

Renewing My Conviction
By BOB PRYOR
SAN DIEGO

The following journal describes the April journey to Tokyo for the Spring Leaders Conference.

Saturday, April 19

As we enter the Soka International Friendship Hall, we pass through a gauntlet of Japanese members whose enthusiasm and sincerity are overwhelming. Several women have tears in their eyes. Some spy my name badge and get very excited that I'm from the United States. It's as if our appearance has actualized their dream for world kosen-rufu.

I reach into my "bag of tricks" and hand out a few souvenir trinkets. The recipients act as if they just won the lottery. It's hard for me to fathom the depths of these members' faith and their commitment to kosen-rufu. When I finally pass through the dozens of individuals gathered, completing countless brief but powerful personal interactions, I feel an emotional overload.

At 2:00 p.m. the International Friendship Meeting starts, and Mr. Wada [SGI general director] is the first to address us. He says that there are 441 members from 56 countries attending this SGI Spring Leaders Conference.

I think about the fact that U.S. participation represents just 10 percent. The United States is a world leader in many categories, but we have a way to go before we are world leaders in the kosen-rufu movement.

Mr. Hasegawa, Soka Gakkai vice president, informs us that we have received a lengthy message from SGI President Ikeda. It turns out that the message is more akin to a speech. It is very detailed and filled with historical references and important contemporary lessons.

I am immediately struck by the depth and thoughtfulness of the message President Ikeda prepared for us, and my head hurts from struggling to grasp its profundity. To compose a greeting with such thoughtfulness and care must have taken considerable effort and much of President Ikeda's precious time. I feel compelled to learn from his action and example — not just his words.

Next we have a study lecture from Mr. Saito, Soka Gakkai Study Department chief. The study material is President Ikeda's lecture on the Gosho "Happiness in this World" in *Learning From the Gosho*. The point I find most interesting is that Mr. Saito follows President Ikeda's lecture almost verbatim from the book rather than creating his own lecture, though he is, no doubt, capable of doing so. Because of this, I see new depths to President Ikeda's lecture that I had not seen before. I realize how immeasurably fortunate I am to have a mentor who can explain the depths of the Daishonin's Buddhism with such clarity and applicability to today's world.

After the meeting is over we gather in groups of seven to attend various discussion meetings around Tokyo. My group goes to a community center in Hadachi Ward, the first community center in that area. More than 100 members line up to greet us as we arrive.

After traditional Japanese musical performances on the *koto* (a string instrument) and the *shamisen* (similar to an American banjo), we start the meeting. Our translator also acts as the master of ceremonies and asks the audience members if they have any questions for us: "Why did you join Buddhism instead of Christianity?" "How do you get new people to learn gongyo?" One member of our group, Diane, who has her own business, is asked how she juggles her business and SGI responsibilities.

The questions are sincere and simple. I realize that what we take for granted they find

most remarkable. I giggle to myself about the irony of coming from America to Japan and answering questions about Buddhism. By the time we return to our hotel we are all a little worn out, but also energized from the day's activities.

Sunday, April 20

Our only activity today is another discussion meeting in Tokyo's Mushashino Headquarters. The atmosphere is different than the day before, since this group has many young families. A number of children turn out to greet us, although the younger ones have no idea what all the fuss is about. A coed youth jazz trio plays a stirring rendition of "Forever Sensei." A few of us spontaneously begin to dance, to the amusement and delight of the Japanese members.

We begin our friendship exchange meeting with more than 150 members. Two representatives from our group present experiences, we have a gift exchange, and seemingly endless group picture-taking follows the meeting. Lots of fun, lots of laughs, and we return to our hotel around 10:00 p.m.

Monday, April 21

Today is the day we've been waiting for, the day we attend a meeting with President Ikeda. The meeting to celebrate Soka Gakkai Day (May 3) is to be held at the Makiguchi Memorial Hall in the evening, so we have time to go to nearby Soka University, where we tour the Ikeda Auditorium. The lobby has a showcase of rocks, companions of which are buried in the building foundation, donated by 162 universities from 73 countries.

Moving to the main auditorium, we are immediately drawn to the striking curtain covering the stage. It depicts a scene from ancient Greece with Socrates and Aristotle walking and talking in an ancient plaza. This curtain was donated by the graduates of Soka University and their parents on the university's 20th anniversary.

Next we go to the basement where numerous historical treasures are showcased — including original writings from George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Edison, Walt Whitman, Helen Keller, Mark Twain, John Dewey and Walt Disney. I feel transported to another time while reading some of these letters. I have a sense that I don't usually get in a museum, as if the respect accorded to these documents — and to the people who wrote them — goes far beyond a collector's hobby, to the realm of the spiritual. Maybe that's what it is: Looking at these documents seems like a very spiritual, reverent experience.

We later arrive at Makiguchi Hall, and it doesn't appear as large to me as it did from a distance. When I get inside I realize why. It is such a large building that it is hard to have a proper perspective from nearby. It is, however, an indescribably magnificent building. We ride up five or six escalators to get to our meeting room. We enter a large tatami-mat Gohonzon room that has a 35-foot high ceiling. It must hold well over a thousand people, and it is packed by the time the meeting starts.

First we hear activity reports from leaders in Russia and Colombia. The Russian leader joined 17 years ago and was the second member in Russia. Members there had their first Gohonzon-conferral ceremony in 1993 and eventually became a chapter.

The Colombian leader talks about how President Ikeda first came to Colombia in 1987, despite great personal risk. Recently temple members held a rally at which only four people, all relatives, showed up. In contrast, 100 members showed up for a meeting in support of the SGI. It's interesting, I thought: As the SGI is spreading throughout the world, the Nikken sect is also appearing in every country to try to derail our efforts.

President Ikeda soon enters the room to thundering applause. We hear a rousing

Title: Renewing My Conviction

Subject: World Tribune 06/06/97 n.3142 p.1 WT970606p01 San Diego, California

Author: Bob Pryor

Keywords: California Conferences Conviction Diego Events Experiences Leaders National News Practice
Renewing Spring Workshops

performance from the Tokyo Brass Band. They are as polished as a symphony orchestra, but more spirited. The first thing President Ikeda says is that we should make meetings interesting. Leaders may think that making things more complicated or difficult (than they have to be) is good, but we are a movement of the common people, he says.

President Ikeda's style is so direct. He says whatever he feels needs to be said, without considering the personal consequences. He is so courageous.

I reflect that I am both appreciative and content to let President Ikeda blaze all the trails, so I can practice and obtain benefit from this wonderful practice. However, in my heart I know that the correct practice of a true disciple is not just to depend on the mentor, but to fulfill the mentor's vision by blazing new trails as well. There is much room for improvement in this critical part of my practice.

After the meeting, we go down one floor to a room where a selection of awards, gifts from dignitaries and honorary doctorates that President Ikeda has received are displayed. It is awesome proof of the achievements and friendships he has built around the world. Why doesn't the Japanese and Western press report at least a few of these outstanding accomplishments? We return to our buses and depart for our hotel, with much to think about on the way back.

Tuesday, April 22

It's hard to believe that this is the last day of our training course. The SGI-USA men attend an informal question-and-answer meeting with Mr. Wada and the women with Mrs. Hachiya. We later attend a closing meeting at the Soka International Friendship Hall.

It's clear to me that the theme of this trip is mentor and disciple. In that context, I can clearly see everything that President Ikeda has built in Japan and throughout the world with untiring effort. I renew my conviction that there is no other mentor of life who is as accomplished, skilled and wise.

The main point I personally take back is that, to be a true disciple of my mentor, I must share his greatness with others. I decide that a good way to do this is to help members better understand President Ikeda's heart through his voluminous and profound writings and speeches. I make a new vow to more deeply study these writings together with my comrades for kosen-rufu as a way to strengthen the foundation for the SGI-USA that no evil outside force can shake.

Wednesday, April 23

We leave Japan and fly back to the States. We arrive the same day, after crossing the international date line. After clearing customs I say my good-byes to both old and new comrades. We have shared a great, historic event together.

WT

Bob Pryor is the study coordinator for San Diego Joint Territory and has a career in the computer software industry. Bob can be reached over the Internet at rpryor@web-insight.com.