

PUBLISHER'S COMMENTARY

BE EXTRAORDINARY ORDINARY PEOPLE

WHERE is the power of Buddhism found? I think we can safely say that it is found in the lives of the people who practice it. It does not come from any special person or entity. In fact, SGI President Ikeda recently commented that he feels his struggle as a Buddhist has been one of challenging those who consider themselves special. When ordinary people become convinced of their true power, those who consider themselves superior will feel threatened and insecure. It then takes a person of courage to stand up against their attempts to undermine the people's confidence.

Last month, I had the wonderful opportunity to visit members in the newly formed Caribbean Region. What impressed me most was the power, passion and richness of the hearts of the members throughout that region, which is now part of SGI-USA's new Southern Zone.

With unemployment rates as high as twenty percent, economic and social conditions are often harsh. In spite of these difficult conditions, the members often go far out of their way to participate in SGI meetings and activities. For instance, to attend the Caribbean Area General Meeting on the island of St. Maarten, members flew in from the islands of Antigua, Aruba, Bonaire, Nevis, St. Croix, St. Lucia and St. Thomas—some from as far as three hours away by air.

In Puerto Rico, members on the far side of the island chartered a bus at their own expense to travel three hours to attend a meeting. Regardless of their difficult circumstances, none of these members appeared poor. All were wealthy in terms of the “treasure of the heart” that is their faith in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. They were rich in spirit and in their shared pride, joy and determination as SGI members. To me, this was a concrete expression of the energy and power of ordinary people, which has always been the SGI's pillar and strength.

After World War II, President Toda vowed that by propagating the Daishonin's Buddhism, he would rid Japan of poverty and misery. In the early days of the Soka Gakkai, the organization was ridiculed by the press and others as an organization of the poor and the sick. Yet these “poor” and “sick” people created a powerful foundation of fortune in their lives and in society, to the extent that Gakkai members today are criticized for being too influential—in a sense, too “healthy.” This condition is none other than the collective good fortune of individual members who have dedicated their lives to kosen-rufu. Clearly, President Toda's vow has been fulfilled.

Today people are anxious and even afraid about what the upcoming turn of the millennium will bring. While this sort of “millennium fever” may have its roots in Judeo-Christian thinking, a similar atmosphere prevailed in Japan around the Daishonin's time. Society was gripped by disasters, and people feared that with the onset of what Buddhist scriptures termed the evil Latter Day of the Law, things would only get worse. While other Buddhist leaders used people's fear to gain support and profit for themselves, the Daishonin made a bold and optimistic declaration based on his enlightened state of life: The present calamities were not simply signs of an evil age, but sure signs that a Great Pure Law was about to spread and bring great fortune to all humanity as the Lotus Sutra taught.

The hope that burned in the Daishonin's heart has been made real in this age solely through the efforts of SGI members. They have cherished it as their dream and, without con-

cern for profit or fame, worked over the decades to build a foundation of peace, happiness and good fortune for themselves and for society. And whatever fear or doubt prevails in the world today, whatever difficulties may await us, it is our mission to inspire hope in those around us that the coming century is in fact the Century of Life.

The Daishonin himself said that he was “born poor and lowly to a *chandala* family” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 37), meaning that he came from the lowest, most ordinary class of society. He also said, “The true Buddha is the common mortal” (MW-1, 91). The Buddha, he declared, is an ordinary person—an enlightened ordinary person.

Today, we are flooded with media images of high style, wealth and status. The need to be “special”—prettier, richer and more popular than others—has become ingrained in our collective psyche. In fact, many have interpreted the “American Dream” to be the pursuit and acquisition of wealth, property and prestige. But recently even science has been demonstrating the shortcomings of such an approach to life.

In February *The New York Times* reported the conclusions of the latest research: “Not only does having more things prove to be unfulfilling, but people for whom affluence is a priority in life tend to experience an unusual degree of anxiety and depression as well as a lower overall level of well-being.... Researchers sketch an increasingly bleak portrait of people who value ‘extrinsic goals’ like money, fame and beauty. Such people are not only more depressed than others, but report more behavioral problems and physical discomfort....”

From such reports, I think, we can take pride that being an “ordinary” person is in tune with the times. And our goals and focus—to create friendship and trust based on shared “treasures of the heart”—are increasingly sought, even by those with wealth or power.

The Daishonin writes: “When it comes to understanding the Lotus Sutra, I have only a minute fraction of the vast ability that [the great teachers] T’ien-t’ai and Dengyo possessed. But as regards my ability to endure persecution and the wealth of my compassion for others, I believe they would hold me in awe” (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 100).

Rather than think ourselves special, when we strive to make a special degree of effort and show special concern for others, we ordinary people will discover within us extraordinary treasures of the heart.

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