

Phila. Region Explores Literacy Issues
By CLAUDE LOMDEN, Bureau Chief
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Basically, reading is essential to thinking. Perhaps we can even say that reading is a sign of our humanity.... Reading makes us human.

— *SGI President Ikeda (Nov. 14, 1997, World Tribune, p. 11)*

SGI-USA members in the Philadelphia Region began discussing literacy a little more than a year ago, asking such questions as: What can we do to support those SGI-USA members who have difficulty reading? And how relevant is reading ability to the happiness of our members and the development of kosen-rufu?

“Originally, members of the Culture Department began discussing how to help kids improve their literacy, but as we continued to talk, concern over literacy of all kinds started to emerge,” Mark Sullivan, the region’s Culture Department leader, said.

“As we talked about literacy education, we drew a big response from various members. In the past, the Culture Department focused on seminars to support one big activity. But literacy of all kinds appeals to the needs of many people, not just Culture Department members. We are now talking about how to have ongoing activities to help our members develop their literacy skills.”

Philadelphia Region’s first concrete step toward generating widespread discussion for improving literacy among our members was a seminar, “Expanding Our Literacy for the 21st Century,” last fall.

Highlighting the importance of the seminar that he coordinated, Ted Primus said: “As we move into the next millennium, we’re bombarded with a tidal wave of information. In order to navigate and make informed choices, it’s imperative to be literate. We need to be literate, in all its forms, so that we can separate the important information from the junk. We need to develop our literacy in order to strengthen our ability to process and collate information — to discern what is relevant from what is not.”

During the opening panel discussion, Monte Joffee, the SGI-USA Culture Department’s education division leader and principal of a New York City school, noted that literacy should be viewed in the context of society. We should take into account such factors as the fact that many adults have lost their “moral compass,” that many kids are growing up with a tradition of violence. For many, the lack of literacy is part of a larger spiritual crisis in society, he said.

Dr. Susan Neuman, associate professor of elementary education at Temple University (and a specialist in reading), stressed that raising the literacy level of children (75 percent of Philadelphia children read and write below grade level) requires more than teacher or parent involvement: community involvement is necessary.

After the panel discussion, several seminars were offered. Commenting on a gongyo practice workshop, Wanda Peacock said: “I was surprised to see so many members who have been practicing a long time who can’t do gongyo! Some of them requested that gongyo practice become a regular Philadelphia activity.”

In the children’s literacy workshop, Mr. Joffee addressed teachers and parents about hope. “What’s really in crisis in our schools is hope,” he said. “Don’t lose hope. Don’t lose confidence. Let’s all make a pledge never to give up on our children. Remember that crisis is also opportunity.”

The success of the literacy seminar sparked further discussion and proposals.

These proposals, many still in dialogue and planning stages, include:

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- Regular weekly volunteer tutoring for SGI-USA junior and senior high school students to be held at the local community center;
- Follow-up literacy seminar focusing on writing and spelling;
- Regular meetings devoted to reading and discussing SGI President Ikeda's guidance published in the *World Tribune* and *Living Buddhism*;
- Periodic gongyo practice.

With study such an integral part of our practice of this Buddhism, literacy is indispensable. Commenting on the connection between reading and education, Philadelphia Region Leader Carmella Menchaca offered recent guidance from SGI President Ikeda:

“Education makes us free. The world of knowledge and of the intellect is where all people can meet and converse. Education liberates people from prejudice. It frees the human heart from its violent passions. It is education that severs the dark fetters of ignorance about the laws that govern the universe.

“Finally, it is through education that we are liberated from powerlessness, from the burden of mistrust directed against ourselves. To awaken the abilities that have been lying dormant within. To arouse and extend the soul's aspiration to become full and complete. Can there be a more sublime experience in life?”

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