

AN ESSAY BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA HOKKAIDO, HOME OF THE HEART

President Ikeda praises Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island, in this essay. He shares the experience of an elderly Hokkaido men's division member, whose spirit to widely propagate the Daishonin's philosophy, regardless of what others said or did, epitomizes the pioneering Hokkaido spirit — and the Soka Gakkai spirit.

Hokkaido and I are one. Its spacious plains are always in my heart. Whenever I think of our comrades there, transforming suffering into joy in that frozen landscape, toasting one another's mission and happiness, I am inspired and filled with fresh energy.

That day 40 years ago, Hokkaido was just as beautiful and majestic. I was making my first trip to Asahikawa. I got up early to make the five-hour journey there from Otaru. On the way, I gazed out at the magical winter scenery, snow sparkling like silver as far as I could see.

It was Jan. 16, 1959. We had just ushered in the first New Year since President Toda's death. I had decided to focus on the prefecture where my mentor had grown up. Leaving behind the sadness of the past, I made my way to Hokkaido with the sun, moon, and stars of tomorrow as my companions.

When I got off the train at Asahikawa Station, it was 10 below zero, yet the hearts of the members who greeted me were as warm and bright as the sun. I went directly to a guidance meeting, for which members from Wakkanai, Abashiri, Kitami, Mombetsu, Rumoi and other areas had gathered. I wanted to meet these precious, praiseworthy friends as soon as possible.

Not all the members could fit inside the meeting place, and many young men's and young women's division members stood outside to hear me, snowflakes swirling in the air around them. Those standing near the eaves remained unperturbed even when clumps of fresh snow slid from the roof onto their heads. Such was the youth's passionate seeking spirit. When I later heard about this, I was deeply moved and, with profound respect and reverence, offered prayers for their happiness.

Before I left for Hokkaido, a leader muttered to me, "Why don't you wait until it's warmer?" His remark had a distinct air of reproach about it. I recall that he was a graduate of a leading university and the type of person who always tried to get ahead with the least possible effort.

"It is the responsibility of leaders," I replied, "to devote their attention to the toughest challenges. Isn't faith in the Lotus Sutra, in Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, about turning winter into spring?"

The true essence of kosen-rufu is taking action where people are experiencing the greatest adversity and to win over all difficulties there. The spirit of a true comrade in faith is to cherish and respect as Buddhas and bodhisattvas those intrepidly struggling amid a storm of difficulties and to wholeheartedly encourage and support them.

On that winter 1959 trip to Hokkaido, I also proudly revisited places that held many fond memories for me — Otaru, Yubari and Sapporo — old battlefields I had fought on

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alongside Mr. Toda in our struggle for kosen-rufu. I had sung songs in warm camaraderie with my youth division brothers and sisters in those place, and I had encouraged the youth there with all my heart to stand up with the passionate spirit to propagate the Daishonin's Buddhism.

Both Mr. Makiguchi and Mr. Toda had deep links with Hokkaido. My first trip to Hokkaido was in the summer of 1954, 45 years ago.

I will never forget traveling with Mr. Toda to his hometown, Atsuta Village. I stood alone that day on the Atsuta seashore, gazing at the ocean, envisioning the dream of world-wide kosen-rufu, a journey I knew would be accompanied by both joy and hardship.

I remember, too, something that took place at the Headquarters Leaders Meeting on Nov. 16, 1979, commemorating the anniversary of the Soka Gakkai's founding [Nov. 18, 1930]. There was, at that time, a group of crafty, dishonest leaders who wanted to split and destroy the Gakkai. A group of evil priests exploited them in their own attempt to control the Gakkai.

At this meeting, an elderly men's division member, who possessed a most amazing resolve and commitment, gave an experience that reverberated with a renewed, everlasting determination to defend the Gakkai. "I am, as you can see, a granddad block leader of Teuri Greater Block in Hokkaido": His opening words rang through the Toda Memorial Auditorium in Sugamo, Tokyo, instantly changing the atmosphere.

Saichi Saga, then 71, was a greater block leader (corresponding today to the position of district leader), and he was the first member to practice the Dai-shonin's Buddhism on the tiny island of Teuri, located in the Japan Sea. He had joined the Soka Gakkai in 1955 and enthusiastically gone around the island introducing others to Buddhism, even though his fellow islanders jeered and mocked him as being crazy.

The experience he related at the meeting was a wonderful, inspiring one: He told how he had recovered from two major accidents, was now running the best hotel on the island and had become one of the most trusted, respected citizens in his community.

I heard all this sitting in a nearby waiting room. At the end of his experience, Mr. Saga declared: "I am an old man, who will soon be 72. But I still have the enthusiasm of a rushing torrents, a dream as unbounded as the skies above and a purity like that of fresh snow. Striving with an eternally youthful spirit, I am determined to achieve kosen-rufu on Teuri Island by my 80th birthday!

"If I haven't accomplished this by 80," he concluded, "I will hang on until I am 100, no matter what it takes. I am prepared to keep fighting with iron resolve, until I have achieved my goal!"

At that time, even the top Soka Gakkai leaders, whose purpose it was to defend the organization, had slackened in their fervor to realize kosen-rufu — as if they were being intimidated by these attempts to suppress the Gakkai. An ordinary member from Hokkaido let loose a great lion's roar to keep up the struggle.

I heartily applauded him. After the meeting, I put my arm around the shoulder of this nameless hero of faith and offered him words of support and encouragement.

Twenty years have passed since then. And today, three quarters of the population on Teuri Island are sympathetic to the Soka Gakkai and 20 percent are longtime subscribers to the *Seikyo Shimbum*, the Soka Gakkai's daily newspaper. Now, at more than 90, Mr. Saga is still active as a chapter vice leader. He declares with vigor, "I can still show these

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young ones a thing or two!"

To do one's best to widely propagate the Daishonin's philosophy, regardless of what other may say or do.... To determine to succeed, no matter what.... This is the Gakkai spirit. It is the pioneering spirit that built Hokkaido, home of the heart, which people all over the world are longing to visit.

As long as this spirit prevails, Hokkaido will withstand every blizzard and storm. The spring of hope of the new century will come, without fail. I will pray all my life for the health, longevity and victory of our hardy Hokkaido members.

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