

IMPRESSIONS OF SGI TRAINING COURSE IN JAPAN

Four hundred SGI members from 52 countries attended the recent SGI Training Course in Japan, June 30 – July 4. The following are impressions of four of the 36 SGI-USA participants.

On July 3, the Day of Mentor and Disciple, all of us, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, started the morning with a commemorative photo session at the new Soka University Central Tower. In the afternoon, we attended a guidance meeting with SGI President Ikeda at Makiguchi Memorial Hall. We then visited the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum where we saw the exhibition “Napoleon Bonaparte: The Man.”

At the meeting President Ikeda announced the formation of an SGI chapter in Yugoslavia; a single individual representing the country was present. This is the essence of our SGI movement — cherishing each human being and bowing to the treasure tower that resides in people’s hearts. I will continue to support this noble mission.

Discussing at length vitality and longevity, President Ikeda also encouraged us that “there is no retirement from faith.”

On the last day of the Training Course, SGI-USA members held two separate question-and-answer sessions. In one of the morning sessions, SGI General Director Eiichi Wada talked about raising the members of the youth division. He said the best time to lay the foundation for youth is while the youngsters are practicing in the Boys and Girls Group.

Mr. Wada told us the things that he remembers most from his youth division experience are the hot soup and rice he was fed by the women division members, rather than the guidance he received. He encouraged us to be warm parents, respecting and taking care of the children.

This training trip gave me the opportunity to share experiences, goodwill and new determinations with new friends I have met from Asia, Africa, Australia, Latin America, Europe and North America. Our Soka Gakkai family, although we are people of many cultures, has one mission — to build a “century of peace.”

Kosen-rufu is a deep heart-to-heart communication among people. It is determined by how we are connected with others.

My experience on this trip reconfirmed that all my efforts in faith, studying Buddhism and supporting SGI activities and ideals prepared me well to learn and grow together with the SGI members I have met. In Buddhism, nothing is wasted.

— TESHAYE ABAGAZ,
Los Angeles

You know how it is when you hear things over and over and over, then, one day it clicks — you get it! Well, while I was in Japan I think I had this experience during a lecture on the oneness of mentor and disciple as taught in the Lotus Sutra. SGI Study Department Chief, Katsuji Saito related, “It is the rhythm of a Buddha to accomplish kosen-rufu.”

He went on to say, “The practice of faith is the spirit that everything starts from now.”

How profound I thought...it doesn't matter what calamities have befallen me. My problems, my lack of fortune, my difficulties in life happily don't mean diddley, as long as I believe that I can start fresh from this moment to pull myself up. Of course, I know this from chanting every morning and evening, but there was something, my frame of mind, or the fact that I was 9,000 miles from my calamities and problems, that made it more real. When I heard this at that moment, I felt so refreshed and ready to start anew, to tackle all obstacles and win over them. A determination welled forth from within me that nothing and nobody could ever discourage me again, for I can start anew from now, this moment in time. I can create the cause to change my future forever. I believe it is this spirit that is at the heart and soul of our mentor President Ikeda. No wonder he's so full of vitality and compassion.

Mr. Saito went on to say, "The message of the Lotus Sutra is definitely that everyone is the Buddha, and the only difference between a Buddha and an ordinary human being is whether they are awakened to this truth. Once awakened to this truth a dramatic transformation occurs and the desire for all people to be awakened to it." Wow man! Isn't that *shakubuku*?

Unbelievable! I thought it was so much more complicated than that. This was crystal clear. I awaken, then I awaken others. I can do that. As Mr. Saito further explained, "Herein lies the Buddha's spirit for compassion. This is why Shakyamuni's statements that all people are equal are true. There is no distinction between people." I realized too that this is why the priesthood is mistaken. The priests think they've got the corner on Buddhahood, but if they did, they would awaken us, not excommunicate us. Nikken's taking himself way too seriously as a Buddha. I'm one too, so are you.

— VAHAN TAFRALIAN,
Las Vegas

An unexpected aspect of this trip for me was the strong connections I made with my fellow SGI-USA members: an instant bond with my roommate from Chicago; sharing a treasure-filled day of exchange meetings with my new friends from Dayton, Ohio, San Diego, Baltimore and New York; hearing news of former Boston members now living in New Orleans, Seattle, and El Paso, Texas; pledging together with SGI Vice President Shigeo Hasegawa to meet again in the year 2020 and share our advancement.

All of the SGI-USA members had the opportunity to meet with Vice President Hasegawa. I would like to share some of his encouragement. He started by saying that he is now 58 years old. He joined when he was 10, and throughout his youth division years, SGI President Ikeda encouraged everyone to aim for May 3, 2001. As a youth that date seemed so far in the future but President Ikeda encouraged everyone to advance no matter what obstacles they may face. Mr. Hasegawa said of course he had obstacles. He often felt like quitting and felt burdened or even bitter. Now that 2001 is so close at hand, he is so happy to have continued and followed President Ikeda.

Mr. Hasegawa elaborated further on the importance of May 3, 2001. He said it is the start of the second seven bells. The stage for the first seven bells was Japan (1930–79). The stage for the second seven bells — beginning May 3, 2001 — is the world. Mr. Hasegawa expressed his hope that America would take the lead in advancing kosen-rufu of the second cycle of the seven bells. The United States is the stage to carry out the glob-

al kosen-rufu movement. As Americans we have a noble, wonderful mission to fulfill. Because in America we have so many problems and issues, that is why we can advance together. When a problem is challenging we can chant seriously and definitely overcome it. He encouraged all of us to aim toward May 3, 2001, so we can make a beautiful departure toward the future.

— EILEEN MILLANE,
Boston

Seven bells is the term given to the seven seven-year periods marking the history of the Soka Gakkai's development from its founding in 1930 through 1979. The second cycle of the seven bells will begin May 3, 2001, marking a new stage of development in the SGI's kosen-rufu movement.

Isshin yok ken butsu. Fu ji shaku shinmyo. We recite these words daily while doing gongyo. These words mean: “yearning to see the Buddha even at the cost of my life.”

These must have been the words that made Abutsu-bo's many trips to meet Nichiren Daishonin, despite treacherous terrain, dangerous circumstances, and old age, a reality. I believe it was my struggle to live these same words that made it possible to meet my mentor, SGI President Ikeda in Japan, at the recently concluded training course.

I embarked on a personal struggle to hone my faith and seeking spirit. Every action became a cause toward attending this training course. In the nine months preceding this course, I introduced nine people to our wonderful practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, chanted hours of daimoku and visited numerous SGI members in my attempt to practice for others. And then it was time.

Four hundred participants from 52 countries — it was like we had always known each other, eternal bonds transcending lifetimes. Every look exchanged, every hug, all the tears unashamedly shed, every experience shared, the celebrities we were made to feel — it was a world like no other.

Unforgettable is the moment when at an exchange meeting, my eyes met those of a pioneer women's division member and instantly we understood each other's struggle without exchanging a word. Each thoughtfully packed gift, some handmade, each lingering handshake — all were testimony of the Gakkai's world without borders, of respecting and learning from our differences, a world that is truly magnificent and worth giving one's life to.

I am back though my heart still wanders there. And now to my mentor, President Ikeda, I must pay the greatest tribute I can: to work with all my heart for others' happiness. This is President Ikeda's heart. Therefore, this is my pledge, my source, the point I will always return to. Again and again, I will keep a seeking mind. *Isshin yok ken butsu. Fu ji shaku shinmyo.*

— SHAILENDRA PRATAPJAIN,
Rochester, N.Y.