

SGI TRAINING COURSE IMPRESSIONS

NEVER PRACTICE IN ISOLATION BY CLAUDIA HEIMAN BOSTON

Twenty-two SGI-USA members and leaders attended a training course in Japan Nov. 7–15, 2000 to commemorate the Soka Gakkai's 70th anniversary. In total, 330 members from 55 countries and regions participated in many meetings, guidance opportunities and exchanges, receiving encouragement to last a lifetime.

‘What I gained from this trip,’ says Claudia Heiman, ‘is the realization that we are all in this together.’

On the morning of Nov. 10, 2000, my third day in Japan, I woke up miserable, exhausted from jet lag and feeling like I was coming down with the flu. The high life-condition I had manifested earlier in the week, full of excitement at meeting members from all over the world, seeing SGI President Ikeda for the first time at the monthly Headquarters Leaders Meeting, plus wonderful sightseeing around Tokyo, had completely evaporated. I immediately began my usual self-slander.

Here I was, finally in Japan, a dream of mine since the beginning of my seven-year practice, on the last training course of the 20th century, at the joyous occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Soka Gakkai. How could I feel so heavy and out of rhythm with everyone and everything? How could I waste this precious opportunity?

After bursting into tears later that morning during a rehearsal of our SGI-USA musical presentation, “We Shall Overcome,” I had a long conversation with two incredibly encouraging women, Mary Oberman of Brooklyn, N.Y., and Chern-Chern Chien of Columbus, Ohio.

Chern-Chern spoke of an experience SGI-USA General Director Danny Nagashima shared at a meeting in Chicago, about his visit to Hawaii a few months before. During his visit, the lovely Hawaiian climate erupted into a terrible storm. Unique to this storm, however, was the fact that there was a brilliant rainbow right through the thunder and lightening. How could a rainbow emerge in such a tempest? Danny described that this phenomena was due to the power of the sun, which in the context of our lives, is our prayer and determination. Even when obstacles rage around us like an electrical storm, if our prayer is strong enough, we can make a rainbow right in the middle of our harshest circumstances. The mess of the storm is not something we have to wait around to expiate. Rather, our obstacles are something we use and transform right now to leverage our Buddhahood from our lives.

I felt refreshed after our conversation and returned to my room to chant, with the raw determination that I would feel better and enjoy my experience in Japan, no matter what! I also realized that this transformation of my negativity was long overdue.

Just the day before, President Ikeda had said that although we face many problems and difficulties, the only thing that is important is our life condition. Whatever we decide on, we must do it and not look back. So I pushed myself through a half hour of daimoku,

trying to raise my life-condition and bring the sun out of of my life. “When life is a storm, make a rainbow!” Each minute I chanted with this intensity, it felt like a year of karmic weight lifted.

From this, I experienced first-hand that effort does not give you hope, effort is hope. As a result, my day and week in Japan and my practice changed dramatically

What I gained from this trip is the realization that every aspect of human revolution involves a win-or-lose struggle, and that we’re all in this together. It’s a fight to keep going, and it’s a fight to open oneself to encouragement from others. SGI Vice Women’s Leader Yumiko Hachiya told the SGI-USA women and young women: “We must never practice in isolation. We can only develop through interaction with other people.”

Going on this training trip has convinced me of the power of our practice and the incredible mission of our beloved SGI. I am eternally grateful to our wonderful Soka family for the years of encouragement and support I have received.

A TRANSCENDENT RELATIONSHIP BY MARY OBERMAN BROOKLYN, N.Y.

Mary Oberman says, ‘The mentor–disciple relationship enables us to achieve lofty, long-term objectives that can affect generations to come.’

I felt extremely fortunate to attend the November 2000 training course in Japan. I was eager to see how members from other countries practiced and to develop my understanding of Buddhism to better support the SGI-USA members back home in Brooklyn, N.Y. Besides wonderful guidance from SGI President Ikeda and top SGI leaders, I heard many awe-inspiring experiences of members struggling to spread Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism around the world.

One member, inspired by an anecdote that President Ikeda had written about Shakyamuni’s disciple Purna, who asks permission from Shakyamuni to go to a country in the east to propagate Buddhism, left his secure home in Hungary several years ago and moved to Yugoslavia to spread the Law. His desire to help others become happy by practicing Buddhism was so strong that he endured a harsh dictatorship and NATO bombings to do it.

An Indonesian member reported on his country’s struggle with Nichiren Shoshu after the general director left the organization and joined High Priest Nikken Abe in attacking the SGI. When the SGI members in Indonesia were organized into a headquarters in 1992, the membership consisted of 30 people spread over the 3,000 miles of the islands that make up the Republic of Indonesia. The priesthood, at one point, convinced the government that the SGI was a communist organization and succeeded in having the organization’s registration with the religious ministry canceled. We heard that police were bribed to disrupt Gakkai meetings. The members persevered, and now the Indonesian organization has 1,000 members with eight community centers.

I spoke to individuals from Africa, South America and southern Europe, who were struggling to spread this Buddhism in the midst of economic turmoil, as well as societal and political instability. Others were striving to establish an organization in their countries,

building the membership and working to forge the external relationships in society necessary to gain acceptance.

These stories made me feel like a pampered poodle. In the face of such Herculean efforts, my difficulties seemed to melt away to nothing. It also became clear to me how crucial America's role is in the kosen-rufu movement. One member commented: "Other countries watch what America is doing. When President Ikeda is truly recognized in America, and when this Buddhism gains acceptance in the United States, it will help pave the way for the rest of us."

The fact is that the United States' power, prosperity and influence on the world is unmatched. It is a diverse and democratic country, with a culture more open to change than that of many older nations. It makes sense that we are in a unique position to take the lead for worldwide kosen-rufu.

This training course made it clear to me that the only way to continue to develop our movement is by sticking close to President Ikeda. It was obvious that these overseas members had persevered and achieved remarkable results based on their connection to President Ikeda and the mentor-disciple relationship. In the United States, too, our success will hinge on the strength of the members' connection to President Ikeda.

The meaning of the mentor-disciple relationship crystallized for me when I saw a Soka University banner in first Soka Gakkai president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi's handwriting. Although Soka University was established after his death, it was originally President Makiguchi's dream. What courage and vision Mr. Makiguchi had, to fight for a compassionate system of education in Japan at a time when schools were used primarily to produce loyal subjects to the emperor and the World War II military regime.

Believing in his mentor's dream, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda agreed that Makiguchi should publish his ideas and record them for posterity. But Makiguchi was too busy to draft a manuscript from start to finish and had time only to jot down notes whenever he had a few minutes to spare. Toda collected all of Makiguchi's notes, arranging them by subject on tatami mats, and eventually compiled them. He then used the little money he had to publish them. Although neither man would live to see the establishment of Soka University and the Soka school system, their dreams would still be realized because of President Ikeda and the mentor-disciple relationship.

In the difficult years after World War II, President Toda told his followers that one day this Buddhism would be practiced by people all over the world. A youth from that time told us how much that dream had inspired them, although, based on their poverty and other difficulties, it seemed hard to believe. Though Toda never traveled outside of Japan, President Ikeda lived to actualize his mentor's dream. We now have SGI members in 163 countries and territories.

I am still chanting to understand what all that I experienced means. I do know that I need to dream fearlessly, as our three presidents did, and work toward my goals, undeterred by how impossible they seem based on my immediate circumstances. And I want to incorporate President Ikeda's compassion and his vision for America deep in my life, so that I can work toward making that vision for peace a reality.