

## HONORING OUR PIONEERS—GRACE TAKAKUWA, LOS ANGELES GROWING UNDER MY MENTOR'S WINGS

**After moving to the United States in the 1950s, Grace Takakuwa learns the importance of working with SGI President Ikeda and leading members to the Gohonzon.**

In 1949, I married Robert Takakuwa in Tokyo. He was 20 years older than I and was working at U.S. General McArthur's headquarters. I had already begun practicing Buddhism with the Soka Gakkai.

In 1953, Robert and I came to the United States with our three sons. (In America, we had our fourth son.) I could hardly speak English, had no friends and every night shed tears of homesickness as I gazed up at the moon. My only wish was to divorce my husband and return to Japan.

After moving to the United States, I developed severe headaches because of financial worries. But in 1960, members began preparations for SGI President Ikeda's first visit to America. When I began to participate in these activities, I found myself filled with a sense of mission to spread Buddhism in the United States and the headaches stopped completely.

When President Ikeda arrived in Los Angeles, he formed Los Angeles Chapter and appointed me the women's leader. I was stunned by the unexpected appointment, but President Ikeda reassured me, saying: "You'll be all right. I'll give you my full support."

What he said was meant not only for me but for everyone in the United States. We had begun our organization with a handful of people, and we all felt somewhat lonely and helpless. When President Ikeda took us under his wing, however, he envisioned a magnificent picture of the future of our American movement.

He later said: "You are not appointed to a position because you are a capable person; you are appointed in order to gain experience and to improve your ability by practice."

After my appointment, my daily life completely changed. I began to visit people every day, partly because I was eager to see Japanese faces. At first, my husband warmly supported my activities. But as time went on, he began to hold a grudge against my practice.

But I could not blame him. Every time I went out, he had to take care of our four children. Moreover, our home was used as an activity center, with members continually coming in and out. Our telephone bills soared—my husband paid them secretly so that I didn't have to see them. Finally, after I left for a training meeting in Japan, my mild-mannered husband reached the limits of his patience and exploded. His opposition to my practice strengthened, troubling me deeply.

President Ikeda knew of my family situation, and when he came to Los Angeles again in 1963, he visited my home. Upon his arrival, he immediately greeted my husband. Instead of giving him guidance as I expected, he expressed his appreciation, politely and in a dignified voice, saying: "Hello, Mr. Takakuwa! I appreciate the support you always give to your wife's activities. Thank you very much. I am sorry to have put you and your family to so much trouble. But in 10 or 20 years, you will surely come to realize what a great path your wife has embarked upon."

The meeting with President Ikeda was the turning point of my husband's life. He began to do gongyo voluntarily and formally joined the organization. He soon developed his own

passion for the practice and was appointed a district leader. Nichiren Daishonin states, “The purpose of the appearance in this world of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, lies in his behavior as a human being” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 852). In this spirit, President Ikeda set a great example of how to behave toward non-practicing members of a family.

My next major problem was the “language barrier.” As I said, I could barely speak English. So when English-speaking members began to practice, I told them to receive guidance from other leaders who could speak English, avoiding the task myself.

One of my seniors in faith noticed my attitude and said to me, “You are the women’s leader, so you should encourage the women’s division members yourself.” That very night, there was a member at the community center who wanted to receive guidance about her problem. And I was left with her in the Gohonzon room.

I didn’t know what to do. There was nothing else to do but to listen to her story. No matter how I strained my ears and eyes, I just could not understand what she said. If you can’t speak English, all you can do is listen. Mistaking my attentiveness for genuine compassion, the member continued talking earnestly.

When I saw that she was finally finished, I said in broken English, “Is that all?” She replied, “Yes.” I said, “Let’s chant together,” and we started to chant.

Though I couldn’t understand what was troubling her, I could teach her about the Gohonzon and daimoku. I chanted more sincerely than I ever had before. By the time we finished chanting, the member felt satisfied and left.

The next day, she called me and said, “Thanks to you my problem was solved!” I was shocked.

Learning from my mistakes, I have developed my English skills as well as my faith. Today, I fully understand what the members are saying, but my faith and encouragement style remain unchanged—to listen thoroughly and then chant together.

President Ikeda once gave me a guiding principle, “The best guidance is to show resolutely that the power of the Gohonzon is absolute.” Today, I have full understanding of and confidence in his guidance, and I am determined to give my full support to the generations to follow, dedicating myself to a “life of kosen-rufu.”