

How To Be Encouraging

Most of us have a picture in our minds of the perfect Buddhist: a person who chants powerfully and abundantly, never misses an opportunity to recite the sutra, studies hard, shares Buddhism with others, shows actual proof, has a deep sense of responsibility toward others — and is always, always encouraging.

When we compare ourselves to this ideal, some of us may feel discouraged or exhausted, thinking that our efforts will never measure up. Ideals are important because they provide a target for us, something to challenge ourselves toward.

But more important than being a “textbook example” of a Buddhist is being a person who can live each day with hope and joy. A person with this spirit is a person who can encourage others.

I hope that the SGI-USA is and will be a place where members feel comfortable being themselves while at the same time developing themselves. Toward this goal, one of the three areas that we are focusing on this year is supporting members’ quests for happiness.

Since encouragement is the key to doing this, I’d like to offer the following points and suggestions.

Encourage by example. Buddhism is active; attaining Buddhahood is the continuous action of striving to improve the quality of your life for the sake of yourself and others. Even though you may feel you’re not showing actual proof in a tangible, material sense, if you can continuously and joyfully challenge your goals and dreams, you can inspire others to do the same. And it’s better to motivate people with a spark of inspiration than the burden of obligation.

Don’t judge. Judgments are usually based on assumptions — which are often incorrect — and can blind us to the unique qualities of each individual. Unless we see a person for who he or she is, rather than who we think he or she is or ought to be, how can we appreciate and encourage that person?

Also, I have found that the people who present me with the toughest challenges are often the ones who turn my judgments inside out and help me see humanity, often where I least expect it.

Develop your compassion. One of the first steps in developing compassion is resisting the urge to criticize. I can’t think of anyone who is encouraged by judgmental criticism.

Sometimes it’s easy to look at a problem that someone else is facing and say, “Your problem is because of your weakness.” Calling attention to the shortcomings of others may sometimes be an expression of compassion, but we should never forget the heart of compassion: feeling another person’s joys and sufferings as if they were our own. This kind of empathy doesn’t just appear; it has to be developed. As we get to know people better, we can better understand and appreciate their lives, thus developing our compassion.

Listen — even if it hurts. Sometimes people tell me that I’m too dry and businesslike, and that they can’t feel my heart. This is very painful for me to hear, because I believe I have deep, warm feelings for the members. I’m sad that my feelings aren’t always apparent. But I have to recognize that this is my challenge; I have to self-reflect and continuously chant to express my joy and appreciation.

When members give us feedback, it’s usually for our benefit. If we can listen to negative-sounding feedback with a spirit of hope and self-improvement, we can keep moving forward without any grudges.

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Jump-start your confidence. As we strive for self-improvement, sometimes we focus on our weaknesses more than our strengths, concentrating on fixing what we think is wrong rather than building on what's right. We all have at least one good point or strength.

And although we may lack confidence elsewhere, we tend to have confidence in our strengths. Recognizing our strengths is a good starting point for expanding our confidence in other areas. We don't have to be perfect in all areas — we just need to be the best we can be.

Encourage others as if you'll only get one chance. SGI President Ikeda has said that he pours every ounce of effort he can muster into encouraging a member. He talks with each person as if it will be his last opportunity to meet him or her. When we talk with members, if we can have the spirit that this will be our last or only meeting with them, we can convey a sense of immediacy and speak truly from the heart.

Remember the sun. Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is known as the Buddhism of the sun. The sun shines equally on all things. It's all-inclusive, providing penetrating warmth. It lifts our spirits and nourishes life. We, too, can shine like the sun, brightening others' lives. When we chant about encouraging others, let's envision the great sun of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo rising in our hearts.

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