

Winning in Life: Becoming a Buddhist
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Not having been to a Gohonzon-conferral ceremony in a while, I was surprised how refreshing it was to attend one recently. The best part was seeing the overjoyed faces of the new members as they walked up to receive the Gohonzon. In the background, the sponsors clapped and jumped up and down — I couldn't tell who was happier, the new members or the sponsors.

The Gohonzon-conferral ceremony seems to be the closest thing we have in the SGI-USA to an initiation ceremony. It's the closest we come to having a certain moment when we officially become Buddhists. But in reality, it might be much later that we feel confident calling ourselves Buddhists. In fact, many people feel, even after long years of practice, that sometimes they are Buddhists and sometimes, well, they are something else.

Shinji Ishibashi, the SGI-USA men's division secretariat chief, felt this way when he neared graduation from college. Even though he was practicing, without realizing it he had been relying on his intellect alone to fulfill his life; spiritually, he didn't feel like a Buddhist. "I was confident that I would move on and become a professional in the field that I chose, architecture," he remembers, "but suddenly I had this feeling of tremendous emptiness." He would ask himself: "OK, I'm sure I'm going to become a professional, but what then? I'll be working hard, working hard, but where's it going to end?"

In trying to fill this void, Shinji found out what it really means to be a Buddhist, to "convert" to Buddhism as it were. Compassion, kindness, cheerfulness, forbearance, using common sense — these are all aspects of the Buddhist way of life that fulfilled him, he found. The bottom line was that he had to show respect to himself and others through his actions.

We are Buddhists when we behave like Buddhists — when we behave as the best, the wisest, human beings we can be. As Nichiren Daishonin teaches: "The real meaning of the Lord Shakyamuni Buddha's appearance in this world lay in his behavior as a human being. How profound!" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 2 [2nd ed.], p. 240).

Sheilah Edwards, an SGI-USA vice general director, learned about living like a Buddhist when her husband got a great new job. She expected to be "in the money," but soon found his new employment necessitated them putting out more funds than she had expected for giving dinners, entertaining people and going to expensive restaurants.

"This was a whole new thing in my life that I never associated with my practice," she remembers. "I went on for a long time just trying to make ends meet, feeling really angry at my husband. There were demands coming from everywhere for more money — and I was just trying to make it work."

What could she do but put her faith into action? She remembers: "I decided to use my common sense and curtail a lot of my spending, budget better and really begin to chant to be understanding, to not be angry at my husband, to be more supportive, to have appreciation for my circumstances. Then I wasn't on the edge all the time."

Becoming a Buddhist is liberating — it's a gradual process of bringing forth the great reserves of wisdom we already have deep in our hearts. Converting to Buddhism is, in this sense, nothing less than converting to our truest selves.

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