

## THE GREATER THE OBSTACLES, THE GREATER THE BENEFITS

**SGI President Ikeda shares the experience of SGI-USA member and master trumpeter Shunzo Ono in part 2 of his February Headquarters Leaders Meeting speech. When Mr. Ono was in a car accident and injured to the point that he could no longer play his instrument, he determined that — precisely because of this ordeal — he would become the best trumpeter in the world. ‘The greater and more trying the obstacles, the greater our benefit when we overcome them,’ President Ikeda explains. ‘That is why hardships are a great treasure.’**

In my youth, I studiously read the works of the great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy over and over again. If I weren’t reading something all the time, Mr. Toda would take me severely to task.

Sometimes, the works of the great writers were rather difficult to understand and proved heavy going. Nevertheless, I persevered and read my way through them.

Ultimately, all phenomena are Buddhism — and that includes great literature.

The members of the Young Women’s Division International Group have prepared some very accessible translations of selected passages from Tolstoy’s book *The Pathway of Life*. I thank them for their sincerity in doing so and wish to share a few of those quotes with you today.

Tolstoy writes: “Of all crimes, the worst is causing division among people. Such behavior is characterized by jealousy, fear, resentment, hostility and anger. In other words, malice toward others. It is the crime of hindering a person’s soul from being joined with love to God and his fellow human beings.”

This “malice toward others” corresponds to what we call slandering others in Buddhism.

Tolstoy was not deeply versed in Buddhism, yet much in his thinking resonates with Buddhist thought.

Tolstoy asserts that severing people from God and their fellow human beings is the worst of all crimes. Translated into our context, the worst crime is cutting off those who embrace the Mystic Law from the Gohonzon and Nichiren Daishonin, and disrupting the unity of friends in faith.

The offense of Nikken and others of his ilk — those who seek to divide and destroy the Soka Gakkai, which has inherited the Buddha’s decree — is infinitely grave. In light of the Daishonin’s teachings, theirs are unforgivable offenses.

### **The Gohonzon exists only within us.**

In *The Pathway of Life*, Tolstoy includes the words of many philosophers and thinkers. Tolstoy himself was a writer admired and venerated throughout the world, yet he was never arrogant. He deeply respected the outstanding philosophers and sages of ages past. That is one of the things that made him great.

Tolstoy records, “Kant, the philosopher, remarked that two things excited his wonder above all others: first the stars in the heavens, and second the law of goodness in the soul of man.”

Title: The Greater The Obstacle The Greater The Benefit (2) [shunzo Ono]

Subject: World Tribune 03/12/99 n.3233 p.6 WT990312p06 Hachioji, Tokyo, Japan 02/02/99

Author: Daisaku Ikeda

Keywords: 02/02/99 Benefit Daisaku Dancers Gakkai Greater Hachioji Headquarters Ikeda Japan Leaders Major Meeting Musicians Obstacle Ono] People President Singers Soka Speech Speeches Tokyo Tribune Worl

This concurs with the Buddhist view of the cosmos. “The stars in the heavens” — there are hundreds of billions of planets like ours in the universe. But equally as wondrous and intriguing is the human heart.

Kant’s concept of an inner moral law that guides human behavior is quite famous, and Tolstoy refers to it as the “law of goodness in people’s hearts.” In terms of Buddhism, it corresponds to the law of the innate Buddha nature of each individual.

President Toda says, “Along with the universe — no, in fact, even more than the universe — we must study the depths, the inner reaches, of life itself.”

Tolstoy also writes: “God cannot be comprehended by reason. We know that He is, only because we are conscious of Him within, and not because we recognize Him with our minds. In order to be a true man, man must be conscious of God within.”

This corresponds to our belief as Buddhists that the Gohonzon, in the Daishonin’s words, “exists only within the mortal flesh of us ordinary people who embrace the Lotus Sutra and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 213).

Tolstoy also paraphrases the German religious poet Angelus: “Man, do not remain man. Become God, only then will you make of yourself what you ought.”

As Buddhists, we can interpret these words as guiding us to devote ourselves to Buddhist practice, guiding us to attaining enlightenment in this lifetime. They are words of great wisdom.

### **Unless we answer the fundamental question of death, we can never create a humanistic civilization.**

About death, Tolstoy says the following: “Death is more certain than the morrow, than night following day, than winter following summer. Why is it then that we prepare for the night and for the winter time, but do not prepare for death? We must prepare for death.”

I spoke about this subject with British historian Arnold J. Toynbee, who described modern civilization as being self-deceptive; people avoid confronting the question of death, seeking only short-term glory and honors. Unless we answer the fundamental question of death, though, we cannot hope to have a humanistic civilization — this was Dr. Toynbee’s conclusion.

This is why he really wanted to meet me, the leader of a lay Buddhist organization. The elderly Dr. Toynbee could not make the long journey to Japan, and as I was in my 40s, almost half his age, I flew to see him in London.

### **The best way to prepare for death is to live well.**

Tolstoy further states that “there is only one way to prepare for death — and that is to live well. The better the life which we live, the less is the fear of death, and the easier is death itself. For the man of holiness there is no death.”

Who is most praiseworthy? Is it powerful figures? Is it famous people? Is it those who have positions, titles, wealth? The answer is a categorical no.

Most praiseworthy are those who work for the happiness and welfare of others, those who carry out noble deeds, those who know the importance of preparing for death, who live their lives in readiness for death. Such people live unsurpassed lives.

All of you are such people. Our SGI activities are noble deeds — this is the realm of

faith in the Daishonin's Buddhism. All of you are the most fortunate people in the world.

Let's give a cheer for the SGI! What do you say?

Tolstoy paraphrases the Chinese philosopher Lao-tsu: "He who knows others is well-informed, he who knows himself is enlightened. He who overcomes others is strong, he who overcomes himself is powerful. But he who dying knows that he is not destroyed is eternal."

Our journey is along the path to everlasting victory.

### **The word 'genius' really means effort.**

For my birthday in January, I received a wonderful present from the internationally acclaimed trumpeter Shunzo Ono, who lives in the United States. It was a CD of 20 beloved tunes and Gakkai songs, which he personally performed and recorded for me. I listen to it every day, over and over again. Each number is a shining jewel of Mr. Ono's sincerity.

As an expression of my appreciation, I immediately sent him this poem:

*Reverberating to the heavens  
How magnificent is the sound  
You bring forth  
From your instrument  
With such genius!*

*Genius* is a synonym for effort. And Mr. Ono has made unflagging, often excruciating efforts.

Mr. Ono is 49, a fellow SGI member who has overcome countless painful trials and tribulations. He has lived through a serious car crash and cancer.

His trumpet playing thus resounds with the fervor of a genuine hero of life. It is the reverberation of "wonderful sound" like that referred to in the Lotus Sutra — a sound that can only be produced by a person who has been face-to-face with death and who has joined his destiny with the SGI.

From the instrument of his life, which Mr. Ono has forged and tempered through hardship and struggle, there resounds soul-stirring melodies of courage. They exhort us to "Survive! Win!" This is the message that his music conveys to me.

### **People who fail to work hard or challenge themselves have no roots.**

Mr. Ono is a proud former member of the Soka Gakkai's Chubu Brass Band. After moving to the United States, too, he energetically threw himself into activities, serving as a young men's division territory leader and Brass Band leader. He was also active in the Soka Group. He has exerted himself in SGI activities alongside his fellow members, on the very front lines of the kosen-rufu organization.

Those who shun making efforts in the organization cannot forge true character or humanity. No matter how famous they may become, people who fail to work hard or challenge difficulties have no foundation or roots. They tend to go to pieces the minute some crisis occurs.

When I visited the Miami Training Center in February 1987, Mr. Ono was there from New York as a Soka Group member. He worked tirelessly behind the scenes throughout. I will never forget his spirited demeanor for as long as I live.

Today, Mr. Ono and his wife, Kazuko, are district-level leaders in New York. Despite the international reputation he enjoys in his field, Mr. Ono is just as sincere and dedicated in his Buddhist practice as ever. He is not arrogant or pretentious in the least. A world-renowned artist, he remains first and foremost an SGI member.

Mr. Ono respects and attaches great importance to the SGI. He is also continually introducing others to the Daishonin's Buddhism, increasing the ranks of capable people for kosen-rufu.

In addition, he is also diligent in carrying out home visits to his fellow members. He is truly admirable.

Fame is ephemeral. What counts is our humanity.

There have been individuals who, as soon as they gained a bit of fame, began to look down on the members who taught them about faith, completely forgetting everything they owed them. Such people have already destroyed their good fortune; they are destined to suffer a fall in the end. This accords with the strict workings of the Buddhist law of cause and effect.

Mr. Ono has just to hear that a fellow member is in trouble or suffering from some problem, and he is off to see and encourage him or her — with the speed of an ambulance rushing to the scene of an emergency. Numberless are the friends who have stood up with courage and joy as a result of his warm support and encouragement.

There is no more noble deed than supporting and protecting our fellow members, precious emissaries of the Buddha.

### **Nichiren Daishonin assures us that we can transform any poison in our lives into medicine.**

In December 1988, while being driven home by a friend after giving personal guidance, Mr. Ono was involved in a car crash.

I hope that all of you will always take the greatest care to ensure you never cause a car accident.

In the crash, Mr. Ono's front teeth were knocked out, and the flesh of his upper lip was severely torn. It was a terrible crisis for a professional trumpeter. Even after his wounds had healed, the muscle had been so severely damaged that, no matter how hard he tried to blow, he could no longer produce any sound at all from his trumpet.

But Mr. Ono did not give up. He did not lose heart. Here we see the true mettle of an artist of the Mystic Law. He said that, far from despairing, he was convinced that — as a result of this ordeal — he could become the best trumpeter in the world.

Actually, in his youth, Mr. Ono had neither the opportunity nor the money to attend music school. He was largely self-taught, practicing hard and honing and perfecting his playing on his own.

He decided that the obstacle of this accident signaled it was time for him to go back to the basics, to really start over again from the beginning. He sought as his mentors the top trumpeters in the United States and humbly received training and instruction from them.

As a result, he says he developed many tens of times the concentration he had previously, plus the ability to produce exactly the sound he wanted — with the precision of an

arrow hitting its target.

The Daishonin writes, “The three obstacles and four devils will invariably appear, and the wise will rejoice while the foolish will retreat” (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 244). Mr. Ono was wise. He did not retreat.

No one is free from life’s sorrows and sufferings. The key is: How do we triumph over them?

Through surmounting and winning over obstacles, we elevate our life-condition until, suddenly, limitless horizons stretch before us. The greater and more trying the obstacles, the greater our benefit when we overcome them. That is why hardships are a great treasure.

As I have mentioned many times, the late Japanese industrialist Konosuke Matsushita once said on a visit to Soka University: “Mr. Ikeda, how true it is that young people ought to struggle during their youth and even deliberately seek out hard work. I’ve no time for those who are strangers to hardship.”

The Daishonin’s Buddhism expounds the Mystic Law, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, which enables us to transform earthly desires into enlightenment. The Daishonin assures us that we can, without fail, lead lives in which negative effects are transformed into benefits, where poison is turned into medicine.

He declares, “Though misfortune may occur, we can transform it into a blessing” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 979).

*Part 2 of SGI President Ikeda’s speech at the 31st Soka Gakkai Headquarters Leaders Meeting, held at the Tokyo Makiguchi Memorial Hall in Hachioji, Feb. 2. Part 1 appeared in last week’s issue; part 3 will appear in next week’s.*