

**YOU'RE NEVER TOO YOUNG (OR EXPERIENCED) TO LEARN
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Recently, my sister showed me a pledge I wrote when I was 12 years old. I remember sitting down in front of my mom's blue typewriter to compose it. This is what I wrote:

I love the SGI because it's the greatest thing in the entire world. I think young women have a strong mission for kosen-rufu. We are going to win, win, win, win, win in daily life every single moment...I will strive for every goal and achieve it. Every step I take will be making an abundant cause for the future. I will never ever, ever, ever, ever neglect the practice. I will always study and remember that study is a part of the practice of true Buddhism. I will be a leader of the future and be very responsible.

How refreshing it was to read these words! Around that time I had been appointed a junior group leader, assigned to take care of more than 20 members. I didn't know what I was doing, nor did I feel qualified to encourage young women more than twice my age. I dropped the ball more than once. My men's and women's leaders in Santa Rosa, Calif., however, always wholeheartedly supported me and encouraged me to reach beyond my limitations.

While we were a bit bold in the 80s, what still holds true is the importance of giving opportunities for growth to young people in the district. Not every youth looks ready or able at first glance. Some youth members may not be very active, yet with the right encouragement and support, they would be inspired to challenge themselves. Of course, we have to also resist holding youth to our own standards or being critical of their mistakes. Sure, it's hard to move forward in appointing a youth leader sometimes based on their performance at this moment. Yet it is our challenge to see beyond the present and entrust youth with a mission as young disciples.

The greatest training I received as a youth leader was the encouragement to introduce my friends to Buddhism, teach them gongyo and care for them. Doing *shakubuku* was the greatest joy, and I remember it being the focus of every activity. It made me nervous, yet determined and excited. Of course, I also reminisce about the *shakubuku* cheers and songs—sometimes referred affectionately as “old school”—that I used to hear:

I've been doing shakubuuuuuuuu, all the live long day/I've been chanting daimokuuuu just to get me on my way....

Pardon me folks, but would you like to chant daimoku/ I've got my beads, and my butaicho can lead/This is the way, to change our heavy-duty karma/Overcome all our strife/And lead a happier life

Shakubuku early in the morning, shakubuku late at night

AAO! (What does that mean, anyway?)

While we have changed our approach in accord with the times and our organization's evolution, I appreciate the joy and confidence that comes from introducing others to Buddhism that my leaders instilled in me from an early age.

A few months ago, I talked with a high school division member in Chicago who introduced his friend to the practice. When I saw them, they had just finished their Gajokai shift at the culture center. They both looked sharp in their neatly pressed shirts and ties. I was inspired how this youth member, Stanley Henderson, had not only introduced his friend to the practice, but had helped him take responsibility and develop as a leader.

Of course, junior high and high school students need support in making their studies a priority. But for their future growth and development, which affects their relationships, studies, extracurricular activities, etc., SGI leadership training in the district is the key. Appointing young men's and young women's district leaders, even with older, more experienced youth, requires sensitivity and care. In any case, entrusting youth in the district with responsibility — coupled with warm support and training — is a goal all of us can work toward as we prepare for the culture festival activities this year.