

## **EXPERIENCE—RICK SERNA, SAN MATEO, CALIF. A FEW GOOD FRIENDS**

**After several years working as a Nichiren Shoshu temple administrator, Rick Serna rediscovers the truth of Buddhism and finds his way back to the SGI with the help of his friends.**

There was a time I never thought I'd come back to the SGI. But looking back over my 26 years of practice, it has always been my friends in the SGI that have been there for me and supported my Buddhist practice.

I was raised Catholic, but lost interest during my stay in Vietnam. Then my wife, Junko, introduced me to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism on Dec. 26, 1974, while on vacation in Japan, where she was born. Junko began her practice of Buddhism in 1954.

I, alongside my wife, started attending SGI meetings in mid-1974. I had to attend because Junko didn't have a license to drive yet. As I sat at the back of the meetings, things started to make sense to me. Soon after, Junko got her driver's license, but we continued chanting and attending meetings together in San Mateo, Calif., learning the basics of Buddhist practice: faith, practice and study. With the support of Junko and many leaders within the organization, I developed a consistent practice.

For the first few years as a new member, I questioned where the value was in spending so many hours participating in activities in cold and foggy Daly City, where our community center was at that time. It was during this period that I met some very special people; my young men's leaders tried to encourage me constantly. Of course, I had no idea of their impact at that time in my life, yet these relationships proved to be invaluable and continue to be an important influence in my life.

In time, San Mateo District grew and became two districts, and soon enough, the San Mateo Chapter was born. Members were growing through their constant efforts in Buddhist practice. During this time, I had many opportunities to receive encouragement from then General Director George Williams, and when SGI President Ikeda came to California, I also had many opportunities to be encouraged by his words, actions and compassion.

During my upbringing in this practice, so to speak, President Ikeda and Mr. Williams always showed me the true meaning of a phrase I had heard many times—the stand-alone spirit. And as time went on, I would be tested as to its true meaning. I had developed, as mentioned earlier, deep bonds with a few of my leaders and fellow members, but the most important relationship proved to be between the Gohonzon and me.

After practicing for 14 years in the San Mateo area, we had finally opened our own temple, of which all the members were so proud. I was asked by Mr. Williams to become a member of the temple staff. I was shocked at the invitation and had to go home and talk this over with my wife. I said yes to the offer and resigned from my job as an import agent for a large company.

I began working for the temple in the late 1980s as a temple administrator and did just about everything from mowing the lawn to shopping, bookkeeping and translating. I basically accompanied the chief priest wherever he went. I remember having ceremonies at the temple during the day and then driving to Fresno, Sacramento and San Jose to help

conduct more that same day. At the time, I felt honored and would do anything to protect the temple.

In 1991, however, after the schism between the SGI and the priesthood took place, my life changed dramatically. While I worked for the temple, I also was an active chapter leader within the SGI. I started to feel uncomfortable because I didn't know exactly why the schism happened. Of course, I heard that there was a question of President Ikeda's loyalty toward the priesthood surrounding the singing of "Ode to Joy."

Just being able to continue chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and recite gongyo on a consistent basis was a huge challenge. Because the temple employed me, many SGI leaders and members believed that I should abandon my job immediately. The priests, on the other hand, encouraged me to continue to attend my leaders meetings within the SGI organization. I think people thought I was spying for the priesthood, and eventually I was excluded from leaders meetings within the SGI and was never given any real reasons why. I felt a lack of trust was the real culprit behind my exclusion, and for this reason, I began to mistrust people — especially the leaders — within the SGI.

During this big mess, there was my true friend in Buddhism who called me just to make sure that I was still OK — Cliff Sawyer. I communicated with him as often as possible. He was the young men's leader at that time in San Francisco.

Feeling as if my back were against a wall, I made the decision to protect the priesthood and felt that the priests were supporting my practice. Also I was taught, as many were, that the lineage of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism was handed down from high priest to high priest. I accompanied the priests everywhere and severed my relationship with the SGI. I felt that I had to apply all of my energy toward supporting the temple, including helping to form the temple's separate lay group.

The next seven years would become the darkest period of my life because I felt betrayed by both the SGI and the priests.

In April 1991, my employment ended in various misunderstandings surrounding the lax handling of money that eventually wound up in court. I believe the priests used this as a ploy to get rid of me. I felt the priests manipulated me through trying to sway my opinion about the SGI and President Ikeda while High Priest Nikken Abe was being depicted as a saint. The priests knew of High Priest Nikken's aberrant behavior and nevertheless maintained that even if he wanted to do something wrong, he couldn't because "he had the life-condition of the Daishonin." It seemed that all I was taught by the priests was nothing more than hypocrisy. For the next five years, I stopped practicing Buddhism altogether.

Junko suffered tremendously and was banned from practicing with the temple because she was my wife. I felt as if my life was over. I seriously felt I would be better off dead, that way my wife would not have to worry any longer.

Things got so bad that I began to drink heavily, staying out all night and just not caring about my life — or anything else for that matter. My wife left me because I was never home. I felt completely alone.

After nearly a year, I began to see my wife again. I was living with my mother at that time continuing to drink every night until the bars closed. Junko put me on "probation" for six months before we got back together. I will never forget her undying support and belief in me.

Again, through all of this, one person, Cliff, who is now Southern Zone leader in the SGI-USA, had kept in touch with me — and he's probably the main reason I am practicing today. Danny Nagashima and George Williams kept in touch with my wife — who

continued her practice throughout—trying to convince her of the validity of the SGI. Of course, I was so upset that they were communicating with her. Though Mr. Williams visited me once in my place of work, and I was glad to see him, I couldn't see any future for myself in the SGI. Fortunately, I never forgot his words: "Rick, you are always welcome back into the SGI-USA."

Due to the consistent efforts of people such as Cliff Sawyer, Danny Nagashima and Mr. Williams, Junko and I returned to the SGI in August 1999, and are happily attending district meetings. I had reservations about returning at first because I didn't want to practice in what I had previously experienced as an authoritarian environment, but I now see that the SGI has changed. I could not see that for many years, but now I do.

At first, I didn't feel that the issue of the priesthood needed to be spoken of in our discussion meetings, or any other meeting, that our actions will always speak louder than words. But after several years of working under the priesthood, I feel I must speak out about the atrocities that the priesthood has committed. I know from my own experience that the danger of succumbing to my own fundamental darkness and thereby being swayed by the cunning deception of the priesthood will lead one's life totally astray. Their holier-than-thou-attitude lacks the compassion that Nichiren Daishonin taught. High Priest Nikken's destruction of the Grand Main Temple and other buildings in 1998, without consideration for the members who gave their last monies in many cases, was a true indication of his lack of understanding of the teachings of the Daishonin.

Furthermore, anyone who feels that he has the power to judge who can and cannot practice Buddhism—exemplified through the excommunication of millions of sincere SGI members—simply cannot be a true follower of the Daishonin's teachings.

I honestly feel that President Ikeda is following and practicing the Daishonin's teachings as they were meant to be because he is sincerely teaching people how to practice Buddhism and not how to worship him, and that his guidance is in accordance with those teachings. I will always follow President Ikeda from this point forward in my life.

As common mortals, we all are equal in front of the Gohonzon. Putting this wonderful practice into action makes the difference in our lives. There is nothing more powerful than chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo to the Gohonzon, studying the writings of Nichiren Daishonin and practicing this Buddhism under the proper mentor in life, who for me is Daisaku Ikeda.

In the writing "Questions and Answers About Embracing the Lotus Sutra," the Daishonin states: "When one has had the rare good fortune to be born a human being, and further good fortune to encounter the teachings of Buddhism, how can one waste this opportunity?" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 60). This small phrase has kept me on the quest to find the truth of Buddhism. Again, I will continue to deepen my faith and help others wherever possible to see this same truth.