

Of Leaders and Beach Balls

Ever try to push a beach ball under water? You know what happens. It always pops back to the surface. Sometimes leaders are like that, too, SGI General Director Eiichi Wada said in an informal dialogue recently.

He said he notices that, despite his best intentions to stay on the forefront of the organization, he always tends to “pop” back up — meeting with leaders, holding planning meetings, etc. Just as with keeping a beach ball under water, he said, it takes concerted effort to stay immersed in the lives of individual members.

Forefront and *front lines* are the terms often used in the SGI to denote where our Buddhist philosophy encounters society. It's where the action is, so to speak. District or group discussion meetings are often considered front-line activities because that's generally where guests first learn about our philosophy and come to know about our organization's mission in society.

Headquarters, territory, joint territory, etc., leaders are continually reminded to go to these activities, not only to support the people in the districts, but so they won't forget what the most important activities are.

But Mr. Wada clarified where the real forefront is — the forefront of the forefront. Even discussion meetings or other district meetings are not the real forefront, he said. It is too easy for leaders to attend those meetings, say a few words, answer a few questions and leave without really getting to know even one person. The real forefront, the most important activity in the SGI, is talking to people one to one, giving courage, hope or insight to those who've lost heart, listening to how people feel about their lives and activities, sharing in their joys of experiencing actual proof.

As SGI President Ikeda often says, speaking in front of large crowds is easy compared to consoling or revitalizing one person — or becoming a true friend. But it is at these things which we, as SGI-USA members, must excel.

A conversation in *The New Human Revolution*, vol. 6, among Shin'ichi Yamamoto, Mr. Ikeda's character, and two other leaders makes a similar point. The three are talking about the significance of the SGI's discussion meetings, praising such gatherings for their dedication to the people's happiness and the study of Buddhism.

“The most important thing of all, though, is giving personal guidance and encouragement,” Shin'ichi says. “It goes without saying that we should encourage those who attend discussion meetings as much as possible, but I always tend to think of those who do not attend. That's why I've often visited such members, to encourage them personally. This is the most fundamental part of a leader's activities.”

Developing this ability to give hope and confidence to others, one to one, is a major reason we practice this Buddhism. Through our prayers and our study, we can develop our compassion and wisdom to, like a real bodhisattva, remove another's suffering and bring joy.

If as leaders we — like red, yellow and blue beach balls — always bob on the surface, appearing only at planning meetings, etc., we'll miss out on a most rewarding aspect of our practice: helping another human being. The activities that epitomize the Gakkai are those that deal directly with encouraging the individual — whether it is visiting him or her at home, making a phone call, sending an e-mail or writing a note. Not that the other leadership duties aren't important, but the one-to-one connection is what keeps our peace movement afloat and moving full steam ahead.

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Title: Editorial: Of leaders and beach balls

Subject: World Tribune 10/10/97 n.3160 p.2 WT971010p02

Author:

Keywords: balls beach Editorials Guidance leaders Opinion Practice Tribune World