

A UNIVERSITY FOR THE PEOPLE

THIS month, the editors have included study material for the Entrance-level Examination scheduled for next April. I hope it will be helpful to the exam candidates and those who assist them in study. That an exam is coming up reminds me of one of the last ones I took. As I recall, it was an Advanced-level Exam. I thought it would be easy. It wasn't. In fact, much to my surprise, I failed it. That experience taught me an important lesson about Buddhist study that I would like to share with you.

Because I had successfully passed previous exams, my study habits weren't as keen as they should have been. I was beginning to take study lightly. So even had I passed, I don't think I would have gained much. Failing that exam, however, helped me realize that study isn't just something we undertake when exam time rolls around. Nor is it an activity designed just for scholars and intellectuals. Rather, study is an integral part of our practice, something no less important than reciting the sutra, chanting or sharing the wonders of Buddhism with others. In fact, to integrate study into our daily regime is exactly the formula outlined by Nichiren Daishonin when he writes, "Exert yourself in the two ways of practice and study. Without practice and study, there can be no Buddhism" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, pp. 94–95). But what makes Buddhist study such a profound endeavor, I think, can be found in the remaining part of that passage where he writes, "You must not only persevere yourself: you must also teach others. Both practice and study arise from faith. Teach others to the best of your ability, even if only a single sentence or phrase."

Generally we tend to think of study as simply acquiring more knowledge for ourselves. There are even those who study to be able to say, "I'm smarter than you are." But to study solely for the sake of gaining more knowledge or deepening one's own intellectual understanding completely misses the point of Buddhist study. Such self-centeredness falls into the realm of what Buddhism calls the "lesser self" and can in fact lead one away from being able to truly understand the heart of Buddhism.

What I was reminded of when I failed my exam is that I study, not for myself, but for the sake of others. It reminded me that we practice in order to "accumulate the treasures of the heart" to become warmhearted people. From that perspective, study, rather than being an exercise for the ego, can be said to be an integral component of our practice for others. SGI President Ikeda illuminated that perspective when he delivered a lecture to the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation in India just this past October. He said:

Buddhism ... is an endeavor directed toward human education. Conversely, education, to realize its full value, must be supported by the spirituality that enables us to extend faith and trust to others. What our world most requires now is the kind of education that fosters love for humankind, that develops

Title: A University for the People

Subject: Living Buddhism 12/97 v.1 n.12 p.4 LB9712p04

Author: Fred M. Zaitso

Keywords: Commentary Department Exams Organization People Publisher Study University

character; that provides an intellectual basis for the realization of peace and empowers learners to contribute to and improve society.

The roots of the Soka Gakkai International (SGI) are to be found in the Soka Kyoiku Gakkai (society for Value-Creating Education), founded in Japan in 1930. Both the first and second presidents, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda, were educators. Motivated by the conviction that the goal of education is the lifetime happiness of students, they sought to understand the actual content of happiness. It was this pursuit that eventually led them to the philosophy of Buddhism, which elucidates the workings of life, and how we come to experience happiness and unhappiness.¹

IN many Buddhist sects, studying and reciting the sutra are considered to be the privilege of priests. I recall during my childhood in Japan when priests visited our home a few times a year to recite the sutra in memory of our ancestors. Such memorial services are a major source of income for priests. On the contrary, the SGI is where people of all walks of life, regardless of social status, background or educational achievement can gather together and learn how one ought to live as a human being. No wonder President Toda called our organization a “university for the people.”

Whether we are preparing for the April examination or helping others prepare, this might be a good time to remind ourselves again how significant study is to our Buddhist practice. Returning to President Ikeda’s lecture in India:

Unless supported and tempered by the wisdom of education, religious faith is always at risk of becoming blind and undirected. On the other hand, when illumined by the light of wisdom that education brings forth, the spiritual values of religion shine that much brighter. I thus find it extremely natural, inevitable even, that the first and second presidents of the Soka Gakkai should have arrived, at one terminus of their pursuit of the real meaning and purpose of education, at the practice of Buddhism—carried out for, and in the midst of, the common people. In a sense, then, our movement has come full circle, as we now seek to promote a universal solidarity of education, culture and peace amongst the world’s people based on the insights of Buddhism. Our actions are rooted in the conviction that this is the certain means by which to reduce, and eventually eliminate, the distances of the heart that separate people. (Ibid.)

As this is the last issue of *Living Buddhism* for the year, please allow me to thank you for your support this year and to extend to all of our readers and their families a safe, healthy and joyful holiday season.

Fred M. Zaitso
SGI-USA General Director

1. See Daisaku Ikeda’s lecture titled “A New Humanism for the Coming Century” in the January 1998 issue of *Living Buddhism*.