

EXPERIENCE—ALWIN HARDING, WASHINGTON, D.C. UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERSONAL GROWTH

SGI-USA Medical Division Leader Dr. Alwin Harding, of Washington, D.C., gave prison inmates a means to change their lives, never realizing the difference it would make in his own life.

In March 1990, I began working for the District of Columbia government as a health care provider for the prison system. Prior to my employment in the prison system, I had a distaste for law enforcement, especially prisons and the incarcerated. Somehow I was sought out, and the encouragement of SGI President Ikeda in 1990 confirmed my decision to accept the position. I was fearful, but the warm reception that I received from the staff and the prisoners quickly diminished my prejudices to a great degree.

The life of a prisoner as I saw it was beset by danger of every kind: Correctional staff trying to create order may at times mete out unusual cruelty; fellow prisoners are tense and can also be a source of harm. There is no trust: Individuals might stay awake all night and sleep only during the daytime hours. There is an atmosphere of absolute tension. One may say it is the condition of the four lower worlds—Hell, Hunger, Animality, Anger.

Many efforts are made within the institution to rehabilitate the prisoners. There is psychological and psychiatric counseling to alleviate the effects of stress prior to and after incarceration. Other programs include academics, physical fitness and conflict resolution studies. The impact of these programs appears to be just nominal.

When I witnessed such and felt the unhappiness, I was unable to hold back from offering the only solution that I knew: the practice of Buddhism (I began my practice with the SGI in Washington, D.C., in 1968). As I explored further, I found former patients: Those whom I had treated when they were infants and toddlers were among this prison population; there were fathers and husbands of my patients; there were children of my Buddhist brothers and sisters. Opening my eyes more, I realized that my new environment was not as foreign as I had at first thought.

I knew that it would have been foolhardy to propagate Buddhism in this so structured society. There was rampant suffering of every kind: illness, loneliness, anger, despair. Though I initially hesitated, I knew that I could not remain silent very long. Once I determined that I would make a difference, I began by simply suggesting to one person and then another that they chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, assuring them that they would see a difference in their own lives. That was the extent of my initial effort. I would later learn that many had heard of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and had been previously introduced to Buddhism; several had received Gohonzon and practiced for some time. Several patients were surprised that a practice they had so long ago deserted had come back into their lives.

Those early practitioners were receiving benefits and they began introducing the practice to others. They would chant in their dormitories and seek me out when they had questions. Despite the changes that had begun to occur, I was highly criticized for my efforts. To assist in the rehabilitation of these men, I ignored the criticism that I was getting and devoted my lunchtime and after-work hours to teaching gongyo or conducting small discussion meetings. Our weekly discussion meetings began with gongyo and included experiences, questions and answers, and final encouragement. I formed a library by making copies of the publications so that each person could have adequate materials for study. For

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those who showed exceptional interest, there was training as leaders and they took responsibility for teaching others gongyo and conducting chanting sessions. They were also taught the art of encouraging one another. Many questions on the minds of these men related to how to practice nonviolence among their peers. With reading President Ikeda's guidance on the subject, they would try new approaches and the results were usually great successes.

I wanted to share the elements of Buddhism with these people because some of them had long sentences and there is a great process of transfers. I wanted to make sure that long after they were away from me, they could continue to develop peace and happiness within their lives and share their secret with others they might meet.

There is an inmate at Lorton named Wayne Morris who has been striving for many months to establish a formally recognized SGI Buddhist chapter in the prison. He continues his efforts toward that goal despite many obstacles. I receive letters from distant states from some of these young men who continue to practice and share the Buddhist experience with others.

There was a Baptist minister who held weekly dialogues with me on the merits of Buddhism. He would tell me that I am a "good Christian and don't know it." I received similar comments from a fellow physician from India, who is a Muslim. She always sought my opinion on matters of family, religion, war and peace.

An attorney invited me and a group of SGI members to her house to hold a dialogue with her family during a crisis; one of the daughters has become a member of the SGI-USA and is practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism while she is away at college.

I was able to advance from providing basic medical care to supervising a large staff of physicians, nurses, physician assistants and counselors. As a manager, I conducted our monthly staff meetings so as to create an atmosphere of respect and appreciation for everyone. I made myself available at all times to resolve all discrepancies with compassion and to arrive at meaningful solutions. Many staff members would comment on the friendly atmosphere in our workplace and say how much they enjoyed coming to work. I sought to bring about appreciation for our diversity—the staff was international with varied professions. I was adamant that our patients be made to feel appreciated and given the best treatment in an honorable manner. When family members called inquiring about the condition of sick imprisoned relatives, they were always treated courteously.

I no longer work for the District of Columbia government. So as I reflect on my nine years of duty there and on my experience, I ponder why I had this unique opportunity. I believe it was for my personal growth so I could develop my ability to touch the lives of persons from whom, under my usual way of thinking, I would have stayed away. Had this experience not occurred, my happiness could never be complete. I greatly appreciate having had that opportunity and thank President Ikeda, my mentor, for making this possible.

I pray constantly that my humble efforts will continue to bear fruit and that happiness will abound in the lives of those unfortunate brothers and sisters who have lost their freedom and that they will take on the mission of bodhisattvas saving others from suffering. If my experience is truly meaningful, I must, in my present circumstance, seize the opportunity every moment to make a difference.

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