

**VOICES: Has your practice enabled you to confront your thoughts and feelings about differences among people? If so, how?**

***Members from New York #1 Joint Territory respond:***

Diversity had a hand in my joining the SGI in 1982. Practicing in New York City, our district meeting included a cross section of Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Italians, blacks, whites, gays, lesbians, etc. We weren't afforded the luxury of practicing "with our own." Our challenge was to stifle the impulse to assume we knew the hearts and minds of each other — we didn't. The SGI provided a safe haven to begin to sort out a multitude of differences; sometimes we chanted just to tolerate one another. Over time those efforts paid off in bonds that have not been severed by years or miles.

— KATE LOAGUE, Brooklyn, N.Y.

I began practicing in 1973. As a gay man, I was soon shocked to find that homophobia was as rampant in our organization as in society at large. Top leaders gave guidance that gay members were "out of rhythm" and must change their sexual orientation. I felt I had two choices: Either leave the Gakkai or change it! I opted for the latter. In response, I was scolded for "breaking unity" and "promoting my own agenda." But I would not give up. In 20 years, we have transformed ourselves! I can now stand proudly, just as I am, as a member of an organization that is at the forefront in the battle against prejudice!

—W. DAVID JOHNSON, New Hyde Park, N.Y.

By basing my sense of identity and self-worth on the Gohonzon, the Goshu and President Ikeda's guidance, I have gradually changed how I think, speak and act with respect to others. The SGI's continuous emphasis on the worthiness of each person, regardless of their distinguishing characteristics, has helped me tremendously. I think more about how I can reach out to create value, harmony, dialogue, appreciation and even humor. Inevitably, my prejudicial nature periodically tries to intercede and, just as periodically, I tell it to go back to its home.

— ROBERT TALIAFERRO, Brooklyn, N.Y.

When I first started practicing 13 years ago, I was very idealistic. I thought Buddhists were more enlightened than others and didn't suffer from the same prejudices. Experience has taught me that this is not true. Buddhists possess the same negative tendencies as other humans — to distrust or dislike people who are different. The one thing we Buddhists have in our favor is that we can recognize these devilish functions and work to eradicate them.

— MARI McQUEEN, Rego Park, N.Y.

For many years I felt afraid of African American men based on some experiences that my daughter had. However, during my 25 years in the SGI, I have met so many wonderful men in our organization, so how could I stay prejudiced? When I go to world peace gongyo, I see many people of different races. I have also made wonderful friendships with members of other races. Having positive experiences like this has opened my mind. This is one reason I love the SGI so much.

— BETTY BELL, Flushing, N.Y.