

WORLD TRIBUNE MAILBOX

Reproductive Rights

As an unabashed Buddhist abortion counselor, I want to comment on Kim Hawkins' remarks (Oct. 23 *World Tribune*) in regard to the experience of Bethany Wild (Sept. 11 *World Tribune*). I have always felt that there was a dearth of discussion in the SGI regarding women's reproductive rights, as they are an integral part of the human rights that the SGI has always championed.

I, too, found Bethany's experience to be a touching and inspiring story of the power of our Buddhist practice. But I find it outrageous that such an experience be used to encourage what appears to be a "pro-life" crisis pregnancy center. As a counselor and patient educator in clinics that perform abortions, I know all too well that most crisis pregnancy centers have an anti-abortion agenda and carry out that agenda by conducting campaigns of misinformation. There have been many women making what they felt was the most wise, compassionate decision possible, who have been terrorized by the inflammatory, and downright incorrect rhetoric of these types of centers.

The most important aspect of our democratic society is that we are able to make important life decisions based on our own conscience — choices involving our beliefs about life, death, religion; spirituality cannot, and should not be dictated by the personal beliefs of other people. Those actively involved in misinforming women about their reproductive choices not only endanger the physical health of women but deny the wisdom of women to make responsible choices about their reproductive health, in essence denying their inherent Buddhahood. There is a widespread movement in our country that would not only want to deny women their reproductive rights but also deny the right of each of us to practice Buddhism. Religious liberty and reproductive rights are freedoms whose existence are mutually dependent. I believe it is of the utmost importance that we speak out against...the "crisis pregnancy" centers throughout the nation....We have begun to make strides in addressing racism and homophobia, both within our organization and within our society. The sexism inherent in the anti-abortion agenda is just as important a human rights issue as racism and homophobia. We will never be free of these human rights abuses until we address them all equally and eradicate their root cause.

—JENNIFER L. BENSON, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Regarding Rituals

I am a member of 30+ years who has been also leading at some level for nearly as many years.... I have had difficulty with all religions because of doctrines, clergies and practices that are departures from the founders' own words. This difficulty is multiplied when having to explain such practices to people.

I believe that we should cover topics such as the bell in ways that the future members will be able to readily discern necessity from custom and common practice. I hope that future topics will include more about bell-ringing and silent prayers, etc.

I would like to raise a couple of issues that were touched upon in Lisa Jones' article "Bell, Book, Candle and Saxophone" in the Nov. 13 *Tribune*.

You said, "The reason we ring a bell is...." I have heard explanations that related to sound and beauty, but the one reason I remember is the function of signaling. I mean that

Title: Mailbox: 12/11/98

Subject: World Tribune 12/11/98 n.3221 p.11 WT981211p11

Author:

Keywords: 12/11/98 December July Mailbox Opinion Tribune World

we ring the bell to signal those we are leading that, for instance, it's time to chant daimoku three times.... Can you recognize that we in the Gakkai use a particular kind of bell simply because we agreed to be based upon a common sound, and since the Gakkai is the gathering of those propagating the Gohonzon, what we do must be at least an acceptable way? Can you allow that a common practice is preferred to encouraging others to find their own way? Obviously, that's the way I want this kind of thing to go. There are places that will look and sound really weird if we encourage too much diversion from the common practice of the Gakkai, I think.

I like the idea that you can shake up people's perspective of the norm. But do you know that we have to explain after you're finished with your shaking? Take, for instance, your information about the book on the floor. It's possible that the concept of a floor being a place of danger and disrespect is more universal than you teach.... Your judgment of "putting your book on the floor is not a big issue" might be true to the extent that it is not a big issue to you, I think. Or, Lisa, I can agree with you that it is not a big issue for those who are respectful of important things.

So, again, I support your bringing up topics like this, but I would like you to consider endorsing the common practice of the Gakkai as it is now. If these things are changing, the *Tribune* is where the members will look to find them. Please realize that your articles will be taken as SGI-endorsed when they are printed in editorial style. I want you to know that when you write something that some people think, "The *World Tribune* said...." So could you make such articles more accurate and a little more complete and containing more support for common Gakkai practice (making clear that the practice could change) so you leave less for us to correct after you've stirred things up?

Your article on forbearance (Nov. 13 "Editorial") was appreciated by me. It is the most difficult of concepts for me to master, too. Thank you.

— RALPH E. HICKEN, Omaha, Neb.

I have been looking forward to and reading NSA/SGI publications for almost 15 years and have come to appreciate the hard work and quality of your staff. The following article, though, seems a break from this tradition.

While I agree with Staff Writer Lisa Jones that Nichiren Daishonin prescribed few formalities in association with Buddhist practice and that the most important thing is the sincerity of our offerings, I was surprised and disappointed to read her advice and sarcastic tone in the article "Bell, Book, Candle and Saxophone."

She writes, "The reason we ring the bell is to offer beautiful sounds to the Buddha," as if the Buddha is something outside ourselves. It is my understanding that the Daishonin taught that the Buddha nature is innate in every living human, and we practice Buddhism to nurture it and bring it forth in our lives. There is a danger, especially for newer members, who might read this and believe that chanting is asking for help from "The Buddha" just as many Christians believe that through Jesus they can get closer to God. I, for one, am not chanting for outside help.

The statement "Many Americans have no qualms about putting books wherever it's convenient" I also take exception to. The fact that some people do not understand the subtle flow of life's energy is not a reason to adjust our standards to the lowest common denominator. I believe that it is not proper to put children on top of their heads (our crown chakra) point the bottom of my feet at another human or the Gohonzon, place certain objects on the floor, hang anything on the same wall higher than the Gohonzon, wear a hat or chew gum in the Gohonzon room, and cross one's legs while chanting.

We are chanting for human revolution and world peace. Attaining these goals will

Title: Mailbox: 12/11/98

Subject: World Tribune 12/11/98 n.3221 p.11 WT981211p11

Author:

Keywords: 12/11/98 December July Mailbox Opinion Tribune World

involve doing something different (change) which is often uncomfortable. Crossing our arms or legs is a sign of resistance and comfort, clearly counter-productive to our chanting. I can see around me that not many in our society understand these issues, but that doesn't mean it is not so, and to use "Americans" for our guide in these matters is not the advice I am looking for in the *World Tribune*.

I would rather read an article on the manner in which SGIPresident and Mrs. Ikeda set up their altar than how Lisa thinks it should be done.

— PETER DANNENFELSER II, Sacramento, Calif.

Working with younger youth division members, I consciously look at the practices in our organization to realize whether they are rooted in culture or the Daishonin's Buddhism. I want them to know that these cultural practices are not necessarily essential to our Buddhist practice. As future leaders and members of our organization, I want to instill in them the sense of responsibility in continuously creating and recreating an organization for the American people as representatives of the entire world, based on the foundation of the essence of the Daishonin's Buddhism.

Thank you for having the courage and wisdom to write eloquently of issues that can sometimes stir up controversy only because of the fear of change.

— LISA HONN, Kansas City, Mo.

Misquote?

In the Nov. 13 issue, in "In My Life," Ulisse Gallo wrote: "I remembered what Nelson Mandela said in his 1994 inaugural address: 'It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be?'"

This supposed quote from Mandela has been circulating around the SGI-USA for a year or so. However, if you read Mandela's two inaugural speeches, one given on May 9, 1994, and a second one given on May 10, 1994 — both of which are easily accessible on the Internet — Mandela said absolutely nothing like the above quote. His intent and wording are entirely different and more directly address the people to whom he is speaking.

I've been inquiring about this quote, and it has come to my attention that it was probably written by New Age guru Marianne Williamson.

— LIZ GOLDNER, Huntington Beach, Calif.