

**AMERICA’S TREASURE: OUR DISTRICTS
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The treasure of America—right now—is our SGI-USA districts.”

It was Sept. 12, and I was talking with Richard Miksic, a longtime SGI-USA leader in New York. His voice was fractured by emotion.

He witnessed firsthand what it meant to have a neighborhood group where people care for one another. Because of the relationships woven within each district, within 24 hours of the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, all but two SGI-USA members in all of New York had been accounted for and had a place to go for comfort and shared understanding.

Our district meetings have become a place where people can bring their apprehensions, their feelings, their questions and discuss them in the light of Buddhist practice. At a time when many of us may feel overwhelmed by the harsh global realities and possibilities, the district is where we can truly act locally. It is where we support one another and renew our hope and determination based on Buddhism. How fortunate we are that, right now, in our own homes, we have a method of practice—chanting to the Gohonzon—that brings out our deepest inner strength. When we fortify our lives this way, we suffer less from fear and benefit more in confidence and optimism. We gain a strong sense of control over our own lives and compassion for the lives of others.

Doesn’t it make sense that if a significant number of people are bringing forth their humanity and compassion that our world can change? No—that it *must* change.

This is the mission of the district: to help sustain and nurture the faith of members by providing the care, the activities, the forum in which we can find our true identity and function as Bodhisattvas of the Earth. As Nichiren Daishonin writes in “The Four Debts of Gratitude”: “Both the treasure of the Buddha and the treasure of the Law are invariably perpetuated by the Order [the community of believers]. To illustrate, without firewood, there can be no fire, and if there is no earth, trees and plants cannot grow. Likewise, even though Buddhism existed, without the members of the Order who studied it and passed it on, it would never have been transmitted throughout the two thousand years of the Former and Middle Days into the Latter Day of the Law” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, pp. 44–45).

Recently, SGI-USA General Director Danny Nagashima talked about the precious mission of our districts, quoting from the Gosho “Great Evil and Great Good,” which states: “Great events never have minor omens. When great evil occurs, great good follows” (WND, 1119).

“When we view the horrific events commencing on Sept. 11 in this context,” the general director said, “that is, as a point of great change for humanity—and when we determine that great good will follow, we cannot sit idly by and wait for it to be mystically bestowed. Rather, we can and must make great effort to ensure that great good will follow.”

To me, this “great effort” is to spread the Daishonin’s Buddhism. Specifically, we can focus on our November meetings, planning wonderful meetings that will embrace many people, that will capture people’s deepest desire for personal and global peace—meetings that will offer clear and inspiring proof of the greatness of the Daishonin’s Buddhism and the SGI organization. We should reach out as never before to all our active members and to friends who have become inactive. Especially, let’s talk with the many guests and

newcomers we have met in the past.

Often, when I go to district meetings, I meet newcomers who are trying to chant every day, reading about Buddhism and coming to meetings, but they have not yet received the Gohonzon. I believe almost every district has people who are waiting to be asked.

When we unite in our prayers that these new people can begin their practice in the SGI-USA, we will be transforming America. SGI President Ikeda has said: “The first thing is to pray. From the moment we begin to pray, things start moving. The darker the night, the closer the dawn. From the moment we chant daimoku with a deep and powerful resolve, the sun begins to rise in our hearts” (*For Today and Tomorrow*, p. 249).

Our national focus for the end of this year—which is less than two months away—is to help each district reach the goal of welcoming two new Gohonzon members for the year.

What a difference it makes to wake up to the Gohonzon in your own home, to come home at night and be able to chant about your day. When these precious people enjoy this support, this resource—this is the basis to create world peace. I know of one November meeting where a new member will receive the Gohonzon during the meeting, and the members plan to celebrate with a cake afterward to honor this great event. I believe each member in this district will be invested in caring for this new practitioner. That is a crucial ingredient: committed sponsors for each beginner. How proud the members will be!

The SGI-USA membership guidelines ask for three months of practice before receiving the Gohonzon, but that does not mean the applicant must perform perfect daily gongyo or attend weekly meetings. These guidelines are to ensure that each new member is serious in his or her desire to practice, that the new member knows what to expect and that the organization is serious in its commitment to support a new practitioner. We should be aware of each person’s circumstances and do all we can to help him or her begin in earnest.

Do you remember our SGI theme for 2001? It is the Year of Total Victory for the New Century. I have talked with many members this year. Some feel personally victorious and others do not. In the time that remains in 2001, let’s make a concentrated effort to create a victory for each district in making this goal: two new practitioners who can enshrine the Gohonzon in their own homes.

What about our personal goals? It is by taking the action of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, by helping others to practice, that we bring forth the greatest power in our own lives. In the Gosho “On the Treasure Tower,” the Daishonin writes: “You may think you offered gifts to the treasure tower of the Thus Come One Many Treasures, but that is not so. You offered them to yourself. You, yourself, are a Thus Come One who is originally enlightened and endowed with the three bodies. You should chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with this conviction” (WND, 299). I believe our actions to help others will give us the momentum to achieve our personal victories.

As President Ikeda writes: “Let us make each day and each year one of growth and fresh, exciting possibilities. One important way to do this is by meeting with our fellow members, speaking with and encouraging as many people as we can. Our spirits are lifted when we do so; we are invigorated and rejuvenated. Limitless benefit and good fortune adorn those who cherish the members above all, who, rather than meeting the famous or powerful, would happily meet sincere members” (July 4, 1997, *World Tribune*, p. 8).

Recently, General Director Nagashima referred to a conversation with President Ikeda, who spoke about how important it is right now to exert ourselves for world peace. When we make that kind of altruistic effort, he said, many issues may emerge—internal and

external—but as we confront them, we can develop great strength—our greater self comes forth. Everything we do for Bud-dhism benefits us personally.

It is important that we carry out our activities without bearing grudges and without any sense of sacrifice. Negativity causes us to lose momentum. Everything we willingly do for kosen-rufu benefits us in the long run—that is the nature of faith. I believe if we take this guidance to heart right now, at this crucial time, and put our prayers and action into our district activities and into helping people begin their practice with the Gohonzon, we can do two major things: Awaken our own lives as we move closer to our goals, and significantly influence humanity's future. The two are never exclusive.

In closing, I want to share again four points that Soka Gakkai Vice President Yasunori Takemoto made concerning the ingredients of victory:

- Determine to use the current challenge to become someone who does not doubt the Gohonzon, no matter what is happening.
- Determine that we have the karma to experience whatever situation we may find ourselves in, and that it is our mission to achieve a transformation.
- Determine to do *shakubuku*; to act as a Bodhisattva of the Earth.
- Determine to keep a strong spirit; to not let negative feelings or information overwhelm us; to see any setback as a manageable event and not the total picture of our lives.

How wonderful that we have the Gohonzon! How wonderful that we can chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to it! How wonderful that we can tell others of this practice!

How wonderful that we can win!