

SHARING BUDDHISM: SOKA SPIRIT IN ACTION

A dialogue 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. This is the second in a series; the first appeared in the Feb. 25 issue of “Seize the Day.”

Jeff: When we introduce Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism to our friends, they always want to know about the SGI organization. This is a great chance to introduce the true history of the Soka Gakkai to them — especially how first and second Soka Gakkai presidents Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda opposed Japan’s nationalism during World War II. They went to prison for not accepting the state religion, Shinto, and there Makiguchi died for his beliefs. I know that many young people will really admire this history.

Boston: I agree. I think explaining our stance toward Nichiren Shoshu early on in our introduction of the SGI-USA is extremely important in letting others know we stand against injustice. The other day I was in the gym with two youth. We talked about so many subjects. I knew someone would eventually bring up the subject of religion. About a minute later, one of the young people asked me what church I belonged to. I replied: “I’m a member of SGI-USA. I practice Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism.” It seemed like all the questions that followed allowed me to naturally share the history of the Soka Gakkai. While discussing our Soka Spirit movement, one of the youth commented, saying, “That’s revolutionary!” I was very encouraged.

Jeff: I can understand why some people might hesitate to tell others about this issue, thinking that our strong stance toward Nichiren Shoshu might turn some people off. But my own experience is that my friends felt much more positive about the SGI after they knew that we had stood up to the priesthood. They appreciated my honesty. In fact, when I share this Buddhism with others, my opening line nowadays is “I’m an excommunicated Buddhist.”

Wendy: Introducing the “spirit” of Soka spirit to my peers happened for me once in a difficult experience I had in graduate school. While taking a Middle East history class, I saw students being treated disrespectfully. Even though all the students complained and suffered, no one did anything. One student went into severe depression about being ridiculed in class for something she said. At the end of the class, the professors asked if there were any improvements to be made. I made some honest suggestions, which took a lot of courage for me. Everyone else either remained silent or pretended their experience was overwhelmingly positive. I was motivated to speak up because I felt I had to take action as a disciple of President Ikeda. I remember a classmate approached me after class and praised me for my honesty. I shared with her the spirit of Buddhism to be on the side of justice. She said she could tell it was because of my faith that I had such integrity. She was a Muslim, and while she showed no interest in ever attending an SGI meeting, she had been struck by Buddhist principles.

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Maggie: For me, Soka spirit and the spirit of propagation are one and the same because they are both about courage. I have been introducing friends to this Buddhism since I was a young teenager. Most of them did not start practicing right away. In fact, most of them waited at least a year, if not several, before starting. I haven't introduced dozens of people, but every person I introduced still practices strongly. I believe this is because my desire for them to practice always came from a sincere sense of compassion for each of their lives. Just as Wendy had to muster up courage to speak out for her classmates, it took a lot of courage for me to ask my friends if they would chant. I worried, especially when I was younger, that my friends would think I was trying to "convert" them, or simply that I was strange because I was not Christian or Jewish. I grew up in a part of San Francisco populated mostly by people of Asian descent, and it was odd to be the Buddhist "white girl." But what I learned was that if I wanted to share this Buddhism with a person because I was truly concerned with his or her happiness, then my intentions would rarely be misunderstood. I think this is how we must regard the members who have joined the temple. Whether we have the opportunity to speak directly to these members, or we are simply chanting for them, if we have this compassion, this concern for their happiness, they will eventually respond.

Daisaku: This morning I read from President Ikeda's series *From Today Onward*. He quoted Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who stated, "There is no happiness without courage nor virtue without struggle." During last year's November commemorative meetings, I was eating at a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant and had copies of *World Tribune*, *Faith Into Action* and *Living Buddhism* sprawled out on the table. A gentleman a few tables away asked me, out of the blue, if what I was reading was about Buddhism. I replied, "Yes," and asked him if he knew anything about Buddhism. He said he used to chant and introduce others to this practice with others. I shared that I practice the same Buddhism. I sensed that he really knew nothing about the SGI. I found out that he was introduced to the practice through a Nichiren Shoshu temple member. I invited him to a meeting and I am trying to maintain my connection with him.

Maggie: And the moral of the story: ALWAYS bring your *World Tribune* to KFC.

Daisaku: That's right, Maggie. You never know when you'll need it! The SGI is spreading a teaching based upon the empowerment of the individual to take responsibility for his or her own happiness without dependence on priests or an outside force. I also realized from that experience that I must study more and continue to develop the conviction that the philosophy the SGI upholds based upon Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is the best thing out there.

Two in a series.