

## THE PATH OF MY HUMAN REVOLUTION BY YOSHIYA IEDA, WIXOM, MICHIGAN

“So, why do you want to be an astronaut?” This question was the beginning of everything.

In late February 1992, I was visiting my best friend in Madrid, Spain.

Takaaki Yuge and I had gone to the same junior high and high schools and could talk about anything. I had many friends, but he was the one with whom I could share my most intimate dream of becoming an astronaut. He was an invaluable friend to me.

Ever since I saw the flight of the space shuttle on TV when I was 10, I wanted to be an astronaut. However, there were no Japanese astronauts in those days and nobody at that time would have thought a Japanese could possibly become an astronaut. So I had to keep this unrealistic dream to myself in order to avoid being laughed at. Takaaki was the only exception because he had an extraordinary dream as well. His dream was to become a professional guitarist, which seemed just as unrealistic to me. We often discussed our future plans when we got together after school, but we always arrived at the conclusion that neither of us knew what to do to achieve our goals.

When we got to high school, Takaaki’s dream suddenly drew much closer to reality. He said he would go to Spain right after graduation to learn classical guitar. Besides playing guitar in a band, he had already started learning Spanish, which made me feel pressured and impatient. He was my best friend, but at the same time, he was also a good rival. I did not want to be beaten, but all I could do was study hard to get into college and continue training my body.

An unexpected incident took place when we were 17. Takaaki stopped talking to me. I was so upset, because I had no idea what made him shut me out. I tried everything to find out what happened to make him behave like this, but he refused to speak to me. About a year later, I had almost given up on him. Many of my other friends told me that he had gone insane and nothing could be done. Although I didn’t want to believe it, that indeed seemed to be the only possibility.

He finally called me one day in 1989 from Tokyo’s Narita International Airport and said: “I am leaving for Spain today. I wanted to tell you before I left.” I found myself unable to say anything except “good luck.” I was happy that he had finally had spoken to me, and I was glad to know that he had not given up on his dream. About a month later, I left for Hokkaido to attend college.

I heard nothing from my friend for a year until I received a postcard from him. He wrote, “Yoshi, I found a profound philosophy.” I didn’t understand what he meant. After a while, I got another strange postcard. Again, I wasn’t sure what he wanted to tell me, but it sounded like he was striving for something. “What is going on with this guy?” I thought. I decided to visit him in Spain to find out.

When Takaaki picked me up from the airport, I immediately noticed that he was full of energy, like a completely different person. It didn’t take me long to find out what had happened. It was Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. He repeated over and over again, “Without this Buddhism, I would have died here in Spain. I owe what I am now to the SGI.” Although it was obvious that Buddhism and the SGI had changed him, I personally didn’t feel like practicing. I felt religion was what made people dependent; I didn’t want to rely on religion.

The next day, he took me to the SGI community center in Madrid. I was introduced to

Shinji Shimizu, who had been helping my friend with his Buddhist practice. After hearing my opinions on religion, he asked me a question, “Why do you want to be an astronaut?” This was a question I had never asked myself before. All of the answers that came to mind were self-centered, such as money, fame and success. I was so ashamed, I couldn’t say anything. He continued: “If you really want to be an astronaut, please start practicing Buddhism. That will give you a decisive advantage.”

I left Madrid and traveled around Spain by myself. This was a great opportunity to reflect on my life. Mr. Shimizu’s question never left my mind. I thought about the purpose of my life.

One day I lost my wallet. Because it was a Friday night, I had to survive with no money until Monday, when I could cash some travelers’ checks. I ended up at a homeless shelter.

This experience changed my life. For the first time, I lived under the same roof with society’s underprivileged. I keenly felt the disparity in wealth and the inequality into which people are born. When I left the facility, the orphans who I played with cried and asked me not to go. Holding back my tears, I realized I wanted to do something for them.

When I returned to Madrid, I told Takaaki about my experience. He told me we all have infinite potential and that it is Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism that teaches the way to bring out that potential. Our inner determination can transform even the world. Although I still had many doubts and not everything was clear, I decided to try practicing. I wanted to do something to make society better, and I wanted to believe in my best friend.

I returned to Japan and a totally different life based on faith began. I became a member of the Soka Gakkai Student Division and practiced as my best friend told me — chant first, win in the morning and have clear goals. When chanting, trust that my prayers will be answered. Trust the Gohonzon. Study the Daishonin’s writings and read SGI President Ikeda’s guidance every day. Support SGI activities and share this practice with friends.

It did not take long to realize the power of this practice. When I chanted, I felt tremendous life force welling up and challenged everything. As the first step to becoming an astronaut, I made up my mind to go to America to get a Ph.D. in Engineering. Taking my English language ability and financial situation into account, it was a pretty reckless idea. However, I prayed earnestly every day. At the same time, I devoted all my energy to studying English. Since I was a senior in college at the time, it was a huge challenge to cope with schoolwork, preparation for studying abroad, a part-time job, extracurricular activities and SGI activities. I felt overwhelmed, but thanks to constant encouragement from my seniors in faith, I accomplished everything.

One year after I started chanting, I found most of my prayers had already been answered. I graduated from college and was accepted to the graduate school of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I was also granted a one-year scholarship from the Rotary Foundation. I had an opportunity to meet the first Japanese astronaut, Mamoru Mohri, and gave him President Ikeda’s book on space. I was just amazed by the power of this practice.

The biggest benefit was that I finally found the answer to the question of why I wanted to be an astronaut. I realized that becoming an astronaut was not my final goal, but a means. My final goal is to contribute to the realization of world peace and human happiness.

Astronauts can be particularly influential for children. If I could become an astronaut who inspires them to have courage, and use this influence for the sake of their happiness, I would be contributing to society. That’s why I want to be an astronaut. Recalling the orphans I played with in Spain, I made a pledge to become such an astronaut.

With conviction and hope, I arrived in America on July 7, 1993, and this was the beginning of my real struggle. Studying in graduate school in a foreign language was much harder than I

expected. I couldn't understand the professor. Even if I wanted to ask a question, I didn't know how or what to ask. The classes were competitive and the homework was difficult. I had to stay up all night just to understand the homework. I studied frantically, but the result of my first midterm was the lowest in the class. No matter how much I studied, I was always the weakest student. Everyone in the class looked like geniuses to me.

I later took a qualifying entrance exam for a Ph.D. course. I chanted and studied hard, but the result was miserable. Usually students don't fail, or even if they fail, they need to improve in one or two subjects. I failed all my tests. My professor was surprised at my poor results and told me to focus on study. Students are allowed to take this exam twice, and if they fail twice, they have to leave the university. I had one more chance to take the test in seven months. I needed to improve in all subjects.

Because of these difficulties, I sometimes felt I was wasting my time and I seriously doubted my potential. An SGI-USA member who was struggling in school told me: "In the end, a person who has a mission wins. And mission is not something given to us, it's what we create." His words reminded me of the pledge I made when I left Japan. "Yes, that's right! I'm the person who decides if I have a mission. Because even though I may be doing poorly, I know why I am studying." I started with sincere prayer and resumed studying with all my might. "Victory comes down to offering sincere prayer and working three times harder than others." "This faith makes the impossible possible." These were the words of President Ikeda I repeated to myself.

When I took the qualifying exam again, I did my very best. I could honestly say that even if I failed, I would have no regrets. The results arrived a week later. "Conditional pass." That meant I didn't fail the exam, but I needed to clear a certain condition to officially become a Ph.D. candidate. The condition was to get straight A's that semester. Without resting even a moment, I plunged into the new battle.

My goal was to study ten hours a day. I synchronized my goal with SGI activities. I read President Ikeda's guidance for inspiration. The more I struggled, the more I realized the greatness of my mentor. I felt as if he were watching my battle. Because of the encouragement of my mentor, I enjoyed every challenge. I asked many questions in class and participated in discussions. I received the top score on two midterm exams and made straight A's. In January 1996, I was officially accepted into the Ph.D. program.

Writing my thesis and defending it were the only remaining hurdles, but that was going to be difficult. I first needed to conduct experiments and get data. But no matter how many times I ran the same test, the data was not repeatable. I had to redesign the hardware and reconsider the experimental procedure many times. It was a continuous process of trial and error. Two years had passed since the preliminary exam and I still had no valid data. I started feeling uneasy in the summer of 1999.

My final battle had begun. Again, I experienced many failures, but didn't stop. I chanted before each set of experiments for valid data. Every moment was a struggle against self-doubt. Whenever I got stuck, I chanted and summoned up the courage to believe in the power within myself. "I can make it. Faith is to believe and keep believing no matter what."

When I was struggling the most, big obstacles appeared in my life. One of them was my mother and sister's traffic accident. (They were injured and are recovering.) Since I couldn't get back to Japan to see them, all I could do was call and send my prayers. I kept experimenting with tears in my eyes and clenched teeth. One night as I read President Ikeda's diary of the struggles he overcame in his youth, I cried for the first time saying, "President Ikeda, I want to see you!" I was surprised at what I said. But that was the moment when my

mentor entered the deepest part of my life. During this most difficult time, I received tremendous support from the members of Madison Chapter. Some delivered dinner to me almost every night until the crucial day. It is impossible to describe how much those meals helped and encouraged me.

In the middle of October, I finished collecting data and discovered new scientific facts. I began writing my thesis, and wrote more than one hundred pages in just two-and-a-half weeks. I couldn't believe what I had accomplished. At last, on November 18, 1999, I finished. In the acknowledgments section, I introduced President Ikeda's words, which had been one of my dreams to do. The evaluation of my thesis was an A.

It took six years and three months, but I finally received my doctorate, and it was financed through my research assistantship. Looking back, nothing would have been possible without this faith, and all of my prayers were answered. Just as my best friend told me in Spain, I owe what I am today to the SGI. I am so grateful for this practice because I have gained true friendship, a sense of purpose and a mentor in life.

Now I'm working as a sales engineer in Detroit, Michigan. I am determined to show even greater proof and help others become happy. When I chant, I vividly recall the eyes of the orphans I played with in Spain. I'll never forget my pledge to them.

According to a recent Japanese newspaper, NASDA (National Space Development Agency of Japan) will accept applications for new astronauts in 2002. I am definitely going to apply.