

FROM THE GENERAL DIRECTOR A REPORT FROM ALASKA

Greetings to all the readers of Living Buddhism.

As SGI-USA General Director, I have the good fortune to travel the country meeting people who are doing their utmost to improve their communities and help other members.

In June 1983, SGI President Ikeda visited Alaska. Since then, the Alaskan members commemorate his visit each year and refresh their determination toward the future. I was in Alaska for the June celebration.

When I think of Alaska, I envision ice, snow and glaciers, so I was amazed at Alaska's natural unfrozen beauty. June for most Americans is the beginning of summer. But in Alaska, June is still springtime. The temperature was very mild, and I saw beautiful green sprouts emerging from the snow and ice. It was such a beautiful and dramatic sight, and I thought that even here, in this land so close to the Arctic Circle, we can see the drama of new life emerging from barren circumstances. Even here, winter gives way to spring.

I also admired the tenacious efforts of the SGI members here who have continued to commemorate President Ikeda's visit for more than seventeen years. I could see the sprouts of fortune emerging as a result of their persistent efforts. Despite their physical distance from the main body of the SGI-USA members in the other forty-nine states, they are just as close to President Ikeda's heart.

I clearly observed the principle that unseen virtuous efforts bring visible reward. Through persistent efforts, even the most difficult circumstances will produce benefit and result. This principle reflects the inherent vitality of nature, a principle that is at the core of our Buddhist practice.

In our American organization, many pioneers have struggled for forty-plus years, cherishing the dream of sharing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in the United States. In particular, during the past decade, those of you who struggled to take responsibility within our organization must have experienced a difficult time in one way or another. But with the patient and consistent leadership of General Director Fred Zaitso and Women's Leader Wendy Clark, we established a new foundation of growth and progress. And today we can see sprouts and blossoms of development all over the country.

"Unseen virtue brings about visible reward": This is true not only in the life of the individual, where benefit will naturally bloom, but also in our organization where, due to our consistent and tenacious efforts, we enjoy prosperity and harmony. At the same time, the principle of cause and effect is very strict. If any part of our organization is neither prosperous nor harmonious, I hope we can reflect on the unseen and behind-the-scenes actions each of us needs to take to ensure that each member is practicing joyfully and receiving benefit.

During my trip to Alaska, I also met with the city manager of Seward. He shared with me the story of how Alaska came to be acquired by the United States.

The city of Seward was named after the United States Secretary of State William Seward, who is perhaps best remembered as the secretary of state under Abraham Lincoln. He was one of Lincoln's most trusted advisors during the Civil War.

After Lincoln's death, Seward continued to serve as secretary of state. Toward the end of his career, he negotiated the purchase of Alaska, his last act of public renown. In 1867, William Seward purchased 586,412 square miles from Russia for \$7.2 million. Though this worked out to be unbelievably inexpensive, this purchase was widely ridiculed in the government and in the press and was referred to at the time as "Seward's Folly."

The territory was considered an economic liability by the Russians, and most U.S. political and social leaders were focused on the immediate day-to-day concerns of reconstructing the union after the devastation of the Civil War. Alaska was regarded as too remote to be governed, and nobody understood how the purchase of this ice-cold and desolate land could be of any value to the United States.

Of course, today we realize that Alaska is one of the most naturally rich and beautiful parts of our nation. This "icebox" is actually a tremendous jewel. For each penny that Seward spent, millions of dollars have returned. The land is rich in copper, gold, oil and most of all, people. And for environmentalists, the land is a paradise of beauty and untouched terrain. People come from all over the world to admire it.

To people whose vision was entirely focused on the problems of their day, Alaska was a huge liability. To those focused on its unseen and unrealized potential, however, it was a diamond in the rough. It is entirely a matter of perspective and vision. When you have the eyes to see and the ability to create value, any circumstances can be the ground from which the greatest benefit springs.

This story of the acquisition of Alaska was another reminder of the struggles that pioneers—people with a unique vision—go through. True pioneers, true visionaries, are often misunderstood and ridiculed. But such people don't live for praise or honor; they live for the sake of the generations to come. Some people in our lives—in our families or in our communities—may not understand what we are trying to do, but we should be confident we are acting for the sake of the people of the next century and will all indeed be honored as visionaries and heroes.

Therefore, I would like to express my deep appreciation to all of you. Because of your consistent efforts, all over the United States, our SGI organization is showing dynamic progress, and the blossoms of benefit and joy can be seen everywhere. Because of your efforts, spring has come to the SGI-USA.

Daniel K. Nagashima
SGI-USA General Director