

CULTURE DEPARTMENT PANEL DISCUSSES ITS MISSION

On Jan. 30, 26 Culture Department leaders from across the United States gathered for one day at the new Los Angeles Friendship Center. They met to lay the foundation for opening the new century with a Culture Department reinvigorated with a fresh understanding of its humanistic mission and a firm commitment to accomplishing our SGI-USA goals. Participants were guided in their dialogues by the message SGI President Ikeda sent to them (Feb. 12 World Tribune and March Living Buddhism). The result of that conference is the new Culture Department Mission Statement reprinted on page 7.

Recently, the World Tribune staff sponsored a panel discussion regarding the mission statement with five national Culture Department leaders: Eric Hauber, director; Greg Martin, vice director; Gerry Hall, senior advisor; Linda Johnson, Legal Division director; Gail Thomas, Academic Division director.

World Tribune: Thank you for taking the time from your busy schedules to talk with us about the exciting new developments within the Culture Department. Let's begin with the most natural question. What do you believe is the significance of the Culture Department's mission statement, rewritten during the conference? It now reads: "Our mission is to nurture promising, capable people of faith and intellect who are vital to the development of the United States and who exemplify humanistic leadership, embracing wisdom, hope and compassion."

Greg Martin: Let me say first how happy I am to now be in the Culture Department. Since its establishment nine years ago, I was an interested observer. Therefore, my comments today may be somewhat uninformed. I see a subtle shift in emphasis. Up to this point, we seemed to put the priority on members developing themselves in their respective fields. Now, the emphasis is enlarged to include nurturing others in the realm of faith. It implies that we have made great strides in our professions, but now it is time to increase our attention to nurturing others. It reminds me of Nichiren Daishonin's words, "But now you must build your reputation as a votary of the Lotus Sutra and devote yourself to it."

Gerry Hall: The heart of this statement is actually the same goal that the Culture Department has had from its beginning. The new phrasing includes the words to nurture, and I agree with Greg that this indicates a new maturity among the members of the department developed over the last nine years.

Linda Johnson: The mission statement clearly recognizes that to contribute to a positive change in society, it is vital that we be individuals who earn the respect of our colleagues through our expertise in our field, as well as through the way we behave. We need new role models of humanistic leadership, of individuals dedicated to using their careers to affect their surroundings in a positive manner.

Gail Thomas: I agree with Linda. It's a "crystal clear" target for Culture Department members. The focus on both faith and intellect emphasizes their dual importance. Many of us, including myself, came to Buddhism seeking faith because we realized that our

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intellect and academic training were not enough. This is an important point to keep in mind when we think about how to nurture capable people both inside and outside of the SGI. The heart of this thinking is propagation. SGI General Director Wada told us recently that any positive action on behalf of another is propagation.

WT: The first objective calls for us “To foster a steady stream of capable Culture Department members, beginning with ourselves.” What do you see as some key actions under this objective that can be taken both as an individual and by the Culture Department as a whole?

Gail: To foster a “steady stream,” I think, begins with a “me first” attitude, i.e., that I will be the first steady stream. Then I need strong and sincere prayer to have the wisdom and courage to truly do it. We are quite conspicuous as SGI and Culture Department members in our work places and in our local communities. In one of his poems (August 1998 *Living Buddhism*, p. 3), President Ikeda said, “The eyes of the whole world are fixed upon you / My magnificent friends of America / Eager to see our splendid work.” I felt like he was speaking directly to Culture Department members. I interpreted “splendid work” to mean our actual proof that we display everywhere. This, I think, is the best way to foster and expand the stream of capable people.

Eric Hauber: Building on what Gail just said, two strategies strike me. First, developing our personal connection to President Ikeda. This is a foundational element for the Culture Department. The second strategy relates to President Ikeda’s message in which he asks us to “study more deeply and seriously than ever before.” Before we can put the wisdom of Buddhism into our professions, we need to become aware of just what that wisdom is. Soon, the Culture Department will announce a study plan whereby we can discover the deeper elements of Buddhism beneath the surface of our normal study. We will use President Ikeda’s *Lectures on the ‘Expedient Means’ and ‘Life Span’ Chapters of the Lotus Sutra* to accomplish both of these strategies.

Gerry: I think it is important for professionals to realize that they will always encounter stalemates in their careers, and what will enable them to break through deadlocks and set them apart from others in their field will be their inner growth. This invaluable growth of wisdom, creativity and humility can only be gained through acts of compassion, such as practice for the sake of others.

Linda: I really like that point, Gerry. Can I continue with it? For me, this first objective calls for each of us to strive to become first-class people in our respective fields, striving to inspire others through the way in which we live our lives. As part of our “steady stream,” we shouldn’t overlook existing but not yet connected SGI members. We need to look for these new Culture Department members from among qualified members already practicing within the organization but who may not be aware yet of the Culture Department.

WT: What strikes you as particularly important, a point you would personally emphasize to an individual Culture Department member, within the second objective: “To contribute to the achievement of the goals of the SGI-USA?”

Greg: I believe it's the practical path of mentor and disciple. Do we put President Ikeda's encouragement into action within the organization as role models of faith? This objective also calls on us to subscribe to and read our publications, to participate in our discussion meetings, to work to develop the youth and to actively strive to accomplish our organizational goals. President Ikeda, in the *Selected Lectures on the Goshō* (p. 33), reminds us that there are two aspects of our mission: "We are Bodhisattvas of the Earth who contribute to society in two ways: religious or essential, and secular or phenomenal. But if we forget that our mission is to propagate and live by the Law of Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō, we will be unable to carry out the benevolent acts of transient bodhisattvas.... If [we] think of faith only as something to help in overcoming our personal troubles, that person will be lost in a very shallow view of his or her mission."

Eric: Let me point out the last strategy that asks Culture Department leaders to engage in regular, structured dialogue with their line leaders. Frankly speaking, this portion has been largely overlooked in our recent history. With this dialogue, we will create a satisfying atmosphere of understanding and trust. Members will be much happier.

Gerry: I agree that there are many ways to support, through discussion meetings, sharing experiences or writing for our publications, but I feel that the most important thing is to show our own humanity and to actively appreciate and embrace the humanity of others. Our behavior as human beings speaks louder than any lecture, skill or performance.

WT: The third objective — "To play an important and unique role in the SGI's mission to contribute to society" — appears to be where the Culture Department has put its emphasis in recent years. Do you see a new focus in this area either individually or for the Culture Department as a whole?

Linda: I believe this is a fundamental and unchanging *raison d'être* for the Culture Department. We will continue to seek out ways to apply Buddhism to our careers so that we can create a more humanistic professional culture. For example, as a lawyer, it means it is my responsibility to learn how to create a more humanistic approach to the practice of law both inside and outside of the courtroom.

Eric: I am particularly excited by the small-group dialogues in members' homes. Quite a few Culture Department members have expressed to me their desire to share more closely with one another, to have dialogues that bring a more rewarding human contact. Why not a small gathering of Legal Division or Healing Arts Division members, together with a few non-member friends, in someone's apartment with refreshments discussing the ins and outs of legal or medical ethics? It would feel so natural to invite peers and friends. Frankly speaking, I think this strategy should precede the sponsoring of community events. Individual members' development and happiness should come first. Then the community events will be remarkable in their effect.

Greg: That is a very intriguing and fresh idea. It's also very personal and human. Our new culture of humanism can take root right there. They are also a wonderful and practical way to share Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism with others.

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WT: What do you see as the biggest opportunities or challenges facing the Culture Department at this time?

Gerry: The foundation for our Culture Department has been laid. President Ikeda gave tremendous encouragement and showed great personal interest in its first steps toward solidifying that foundation over the past decade. Now it is clear that he has even greater expectations for the members of the Culture Department. The opportunity and challenge for each member is to have confidence that their efforts will make a difference. We need to see our individual actions as a part of the whole SGI movement.

Greg: Individually, I think we are being challenged to manifest our Buddhist wisdom and compassion in our behavior in our professions toward “the creation of a new, more humanistic approach to professionalism.” To practice what we preach. In our old paradigm of Buddhist practice, while we practiced to achieve goals or get the things that we believe will make us happy, one’s behavior during the process sometimes seemed irrelevant. In the new paradigm, the behavior that we exhibit toward others as we strive to show actual proof in our chosen fields must reflect actual proof of our Buddhist practice. This is a challenging mission and responsibility, especially for Culture Department members who often find themselves fulfilling highly visible roles both within and outside of the organization. Yet as Nichiren Daishonin states: “The purpose of Shakyamuni’s advent in this world lies in his behavior as a human being.” What a significant and noble mission!

Linda: I second both Gerry and Greg. I think the biggest challenge is to create new, less formal and more meaningful meetings for each of the professions within each region. These meetings should focus on deepening our understanding of Buddhism and on our ability to apply it to our daily lives, especially in our chosen professions. This will result in expanded membership within the Culture Department, a contributing factor in “fostering a steady stream of capable culture department members.”

Gail: President Ikeda noted that we are traveling in an era of wisdom. To me, this means that our society is in great need of leaders with wisdom, compassion and humanism, in addition to intellect. This is our challenge. When we engage in self-polishing and developing, we can attract and nurture other individuals with these same qualities.

Eric: I believe that our greatest challenge is: Can I be a person with a great, warm heart capable of embracing all types of people because I view things from a Buddhist perspective? This is the heart and soul of President Ikeda’s charge to the Culture Department to create a “new culture for the 21st century.” Everything else is an opportunity — to create a self-motivated faith, to stand alone together, to dialogue toward trust and good will, and to work side by side every day with people who are doing their best to live a contributive life. It doesn’t get any better than that!

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Mission Statement

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Our mission

To nurture promising, capable people of faith and intellect who are vital to the development of the United States and who exemplify humanistic leadership, embracing wisdom, hope and compassion.

We strive to...

Foster a steady stream of capable Culture Department members, beginning with ourselves.

By...

- Continuing to develop our direct connection to SGI President Ikeda by applying his guidance and by corresponding with him directly.
- Studying Buddhism more deeply and seriously than ever before.
- Steadily engaging in dialogue leading to mutual growth and friendship through home visitations, meetings, outings, electronic media, etc.
- Striving for excellence in our respective fields of endeavor.
- Actively searching for prospective Culture Department members from among new and current members, especially youth and graduate students.
- Doing our best to participate in district activities.

Contribute to the achievement of the goals of SGI-USA.

By...

- Being a role model of faith equals daily life.
- Supporting discussion meetings through sharing experiences in faith and presenting topics of interest to the members.
- Engaging the youth division members in dialogue and study appropriate to their needs.
- Contributing to the organization publications (*World Tribune*, *Living Buddhism*, books, pamphlets, etc.).

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- Conducting regular communication meetings with appropriate line level leaders.

**Play an important, unique role in the SGI's mission
to contribute to society.**

By...

- Conducting small-group dialogues in our homes where topics of concern can be discussed with professional colleagues, both member and non-member alike.
- Sponsoring community events which enhance society's understanding of the SGI movement of peace, culture, and education and the principles of the SGI Charter (i.e. seminars, symposia, exhibits, presentations, etc.).
- Applying the wisdom of Buddhism to the creation of a new, more humanistic approach to professionalism in our chosen fields.

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