

YOUTH STUDY SEPTEMBER 2000 FRIENDSHIP—THE FORCE TO CHANGE OUR LIVES

SGI President Daisaku Ikeda recently participated in a dialogue with Senior Youth Division Advisor Ed Feasel and SGI-USA High School Division Leaders Nobuko Kobayashi and Steve Mortan. In their discussion, President Ikeda states:

Friendship is the most beautiful of human bonds. It is a relationship that transcends gain and loss. It is not something superficial, nor is it merely to feel sympathy or pity for another person. It is a relationship where, no matter what happens to the other person, you still care about him or her from the bottom of your heart. Friendship is a precious, irreplaceable human treasure.

I hope that you will forge such friendships with one person after another. It may seem like a small thing, but war and violence can be banished from the earth when a network of such friendships enfolds the world. (Feb. 25 *World Tribune*, p. 4)

The following is a discussion on friendship among three SGI-USA youth division study committee members: George Ross from the San Francisco Bay area, Adam Gamble who lives in Cape Cod, Mass., and John Smith from the New Orleans area (John is not quoted in this installment). This discussion will be concluded in next month's Seize the Day youth study page.

George Ross:

Friendship. Many times in my life, it has been my friends who have either gotten me into trouble or saved me from despair, encouraging me to go on. Buddhism teaches that friendship plays a very important role in our practice. Good friends can keep us on track while “bad” friends can lead us toward a life of unhappiness.

I began practicing when I was 17 years old and like many teenagers today, I was not interested in religion. I was only interested in living for myself. Drugs, alcohol, recklessness — you name it, I was doing it. However, my young men's leader, Andy Asboe, was persistent in encouraging me. There were many times I thought something was wrong with this guy to be so concerned with my business. I was suspicious of everything and everyone. I was very rude to him, to say the least.

Soon, my practice waned and I lost control of my life. It was some three-and-a-half years later that I would make contact with the SGI organization again, and all I could think about was my young men's leader who I once thought was so weird. When I was younger, it never occurred to me that he could actually respect me for my potential. But as I began to become serious about improving my life, I looked back on his efforts with appreciation.

Now that I am older and am responsible for other youth members, I try to remember the strength and commitment of Andy, my young men's leader and friend, and how much he made a difference in my life. He is a role model of friendship for me.

Adam Gamble:

Friendship in the SGI is so amazing, George!

Although we live on different coasts, it turns out that we both were influenced by

the same young men's leader early in our practice!

When I was a new member, it was a struggle for me to connect with the SGI. I lived about an hour-and-a-half drive from the nearest SGI center, and the nearest youth division members to me were more than an hour's drive from my home. It could have been very easy for me to drift away from Buddhism at that time.

But after my wife and I received the Gohonzon, Andy and his co-leader Mayumi McWilliams drove nearly two hours to our house, just to chant with us. It was so amazing to think that we were so important to them.

Most importantly, however, was that they visited us in a very natural, earnest way. In fact, we didn't even realize that Andy and Mayumi were "SGI leaders." They were just our friends. They drove through all sorts of weather and traffic, with such big smiles on their faces. Furthermore, they never preached to us. They just showed up with their beads in hand! They chanted with us, shared their daily struggles and victories with us, and listened to ours.

I deeply appreciate SGI President Ikeda's observation that "friendship is the most beautiful of human bonds." I really do aspire to develop the kind of life that Andy and Mayumi showed us, the kind that not only has room for true friends, but also actively seeks them out. This is the kind of friendship that can change people's lives.

George Ross:

I, too, am trying to create a foundation in my life that makes room for other people's friendship.

I remember something that Ed Feasel once shared with me. I was newly appointed as a leader and I had so many ideas for the activity, but I was having difficulty working with the other members. I wondered how I could succeed in my position as a youth leader. Ed said that one time he had a similar struggle and that the more he fought to get his point across, the more resistance he encountered. He realized that before he could expect support from others, he should support them. Ed was encouraging me to be the first one to support other people, to be the first to support their dreams. This is the Buddhist principle that when we support others, we in turn are supported. I instantly understood that he was describing the basic practice for oneself and others.

What I learned was that in order to work with others, the important thing is to recognize our common goal. To me, this means realizing that my goal as a youth leader is to enable each person that I take responsibility for to accomplish his or her goals and dreams.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) What role has friendship played in your Buddhist practice?
- 2) Have there been any leaders who have made an important difference in your life? What did they do that made a difference to you?
- 3) How do you try to be a friend to others? Is there any relationship between understanding Buddhism and being a good friend to others?