

EXPERIENCE—KAZUHIRO NAGAHAMA, LOS ANGELES FINDING THE ANSWER

Kazuhiro Nagahama uses his practice to stop chronic heart attacks that threaten to take his life.

When I was a junior high school student, I was very active and enjoyed school life. One day, as I was leaving school to go home, I felt a sharp pain in my heart and fell to the floor. Fortunately, there were teachers and students nearby, and they called for an ambulance.

I was taken to the hospital and learned that I had my first heart attack. The doctor examined me closely and concluded that I had variant angina pectoris, a type of heart disease. It was rare to get this kind of disease at my age.

From that point on, my life completely changed. I continued to have heart attacks. No matter what I was doing, they might occur at any time of the day.

The attacks were unimaginably painful and almost killed me every time. I even thought that I would rather die than go on living that way. I started to wonder why I had been born, and I looked for a way to somehow find meaning in my life. Nobody could believe that I had this problem while being so young.

When I was a high school student, I started to read the Bible, which fascinated me. A Catholic priest instructed me, and I thought about becoming a priest for the rest of my life. At that time, I thought, I was gaining fulfillment from Christianity. But I continued suffering and experiencing heart attacks. It was at this point that my grandmother joined the SGI.

I had a negative image of the SGI from the Japanese media. I could not understand what the organization was about. My grandmother never asked me to chant—she always chanted for me and said she believed in me. SGI members would sometimes visit me, and although I did not like them, they kept visiting me until we could really talk and eventually chant. But, to be honest, I still thought that I hated them.

But my heart started to change. Through the SGI members' influence, I started to think about my life again. As I started to attend SGI activities, I felt joy, peace and extreme power and warmth from the members.

The ideals of the SGI matched my own original idea that religion was for ordinary people, not only for a special group. But I did not see this being put into practice in other religions. In fact, I felt they used people to make money, and the people did not become happy. Yet these people would not leave these religions. I wondered why. Why were they doing this without thinking?

I realized that, beginning with first Soka Gakkai president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, the SGI had been trying to destroy the accepted idea of religion for religion's sake. After this realization, I started to chant more and study about the SGI.

I learned that in Buddhism, we already have Buddhahood within our heart. We just need to bring it out and develop this humanitarian state by practicing. And after more chanting and reflection, I joined the SGI.

Once I joined, someone recommended that I apply to Soka University of Japan. I was impressed with this member's character and vision, and he admired SGI President Ikeda, who founded Soka University. I decided to chant to attend and was accepted in 1996. I was

fortunate enough to see President Ikeda at the entrance ceremony, and his warmth and sincerity touched me.

My grandmother and other members were pleased that I got accepted. And I was happy that I would be attending a school where I knew I would be able to learn and grow.

However, I still struggled with my disease. In fact, it was getting worse and worse. I started to chant to overcome this disease once and for all. Almost every morning, I experienced a heart attack and could not move. Every morning I did gongyo in bed crying. I really wanted to know the answer to why I could not change this problem.

One day in 1997, I was walking around the Pond of Literature on the Soka University campus, thinking about my life. I was tired of thinking about my health condition every day and was even contemplating suicide. While sitting on a bench by the pond, some cars drove by, and I realized that President Ikeda was inside one of them. His car drove in front of me and suddenly stopped. I kept looking at his car and then saw the car's window opening and someone calling to me.

At first I could not understand what was happening. The man calling me over was President Ikeda. At first I was confused. He kept calling me, and I rushed up to his car. He was saying, "Come here, closer to me." I got so close that my head was almost inside his car. Sitting there was President Ikeda and his wife, Kaneko.

He asked me about my family and my hometown. I was in shock and could not believe this was happening. He kept holding my hand and looking straight into my eyes. Near the end of our encounter, I explained my health problem. He encouraged me very strongly and gave me some advice: "Become stronger and stronger."

Because of his encouragement, something inside me changed. I decided to follow his advice. The next day, I tried to chant 10 hours. I felt myself getting stronger and stronger. As I faced the Gohonzon, I promised that I would stay with the SGI and President Ikeda.

By the time I was a senior, my heart attacks completely stopped. I was able to function as never before. Even riding in a plane, which previously I could not do because of my health, was no longer a problem. The fact that I am now able to study English in Los Angeles and enjoy my life here so much is great actual proof for me.

I am so appreciative to have such a great mentor, President Ikeda. Every time I met him from that first encounter, I was more and more impressed and I am determined to continue to learn from him.

I truly believe that President Ikeda is a great teacher, who understands what each of us is doing and what we are going through. He understands our trials, and encourages us to have the strength we need to overcome them.

President Ikeda once wrote, "Only the person who struggles can experience true faith." I have made a promise that whenever I face problems, I will never give up. I will always stick with the Gohonzon and the SGI. I have gained confidence that, no matter what happens, I will never be swayed.