

**BEGINNING THE JOURNEY OF FAITH  
DISCOVERING THE JOY OF FAITH AND PRACTICE  
BY KATHLEEN SLATTERY  
LOS ANGELES BUREAU CHIEF**

*The following discussion took place among seven new SGI-USA members from the Culver-Palms Area, Los Angeles, Calif. They talk about the joy of faith and how it has affected their lives.*

**World Tribune: What motivated you to start practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism?**

**Jack Brophy:** What started me practicing was that there was something so universal in the SGI-USA members that I met at the activities. I felt their warmth. I saw their joy and felt their compassion. In making eye contact with different people and conversing before and after the activities, I knew right then that these people have something. I was anxious to learn more right away.

**Susana Sandoval:** That's the best tool for kosen-rufu.

**Jack:** Yeah.

**Susana:** That warmth and compassion. We are all dedicated to world peace. One of the major things that we can do is to show compassion and to be loving and supportive of everybody. We can do this together—so it's not just one individual. We are all together doing this.

**Loretta So:** The members—you feel their energy here—you feel the warmth.

**Tomohiro Hashimoto:** My girlfriend Risa, who lives in Japan, encouraged me to start chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo when I was suffering. She sent me SGI President Ikeda's guidance from the *Seikyo Shimbun* [the Soka Gakkai's daily newspaper].

I have always been dedicated to baseball. When I was 19, I was fortunate to play for the Oakland Athletics club in the minor leagues. Then I had a problem with my shoulder and I was clashing with my teammates because of my personality. When I was visiting Japan, Risa took me to a meeting where President Ikeda talked about Orlando Cepeda. I've always respected Orlando a lot and was surprised to learn that he is an SGI member. That day I decided to join the SGI and received the Gohonzon on May 9, 1999.

**Joan Levine:** My real estate agent introduced me to the practice. I was 48 and buying my first house and doing it all on my own with no second income. Whenever we were waiting for someone to show up like the escrow agent, my real estate agent would say, "Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo." We went into the house that ended up being the condo that I bought. "Whoever lives here has a Gohonzon in their bedroom," she said. So I said, "What's a Gohonzon?" "The Gohonzon is the mandala that we chant to," she said. "That we do gongyo to." And I'm going, "Gongyo? Gohonzon?"

I felt chanting was a very good thing because you use your voice and you have a room

full of people using their voice and creating this harmony. I missed that because I used to sit around and sing with my friends sometimes until 4:00 in the morning. So, every time I had an opportunity to go chant, I just did it. The more I did, the more I wanted to do it.

**Loretta:** I always felt, even as a little girl, I was searching for something, but didn't know what. I was like a lost child. I didn't fit in. In 1990, I moved to the United States from Hong Kong and met a very good friend who had been chanting for 18 years. The first time I sat down and chanted with her in front of the Gohonzon, tears filled my eyes. I thought, "Maybe this is the missing piece?" I love to chant. I received the Gohonzon this past May, and finally feel like I found the missing piece.

**Susana:** I can totally relate, Loretta. I had already changed my life a lot by the time my boss' wife introduced me to the practice. I was a gang member, using drugs, ditching school, and was often picked up by the police. My friend who worked at the police department once asked me with such concern when I got caught ditching school, why I was doing it, what I needed, and asked me what I was missing?

I really cleaned up my act. I went back to school and graduated with my class. I did community service and went to rehab. My mom forgave me, but I still felt like there was something missing, too.

Then my sister invited me to come and live with her in Los Angeles so I could go to college. I loved learning. She gave me 30 days to find a job. It was a week before the 30 days was up when they began experiencing problems with the phone system at her job. They needed someone right away, so she recommended me to her bosses. They ended up hiring me full time.

It turns out that in my office more than half of the people are SGI-USA members, so being introduced to this practice was kind of inevitable. I received the Gohonzon in December 1999, and it was like my cup was filled, I found what I was missing. Just being able to chant every time you have a problem...there's this comfort, like when your mom hugs you. You just feel safe. I think that's what I needed — that security, that feeling of love that I get from practicing this Buddhism.

**Milton Malone:** This practice makes me feel good, too. I was just drowning in negativity. I received the Gohonzon in October 1999.

**Janice Davison:** For most of my life I lived in the South in New Orleans or Alabama. I was a mother and thought that made me complete. But then I moved to Los Angeles and things here were tough. Also, my daughter and I had always been so close, but now she had moved to Atlanta. I could sense her unhappiness about being there and feeling alone in her efforts to get a job. By chanting for her, we connected in a way that allowed me to encourage her. I decided to receive the Gohonzon in July 1999 after chanting for five months because I could see the positive effect chanting had on my feelings and my thoughts.

### **WT: How has your life changed since you began practicing?**

**Milton:** When you're as angry as I was, you seem to attack everything. Inside I had this rage against everything. I used to attack anything and anybody. I used to look at people's

faults and say, “Ok, you’re wrong and I’m right.” What I noticed is I don’t do that anymore or don’t let it overwhelm me anymore. I get along with my mother better and my brother and sister. I’ve talked to my mother more in the last two months than ever in my life.

I’m busier — working more. I like being busy. I have a lot of energy. When I sit around I get negative. But when I’m out working and moving around using up all my energy, I kind of enjoy it. I used to think it was a sell-out going to work. You’re working for the “man.”

That’s what’s changing — no more overwhelming anger. It was holding me back for so long. It’s easy to get angry. It’s easy to lock yourself in that security blanket. Instead of working through it you just get angry, pissed off and storm and break something. That’s too easy. It’s harder and a little more painful to look inside yourself and realize why you’re so angry, and say, “Okay, now I have to change it.”

I’ve been discovering capabilities in myself I never knew were there by participating in Soka Group the past six months; like how I’m able to take charge in a crisis and think on my feet without direction from anyone.

**Tomohiro:** I was so impatient and stubborn. I couldn’t get along with people because my life was so closed. Since I started doing gongyo and chanting, I’m able to control my anger and take even seemingly negative situations more positively. I also started opening up to others. Now I’m surrounded by many good friends. I keep President Ikeda’s guidance in my mind and heart: “If you lose today, then win tomorrow.” “If there’s no hope, then you yourself create hope.” My biggest benefit was that I was meeting Orlando Cepeda in July. After hearing Orlando’s experience of practice and encouragement from President Ikeda, I determined to pursue my goal of becoming a major league baseball player, no matter what.

**Janice:** I chanted about my sensitive nature and to overcome my negativity. Things seemed to get worse and I was miserable, but as I continued to chant, without knowing it, I was getting stronger inside.

In January I was supposed to go in for an operation but it was rescheduled for March. I was suffering so much, and began chanting two to three hours a day. The week of the operation, I increased my chanting to five to six hours a day. Then my sister and my niece were chanting with me on the phone, sometimes for more than 30 minutes. Everyone was getting benefits. I was so nervous. Then on the day of the surgery, I really felt the universe supporting me. Everyone was so attentive and I was taken into surgery. Five hours later, I was back in my room with everyone telling me how great I did. My health is great now.

**Jack:** To me, the most important, most basic and greatest change in me is I finally have a purpose in life since I started chanting. I now know what I want to do in life. I used to always think, “Why was I born, what am I supposed to do, what’s my purpose?”

All the other changes surround that; changes in my personality, my depth of feeling, my ego, patience, greed, anger, my ability to develop virtues that I used to think were just sissy things for women. Being a nice guy? Not me, I didn’t need any of that.

Having a purpose — that’s the greatest change, the biggest benefit.

**Joan:** I’ve always had really severe depressions, where I have been completely non-functional for years at a time. My mother was the same way. I remember, after I first

received the Gohonzon in February of this year and was chanting everyday, I felt this overwhelming feeling of relief that life was truly joyous. Somewhere deep inside me I realized, oh boy, you are so wrong, even your suffering is fabulous—everything is fabulous.

I had some stock that went way up and I made a lot of money and I got this house—these things started happening immediately. But what I was really looking for was to let go of the resentment and open up and lead a more joyous life. For years, I would work all week and sleep all day Saturday. When I first started chanting, I'd go to the Saturday chanting session. I would leave wide-awake with tons of energy and the world was in color. It's just been wonderful. I don't feeling like sleeping all day.

**Susana:** I've learned how to really value my friends, my family, my mother. I was terrible to my mom. We really started talking again, and now we are just the closest in the world. Now I take the love I have from my family and friends all together and I hold them with both hands and I keep them really close to my heart. I chant for them and I think that is one of the biggest benefits I've ever had, just actually realizing that this is what you have been given—from all that darkness, you come to value your family and your friends. Only with this Buddhism could I realize that everything I'd gone through was all for a purpose. I now appreciate what I went through.

**Milton:** Now when I look in the mirror I can say, I am a good, decent person. So what if I get angry, everyone else has that kind of negativity, you're not the only one. I used to be very shy. I would never raise my voice. Now I actually look at people when I'm talking to them. I want to make friends again. I want to talk to more members.

**Jack:** I want to talk to you. You seem like the kind of guy I'd like to talk to.

**Milton:** Thank you.

**Loretta:** Congratulations. I can feel what you talked about, Milton—about feeling angry. There was an article in the *World Tribune* a while ago about how some people get mad and get even. I've stopped getting even and it really takes a lot to make me mad, now. I truly believe my Buddhist practice will help me to become a better person day by day. I'm a nurse. One day I was with a patient in the procedure area while we were waiting for the doctor. Then all of a sudden, the patient asked me, "Are you an SGI member?" I was shocked. "How do you know?" I asked, and she said, "I can feel your energy." She told me she had been practicing for 20 years, and she said: "Of all the people I met here today, you are the happiest one. I can see a glow on your face that the other people don't have, in the way that you talk to me, the way you let me know what was going to happen to give me the comfort, I knew that you were an SGI member."

**Jack:** I was badly injured, lived alone in a big house and could hardly walk or talk. I couldn't even crawl to the kitchen to eat. That's how sick I was. Nancy called and came over with enough food for a week. I was told that I was going to have to have surgery because my nerves in my neck were being crushed. Normally it doesn't heal by itself, but Nancy kept coming over and assisting me in my pain. With Nancy rubbing my neck every night, a little medicine and chanting, even after a big relapse, eventually I didn't need the

surgery. The orthopedic surgeons were amazed.

I saw Nancy's goodness was so deep, I just fell in love with her. I asked her to marry me, and she said: "Oh, get out of here. No way, you're so crazy! We're so different. You've got to be kidding me! You're a big, tall white guy and I'm a little Chinese lady. You're highly educated, I have no education." She could hardly speak English. I said: "I don't care about all these differences. You have that heart, you have that spirit."

I received my SGI-USA membership certificate May 3, 1999, and a few months later we got married. Nancy and I do gongyo every morning and night and read President Ikeda's daily guidance. Nancy's been practicing for 18 years so she really helps me develop myself.

**Tomohiro:** My mother was so impressed by the changes in me, she began practicing and received the Gohonzon on Sept. 3. She tells me that she's happy and chanting about two hours a day. My grandmother, too. She had negative feelings about the SGI, but in one year, because of the changes she sees in me and how happy my mother is, she wants to attend activities. I'm so excited to see so many changes happening in my family.

**Janice:** One evening, my daughter called me in such low spirits. No one seemed to be responding to her resume. I told her she must say Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and we chanted on the phone together for 15 to 20 minutes. The next day she got a job. I talk with her every day and read her the daily guidance from President Ikeda. She said it encouraged her so I sent her a copy. I make sure to talk with everyone I meet about how great chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is and how the SGI can help someone learn more about our Buddhist practice.

**Joan:** For more than 40 years, my emotions and my actions were dominated by my fear of dying. Now, for the first time that I can remember, I'm not afraid of death.

#### **WT: What are your dreams for the future?**

**Tomohiro:** I'm 22 years old now. I will continue to pursue my dream of becoming a Major League baseball player, which I have cherished for a long time. In order to realize my dream, I will never spare my effort and keep chanting.

**Janice:** My health now is great, and I feel I can accomplish all my dreams. I am learning to love myself, and will continue working for kosen-rufu so that everyone can have a chance to become happy.

**Milton:** I've wanted to become a writer since I was 12. Writing everything—poems, scripts, novels. I also want to be a musician, a martial artist and possibly become a leader in the practice in some way. It's only been one year but I know I'm going to be here for the long run and a lot of great things are going to happen. I'm here until kosen-rufu and beyond.

**Susana:** I want to be in a position to touch other people's lives—to help a lot of people like other people have helped me. My Aunt Cilla was my role model, with her kindness and warmth. I want to be someone else's model. I want to be the kind of boss my bosses

are. I want to be that kind of loving and compassionate person.

**Joan:** My original dream was to be happy in my own skin, and to use the gifts I have to actually benefit people. I want to do the work I was put here to do. I continue to struggle with duality in my life. I want to paint for a living. I actually sold one of my paintings after I began chanting. I also want to get busy in the research of aging and it's relationship to cancer. I work in the department of preventive medicine at the University of Southern California. I have known for a long time that I have a lot of gifts, and it's taken a lot to even get that out.

**WT: What do you think would be beneficial for other new members or people just starting to practice to know?**

**Susana:** I would say that if you tell your friend the problem, it's a complaint. But if you take it to the Gohonzon, it's a prayer. If you have any small problems, any big problems, anything—go straight to the Gohonzon first and just chant about it. You'll see it get better.

**Jack:** It's important to remember to never look outside of yourself for the answer because you are already born with the goodness and the wisdom and all the truth you need. Get connected to your Buddhahood.

**Milton:** Gongyo first, and find out what's holding you back. Then do what your afraid to do because that may be the one thing that will set you on the right path.

**Janice:** Recently in the *World Tribune*, there was an article on the power of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with a strong and high life-condition. It explained how when we are chanting and things are not changing, it is because we are looking to change the environment or someone else instead of ourselves. Another article by SGI-USA Women's Leader Matilda Buck explained how each day we have the chance to change our situation, and that for her, chanting was like using a lantern in the dark. When you change, your environment will also. It is about staying focused on the self to fight the evil and bring out the good.