? He then explained why it was eight and restated that it was ship's policy. At the conclusion of our meeting, he mentioned that I was welcome to attend any of the other religious services that were available in the ship's chapel.

Needless to say, I was disappointed and felt hopeless. So that night, searching for comfort, I wrote a long letter to my mother explaining in great detail my meeting with the chaplain. I shared my feelings of hopelessness and how difficult it was to practice on my own. I mailed the letter to my mom and a couple weeks later I received her reply. It was only a postcard that read: “Stop complaining. Do *shakubuku!* Love, Mom.” Although this letter was not quite the comfort that I was searching for from my mother, it was exactly what I needed to hear at that time.

Most of my friends already knew about my practice, many respected it, some made fun of it. Either way I began to chant to have the courage to introduce them to Buddhism. Amazingly the more I chanted this way, the more my friends would ask me about this practice. In a month's time, I had introduced seven of my friends to this practice. I then made an appointment with the chaplain again and told him that we now had eight practitioners of the Daishonin's Buddhism on our ship and provided him a list of our names. No doubt he was astonished and somewhat skeptical. But he provided me with a key to the ship's chapel and granted our use of it. From then on every morning and evening the crew members throughout the ship would hear the public announcement “Morning gongyo will be held in the ship's chapel, evening gongyo will be held in the ship's chapel.”

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Through this experience I realized I had forgotten that the key to our safe navigation to happiness is nothing other than to introduce our friends to this wonderful practice. This fundamental compassionate action will not only help us overcome our own suffering, but will provide our friends with a vessel to reach the shore of their own dreams.

Richard Sasaki: The discussion meeting is the main arena in our organization where we can carry out efforts to share this Buddhism with others. In his “Thoughts on The New Human Revolution” titled, “Our Courageous Propagation of Buddhism,” SGI President Ikeda writes: “Propagation is the lifeblood of religion. A religion without propagation efforts has abandoned the basic function of religion — to reach out to people and help them.” As he mentions, the spirit to help those who are struggling and suffering is an important part of our practice, one that we must always keep in mind.

The successive presidents of the Soka Gakkai have all been champions of propagation. In the same article, President Ikeda mentions: “When Mr. Toda became the second president of the Soka Gakkai and made his vow to attain a membership of 750,000 households, I pledged, ‘Mr. Toda is my mentor in propagation; as his disciple, I vow to become a true champion of propagation.’ And having made that pledge, I threw myself wholeheartedly into this challenge, creating the groundswell for unprecedented propagation in Kamata, in Bunkyo, in Osaka, in Yamaguchi.”

Under Mr. Toda’s leadership, President Ikeda created an amazing victory of propagation in every area for which he assumed responsibility. He knew that the heart of his mentor was to share this Buddhism with all those people who were suffering in society, and he made this his heart also. Since Mr. Toda’s death, President Ikeda has led the worldwide spread of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, again responding to the expectations of his mentor.

The history of the Soka Gakkai is one of propagation — an effort to help people in society. In SGI-USA, let’s similarly create a history of propagation where we reach out to our friends and family and share this Buddhism with them so that they can become happy. I myself was able to introduce a new member to this practice last year and I was so happy to see his excitement and the growth in his life. I believe if each of us starts with the spirit of propagation first, we can all create a great victory in 1999.

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