

## ESSAYS FROM SGI-USA YOUTH

### ONE-TO-ONE DIALOGUE BY JAMES HERRMANN, LOS ANGELES

I recently had a conversation with a good friend on the topic of dialogue and its importance in spreading Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. My friend is fun and interesting to talk to, and I am always inspired by his ability to hold a conversation with anyone. I asked how he had developed his dialogue skills. It's not like there is a training ground to acquire these skills. He said he was not always like this and shared his experience with me.

His stepfather was a partner with a prominent law firm and through his practice as an attorney, he developed excellent skills in the art of dialogue. However, his stepfather — when using his ability to dialogue — was often more concerned about being right than using his skills to make another person feel special or to inspire them to be happy. He could defeat almost anyone in any argument. When my friend was growing up, his conversations with his stepfather would leave him feeling shut down and inadequate. He could not express himself with his stepfather and found it easier to just stop talking to him. This eventually led to a lack of confidence in his own ability to speak and he just clammed up.

Some people in high school are known for their excellence in academic studies and others for their athletic ability, but almost never for their ability to conduct dialogue. In sports, one can increase one's ability through a proper diet, weight training, exercise and practice. In academics, one can excel through consistent study. How does one acquire the ability to conduct effective and meaningful dialogue?

My friend carried this lack of confidence throughout high school. It wasn't until his first year of college that he was introduced to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and the SGI. Practicing Buddhism brought joy and confidence to his life. The moment he started practicing he said: "This makes me feel great. I'm going to practice Buddhism for the rest of my life." He had found a happiness he had not known before.

He immediately shared his newfound joy with everyone he knew, engaging in one-to-one dialogue. As he struggled to explain the greatness of Buddhism with others, he gradually began to see himself overcoming his fear of speaking. He was often asked questions about the practice he couldn't answer, but he would pray and study even harder to effectively share Buddhism with others. It was in the midst of my friend's suffering that he challenged himself to open up his life. As a result, his joy increased even more.

SGI President Daisaku Ikeda says, "Under favorable circumstances anyone can do well. It is how one fares in adversity that determines his value. One can manifest his true ability only when he struggles against difficulties, and by overcoming them, he can feel the true joy of faith and savor the best life" (*From Today Onward*, vol. 26-28, p. 18).

What I learned from my friend's experience is that the key to overcoming our weaknesses is to challenge ourselves in our personal practice and become capable of sharing Buddhism with others. It is through this process that we are able to expand our own lives and our understanding of Buddhism, develop confidence and fulfill our missions to help others become happy.

As youth, I feel it's important that we enthusiastically engage in the propagation of Buddhism, learning from the great examples of our seniors in faith and especially President Ikeda, who has stated that dialogue is essential for peace in the twenty-first century. He also said: "Socrates

continually strove to carry out sincere and forthright dialogue. Because he deeply trusted his companions, he was able to speak his mind in a frank and unpretentious manner. To talk with others, heart to heart, free of pretension, is to show them the deepest respect. Undertaking this sort of conversation also requires great humility” (*From Today Onward*, vol. 26–28, p. 21).

I feel this is the proper spirit in sharing Buddhism with others. Propagating Buddhism requires heart-to-heart exchange based on mutual respect.

*James Herrmann is the SGI-USA Youth Leader.*

## **RENEWING MY FAITH IN THE 21ST CENTURY BY MELANIE R. TRASS, LOS ANGELES**

I always anticipated the arrival of the new century. I dreamed it would be filled with happiness, wealth and advancement for me. I developed an image in my dreams of a door that would open and on the other side, my life would be better. The door would close and the faults and shortcomings of the past would be completely erased from my life. The roadblocks and detours of life’s struggles didn’t exist in this dream. I had a deep-down feeling that if I simply kept living and made it to the twenty-first century, then all my problems would cease to exist!

Yeah, right, who was I kidding? I was living without challenging myself wholeheartedly. I set goals for myself that were not attainable unless I was willing to fight. Since I had not adopted the spirit of a victor, I found myself giving in to weakness and faltering, failing to meet my goals. This pattern has repeatedly occurred in my life. I always found a way to place blame for my misfortune on someone or something else. I did not see that I controlled everything in my environment — how I chose the circumstances I was in.

In the five years I spent in college, I found that living independently also meant making independent decisions. I make decisions impulsively, but I no longer had my parents to stop me from doing impulsive things. Sometimes, I simply could not control myself. I wasted money, ran up a mountain of debt, partied too much and made a slew of other bad choices. At the moment I made impulsive decisions, I would tell myself “Girl, just worry about it later,” never realizing how quickly later would come. My attitude was like believing that effects from the bad causes I made would just vanish into the universe. When faced with the choice of making good or bad decisions, I usually made the bad ones.

I was born into this practice, but as a child, I never developed strong faith. I believed it worked, but I only chanted when I wanted something or attended a meeting with my parents. I thought the meetings were boring. However, I was eager to participate in youth activities. I enjoyed the fun and friendships of the Boys and Girls Group and later young women’s activities and the SGI-USA Fife and Drum Corps. I am grateful for the strong young women leaders I met. Much of their guidance has stayed with me, and I often refer to it in my mental notebook during life’s adverse moments.

While in college, my practice was sporadic. I would attend meetings only when things were going right, because I did not want people to see the hellish state of my life. I chanted only when I needed to pass a course or when I did not have money to pay rent and other bills. I found myself turning to the Gohonzon as a last resort, so I was always pleading to get out of the current predicament. Once my prayer was answered, I wouldn’t chant until the next crisis. I didn’t challenge myself to address the real issue of dealing with my karma.

It is now the beginning of the new century. I just graduated from college and am now faced

with dealing with the repercussions of my past decisions. I am only 23, but I am challenging myself to change. As the Daishonin states in “The One Essential Phrase”: “All the beings of the Ten Worlds can attain Buddhahood in their present form. [This is an incomparably greater wonder than] fire being produced by a stone taken from the bottom of a river, or a lantern lighting up a place that has been dark for a hundred, a thousand, or ten thousand years. If even the most ordinary things of this world are such wonders, then how much more wondrous is the power of the Buddhist Law?” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 923).

No matter what I may have done in the past, I will challenge myself to build strong faith in my Buddhist practice. I have set chanting goals, and I am already seeing my life more clearly. I believe that the twenty-first century will definitely be all that I expected and more, because of my fresh determination to persevere for the sake of kosen-rufu. I actually look forward to facing challenges because that is the way to develop the spirit of a courageous person. I have friends who are suffering and I will show them the power of the Gohonzon through my life. I will continue to chant no matter what adversity I face. This is my determination for the new century.

I still have my dream, but now I see a path on the journey toward realizing it.

*Melanie Trass is a recent graduate of Purdue University.*

## **JOYFULLY CREATING HISTORY THROUGH NOT BEGRUDGING ONE’S LIFE BY JASON BERG, BLOOMFIELD, NEW JERSEY**

**“Since nothing is more precious than life itself,  
one who dedicates one’s life to Buddhist practice  
is certain to attain Buddhahood. If one is prepared  
to offer one’s life, why should one begrudge any  
other treasure for the sake of Buddhism?”**

(“Letter from Sado,” *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 301).

**R**ecently, in the middle of evening prayers at the New York Culture Center, I suddenly became acutely aware of the beauty of my surroundings. Seated in the middle of the room, I was overcome by the elegance of the setting. Wood paneling, a plush red carpet on the floor and a graceful two-story high ceiling surrounded me. In front of me sat the majestic altar that was designed to direct our focus toward the Gohonzon enshrined within. Filled with people earnestly chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the room itself truly felt and looked like the Buddha land.

Taking in this scene, I asked myself what I had done to help create this. I came to the realization that despite a handful of years as an active member of the youth division, what I had contributed to help make this all possible was rather insignificant. My mind turned to the massive struggle that the pioneers of our movement had gone through in America and how they had created a tremendous history, forging the foundation for the American kosen-rufu movement led by SGI President Ikeda. How had they done it? What was it that had enabled these members to overcome the tremendous difficulties they faced and create the beautiful SGI-USA organization that we enjoy today?

What occurred to me is that it comes down to the fact that these members fought side by side with President Ikeda for the sake of kosen-rufu without begrudging their lives. Our

pioneers spared nothing as they worked to propagate the Mystic Law and did so without complaint. They put everything they had on the line while they challenged themselves again and again to spread the message of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism to those who were suffering. Guided by President Ikeda's constant encouragement, these sincere men and women created lives of victory as they helped many other Americans become happy through the power of the Mystic Law.

While in Hong Kong recently, President Ikeda shared: "The Buddhist law of cause and effect is strict. I want you all to be confident that those who dedicate their lives to the Mystic Law will be healthy, wealthy and beautiful, in body and mind, in lifetime after lifetime, and, as great leaders, contribute to society, winning people's praise and admiration, and enjoying lives of supreme fulfillment" (*World Tribune*, January 1, 2001, p. 11). Is there anyone that embodies this statement more than our pioneer members, who have been working so hard for so many years?

It is time for us, as the inheritors of this golden legacy, to build upon the tremendous foundation that has been laid. Let us truly devote ourselves to kosen-rufu. Showing actual proof at work, in our families and in society, let us pursue the path of mentor and disciple without begrudging our lives. Without reluctance, fear or hesitation, let us create a new era together with our mentor, President Ikeda. When we do this without begrudging our lives, then we will enjoy the immense benefit of the Mystic Law.

*Jason Berg is an SGI-USA Vice Music Corps Leader, musician and a teacher.*

## **YOUNG WOMEN DEDICATED TO PEACE BY KELLY DUNLAP, SAN DIEGO**

As SGI President Daisaku Ikeda welcomes the twenty-first century as the "Century of Women" he states, "Every woman who devotes her life to kosen-rufu is a person with the noblest of missions" (*World Tribune*, December 15, 2000, p. 8).

Now is the time for young women to stand strong and work for peace all over the world. To do this, it is important that we understand the history of women to further inspire us. We need to understand the importance of our role as women in society. Many young women do not recognize their own greatness. I feel fortunate to be a woman. If it weren't for the great women of the past who dedicated their lives to justice, equality and peace, I don't think we would enjoy the freedoms we have today.

My determination is to have a heart like the great pharaoh Hatshepsut. A leader of Africa's golden age, she ruled an empire in Egypt at a time when it was uncommon for women to lead and were only thought capable to assist men. Because she was a woman, she had to prove herself over and over again. At times, Hatshepsut wore men's clothing in order to be taken seriously, and people referred to her as "Pharaoh." She was both brilliant and beautiful, a lover of peace who prayed for it frequently. She loved to study the history of her family. Her father was her biggest influence. He taught her military matters and raised her to become a pharaoh — the leader of her people. Through her studies and determination, she built many temples and engaged in foreign trade, thereby advancing her empire. She successfully ruled for thirty-one years as the only female pharaoh in history. Through her example, I am motivated to expand beyond the traditional role of women and become a leader for world peace.

It is important for women to understand the crisis of women in other countries. On a recent

talk show, I heard women share experiences of other women who were raped and stoned to death. In Afghanistan, women have few rights. If a woman is raped, she can be killed. If she wants to divorce her husband, she can be killed. If she has sex before marriage, she can be killed. In certain parts of India, some women who choose not to marry have had acid thrown in their faces. In some parts of the world, young girls are sold into prostitution, while others experience genital mutilation. It's important to learn about the injustices perpetrated against women not only in America, but worldwide so that we can determine to work that much harder for kosen-rufu.

As women practitioners of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, we have a unique mission to not only uphold and fight for our rights as women, but to expose and fight injustices committed against women everywhere. We must create true equality among all people!

When the unity between men and women becomes strong, together we can create a solid foundation for peace. Women of the SGI, let's strengthen our practice through prayer, study and action. In "The Unity of Husband and Wife," Nichiren Daishonin states: "If a woman's faith is weak, even though she embraces the Lotus Sutra, she will be forsaken. For example, if a commanding general is fainthearted, his soldiers will become cowards. If a bow is weak, the bowstring will be slack. If the wind is gentle, the waves will never rise high. This all accords with the principle of nature" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 464).

## **GROWING UP BUDDHIST BY JASON HENNINGER, LOS ANGELES**

I was born in Los Angeles in 1970 in the first wave of American children born into Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. It was a chaotic time. The Vietnam War was still claiming lives. The struggle to end the war, to establish gender and ethnic identities and to reevaluate social paradigms brought about both hope and unease. It was a time for both genuine reformers and opportunistic phonies. In this wild time, the kosen-rufu movement began in America.

I think the pioneers of kosen-rufu are among the strongest and most dedicated people. They reached out — sometimes with only a few words of English — to teach Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism to a tangled morass of Americans. One such American was my mother. The early organization in Los Angeles was a combination of immigrants and so-called hippies like my mom. These disparate groups somehow managed to create the foundation for a religious movement in a remarkably short period of time. It was far from easy. My family and I went to meetings nearly every night. I took naps at the community center nearly as much as I did at home. Everything was strict, everything was urgent, and everything was important. Somehow we built a fortress in a monsoon.

Though I didn't clearly understand all that went on around me, I knew something very important was happening and that even little kids were part of it. I don't want to give you the impression that I was always happy to go to meetings. I was a kid, after all, and I wanted to play. There is no doubt I had my resentful moments. I usually chanted when I felt obligated to, not when I wanted to. But I knew that sometimes practicing Buddhism meant your life would be more disciplined than most, yet happier as well.

Even as a child, I knew that being a Buddhist made me different from other kids. I didn't believe in the Christian concept of God as most of my friends did. I was busy almost every night. I knew lots of funny words in a foreign language. Most of my friends had never heard of Buddhism, and those few who had heard of it assumed I worshipped a statue. Nevertheless, I

was proud to belong to the misunderstood, very busy, funny-words religion.

If the seventies were a monsoon, then the eighties were a hurricane: more focused, but just as intense. In the early eighties, I was just as involved as ever, but as I grew into adolescence, I attended fewer meetings. I practiced less, and began to distance myself from other members. I became miserable, brooding, dark and lonely.

I have given a lot of thought to that time. For about ten years, I hardly practiced at all. I used to think I was the only person born into the practice to do this, but I've since found out it's a pretty common occurrence. During the early nineties, President Ikeda initiated phenomenal changes in the SGI and then there was the split with the priesthood. Meanwhile, I learned what it felt like not to practice, and to put it bluntly — it was terrible. When I resumed my involvement in the SGI, it was like Dorothy stepping out into Oz. So much had changed! I had changed because my practice was my own and not something I felt obligated to do. The SGI had changed — the monsoon and the hurricane had passed and the fortress was being rebuilt as a global village.

Now, my time as a youth division member is nearly done. I'm very excited to see what happens next. What's the next storm going to be? What improvements and advancements will the future bring? When I have children, how will they feel about their Buddhist heritage?

Josei Toda, second president of the Soka Gakkai, once said, "One year's growth of the lay organization will be equal to ten year's growth of other organizations." In just a few decades, we have proven him absolutely right. I am witness to an incredible piece of history unfolding, yet I know it is only the beginning.

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