

**ENTRANCE-LEVEL EXAM TO BE HELD IN APRIL
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This April 25 we will be holding the SGI-USA Study Department Entrance-level Examination. I know there are many people who don't even like to hear the word *examination*. Past experiences with tests—of being judged by their scores and of facing negative consequences for failing—have made it an experience they wish not to repeat. Although examinations are often tools for evaluating a person's knowledge and ability in a particular field or skill, the SGI study examination is intended as a means to encourage us to study Nichiren Daishonin's teachings and deepen our faith and practice. Far more important than the score we receive is the studying itself and what we capture of Nichiren Daishonin's spirit and wisdom in the process. SGI members who have challenged themselves to study in the midst of hectic daily schedules and advanced in their practice even a little as a result are all winners, regardless of the test score.

Study programs and examinations are an important tradition in the history of our organization. In a few recent installments of "The New Human Revolution" that appeared in the *World Tribune*, SGI President Ikeda writes about attending study department exams in Los Angeles in the early 1960s. His character in the novel, Shin'ichi Yamamoto, tells the participants: "Some of you must be wondering why we have to study such difficult Buddhist theory, when surely it's simply enough to chant and receive benefit. Please bear in mind, however, that while correct faith does bring tremendous benefit, it is also fraught with obstacles and difficulties. Unless you have a solid grounding in study, you'll start to have doubts when problems arise" (Jan. 15 *World Tribune*, p. 5).

Of course the spirit and tradition of the SGI's study program originated with Nichiren Daishonin. In his writing "The True Entity of Life," he states: "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). And the Daishonin's immediate successor, Nikko Shonin, also emphasized the importance of study in his writings. In his "Twenty-six Admonitions of Nikko," article 11 states, "Followers of this school should engrave the teachings of the Goshu in their lives and thereby inherit the ultimate principles expounded by the master."

Throughout his life, Nichiren Daishonin wrote a multitude of letters addressing a wide variety of issues and principles to people of very diverse circumstances. Some of these are essential doctrinal writings that explain his profound philosophy, and others are compassionate letters of encouragement to disciples facing life-and-death situations. Many contain very clear and concrete instructions and guidance that practitioners can readily apply to their daily lives. All represent his active efforts to lead people — ultimately all of humankind — from misery. The Daishonin's writings are great works of living philosophy and humanity and constitute a clear textbook for living a valuable and courageous life. Nikko Shonin, the Daishonin's successor, carried on his spirit and protected his writings, making clear that they contained the Daishonin's eternal teachings.

Nevertheless, as time passed, the priesthood repeatedly strayed from the founder's spirit and the laity were no longer encouraged to study Buddhism. Naturally, without study there was little or no way for the laity to tell whether the priests were on the right course or to put the teachings into practice. This is one of the things that the Daishonin was admonishing against in the passage, "Without practice and study, there can be no

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Buddhism” (MW-1, 95).

It was only with the emergence of the Soka Gakkai and the efforts of its presidents that the spirit of the two ways of practice and study was reborn. As a result, Nichiren Daishonin’s teachings have spread throughout the world, as he wrote that they would.

During World War II, the laity was severely persecuted by the military authorities, and the majority of the membership abandoned their faith. President Toda later declared, “Without study, the members didn’t really understand faith. They became frightened and were defeated by persecution. It was very unfortunate. I’m determined that mistake will not be repeated.”

With this in mind, Mr. Toda published *The Complete Works of Nichiren Daishonin* (Jpn *Gosho Zenshu*), containing over 400 writings. It marked the first time in the 700 years since the Daishonin that such a work was available.

The tradition of the Soka Gakkai’s study program evolved through study meetings and examinations. This unique program by which ordinary people master the deep philosophy of Buddhism has now expanded to include millions all over the world.

In his current essay series, SGI President Ikeda clarified why the study of the Daishonin’s teachings is so important with three points: “First, Buddhist study deepens faith...,” he said, and “second, study gives impetus to the advancement of kosen-rufu....

“Third,” he concluded, “study is the key to establishing a new humanistic philosophy” (Sept. 25, 1998, *World Tribune*, p.4).

I ask that every responsible leader actively visit each district and group and give their full support and assistance to those taking the exam. Often a “study-buddy” system works well with each person paired with another examinee or small group to study together.

Sample questions, from which the actual exam will be made, have been published in the Jan. 29 *World Tribune*. Reading the exam material, and then going through the sample questions a few at a time until you are familiar with all of them, may be helpful in preparing for the exam. Let’s encourage everyone eligible to take the upcoming Entrance-level exam, so that they can deepen their understanding of Buddhism, strengthen their faith and practice for kosen-rufu, and create a firm basis for their personal growth and happiness.

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