

WHAT SOKA SPIRIT MEANS TO US

Adialogue on Soka Spirit with Vice YMD Leader Jeff Farr, Student Division leaders Wendy DeSouza and Daisaku Leslie, and vice leaders Maggie Eisenberg and Boston Snowden.

Jeff Farr: Many people ask me what they can do in the Soka Spirit movement. There are lots of members, especially youth division members, who want to do more. But they don't know any temple members they can talk to, or everyone in their district already understands the issue. Some people who have talked to me have been really frustrated, feeling there's nothing they can add to the movement. Have you struggled with this? How have you found a way to participate?

Maggie Eisenberg: I believe that this is one of the most challenging aspects of the Soka Spirit movement. Honestly, it was very hard for me to have a deep feeling for something that appeared to have no direct or tangible impact on my life. The first thing that really changed my personal feeling was realizing how strongly SGI President Ikeda feels about triumphing over the destructive force of High Priest Nikken Abe and his followers. I decided to chant to understand President Ikeda's heart on this matter. In my 18 years of practice, I have learned to trust President Ikeda in a way quite similar to the way I trust my mother. Though in the past I may not have understood why she was so strict with me about certain things, I have learned to take the time to try to understand where she is coming from. So my prayer to understand President Ikeda's heart was very effective in changing my feeling about this issue. Though I still did not know what exact action to take, I finally wanted to take action.

Wendy DeSouza: I relate to Maggie's point about connecting Soka Spirit to our own lives. I personally don't think it's necessary to know any temple members to take action and create value. When I started chanting about Soka Spirit, I began to draw connections to my daily life. I realized, for instance, how I lacked compassion for other people. That was a difficult realization, but I am so appreciative that I was able to see that in my life. For me, facing my fears, developing compassion and being self-reliant are the positive actions I have taken to respond to the type of "fire and brimstone" or fear-driven mentality that's coming out of the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood. I believe that human revolution itself is a way to take action in this Soka Spirit movement.

Boston Snowden: I agree with you. I think that self-reliance and confidence are what the priesthood wants to take away from their members. The priesthood wants the members to serve them. They want to drain their members' pockets. Millions of members contributed to the building of one of the most phenomenal works of architecture known to humankind, the Grand Main Temple (Sho-Hondo). High Priest Nikken displayed his selfish behavior by tearing down this monument. This might be obvious to some, and others may not agree — but society has to realize the

truth. Common people throughout the world have been enslaved, learning to believe that they are powerless. I have made a determination to stand up against injustice anywhere and everywhere — this is my Soka Spirit effort.

Maggie: A while back, I was at a meeting in Southern California at which several leaders were passionately imploring everyone to DO SOMETHING, to TAKE ACTION to overcome this conflict with the temple. I started to feel frustrated, even a bit immobilized by the fact that I didn't know any concrete action to take. Finally, one member stood up and said something that struck me. It had occurred to him that, though many people may not know anyone who is at all affiliated with the temple, it is likely that most — if not all of us — know someone who has left the SGI, even if not to go to the temple. And many of these people left with hard feelings. He said that he had decided to start chanting for one of these people, as there were several with whom he had personal connections. This way, his prayer would be heartfelt. I think that this is the epitome of Soka Spirit.

Daisaku Leslie: I like to think of Soka Spirit in broad terms. There are plenty of opportunities for us to personalize this issue. But most important is realizing that the practice of Buddhism entails the struggle between our Buddha nature and devilish functions, both of which, manifest from our own lives. As I practice I have begun to see more clearly my weak points and work to overcome them. For many years, I have been battling with a deep-seated lack of confidence in myself. But when I determined to fight against this tendency, this lack of respect for my own Buddha nature, things began to change. It is a daily struggle but I can say that I am gaining more and more confidence. I feel the key to my winning every day will be to put into practice President Ikeda's recent guidance.

Jeff: Our Soka Spirit effort and our propagation effort are really the same, aren't they? They're like the two sides of a coin. The ultimate intent of both is to plant this Buddhism more deeply in America.

Wendy: That's a really important point. Introducing others to this practice is the ultimate act of compassion and deals the strongest blow to injustice. Connecting Soka Spirit to our own human revolution, and making efforts to propagate Buddhism are a winning combination.