

SIGNIFICANT DATES
NOV. 28: THE DAY OF OUR SPIRITUAL LIBERATION
SPIRITUAL INDEPENDENCE REQUIRES CONTINUOUS EFFORTS
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The word *independence* is full of intense meaning. It conjures images of self-reliance, freedom, confidence and the capability to exercise solid judgment and wisdom. The lofty philosophy of independence in the hearts of America's founders was brought into being only after the determination was made to sever ties with England. Had the colonies remained under British rule, the impetus to create such documents as the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights would never have occurred. Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson and the rest of the founding fathers' idealism would have remained beautiful theory. And if, in lacking conviction they had given up and decided to return to British rule, the freedoms for which they had fought would have been lost.

Ten years ago, the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood under the leadership of High Priest Nikken Abe excommunicated the SGI. Evidently the priesthood suspected that under such unusual circumstances, the leadership of the SGI would panic and the general membership would be confused enough for the organization to fracture and collapse. This is, of course, far from what happened. Over the last 10 years, the Soka Gakkai International has become a Buddhist organization unparalleled in history. It is because of our response to the excommunication, rather than despite it, that we have seen such growth.

Just as this country has July 4, Independence Day, we in the SGI have Nov. 28, our Day of Spiritual Independence. This Spiritual Independence has brought us to a new dimension in our history. Now we are both global and local. We have continued to expand on an international level spearheaded by SGI President Ikeda's groundbreaking dialogues with a wide variety of leaders the world over. Through traveling exhibitions on diverse topics such as the arts, the rights of children and nonviolence, we have communicated the concepts of peace, culture and education to every part of the world. On the local level, the SGI-USA is more neighborhood-oriented than ever before, engaging in interfaith dialogues, parades, festivals and other community events for peace and human rights. Because of our Spiritual Independence, we have the latitude to develop these creative avenues for spreading Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and for actively working toward world peace.

It was certainly not the intention of the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood to give us this wonderful gift. However, as Shin Yatomi recently wrote in his article "Buddhism in a New Light": "Power derived from subjugating others is merely a fancy because it requires others and is dependent on them. On the other hand, power from within is genuine because it is independent and free" (Oct. 5 *World Tribune*, p. 2).

It is because SGI members responded positively, realizing the significance of the obstacles that arose, that we were able so dynamically to advance. By utilizing our "power from within," we were able to change the divisive into the expansive. Confronted with people awakened to their spiritual independence, authoritarianism loses all its ability to truly influence or control. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "Whenever men and women straighten their backs up, they are going somewhere because a man can't ride your back unless it is bent."

Along with independence from past authoritarianism comes the responsibility to maintain independence within our lives through honest, searching and open dialogue. It is

not enough just to attain independence at one point in time; it must be kept eternally alive. Later in the same article, Shin Yatomi emphasized the importance of learning that “the absence of a priesthood does not necessarily mean the end of authoritarianism, and that each of us is responsible to understand and practice the Daishonin’s Buddhism as the humanistic teaching it is intended to be.”

The history of the Daishonin’s Buddhism has been one of human revolution. What better result from such a revolution than creating an era of Spiritual Independence, where ordinary people reveal their incredible power? Let’s see how much more we can accomplish in 2002, the “Year of Expanding Dialogue,” and the next 10 years.