

NOTHING CAN DEFEAT US, WHEN WE HAVE GOOD FRIENDS

SGI President Ikeda continues with the experience of SGI-USA member and master trumpeter Shunzo Ono in part 3 of his February Headquarters Leaders Meeting speech. After recovering from a car accident, adversity strikes Mr. Ono again: cancer. But his fellow jazz musicians in the SGI rally round him and help him overcome this obstacle, too. 'Nichiren Daishonin repeatedly exhorts us to associate with good friends,' President Ikeda explains, so that we can completely triumph in life.

Adversity was to strike Shunzo Ono again. In December 1995, he was told he had cancer of the tonsils. The cancer was said to be Stage 4 — the most advanced stage. This time, it was not his career as a trumpeter but his very life that hung in the balance.

When I was notified that he would have to undergo surgery, I immediately sent a message to encourage him. And I prayed earnestly to the Gohonzon for the recovery of this most beloved disciple.

“Heavenly deities! Bodhisattva Medicine King! Please protect my dear disciple!” I prayed. “Please go to work on his behalf!”

Mr. Ono chanted to find a good doctor, and he did. The operation was performed by a leading specialist in the field and was a great success. That was three years ago, in February 1996.

From day to day, we may not be able to see the great benefit that we are accumulating in the course of our SGI activities, but at a crucial moment, it is clearly manifested as a powerful protective force — it’s much like having a million allies fighting on our behalf.

In Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, the benefits, whether inconspicuous or conspicuous, are enormous!

Mr. Ono’s courageous struggle for recovery continued after his operation. The surgery had removed not only the cancerous tonsils but also some of the lymph nodes and surrounding muscle tissue in his throat. He could not open his mouth unless he pried it open with his hands.

He had to undergo physiotherapy to regain use of his facial muscles and also had to go through more than 35 sessions of radiation therapy, which brought with it the side effects of vomiting and insomnia. These took a heavy toll on Mr. Ono’s body, and he grew extremely weak.

But he had a firm resolve that kept him going: to join his fellow members on stage at the 15th World Peace Youth Culture Festival to be held in New York a few months later.

Together, Mr. and Mrs. Ono waged an awesome battle against the devil of illness. They were absolutely determined not to be defeated. I sent them a number of messages of support. I also continued to chant for Mr. Ono’s recovery.

Up until five days before the culture festival, Mr. Ono was so weak that he had to have a tube inserted in his stomach and be fed intravenously. But through determination, through sheer force of will, he finally took his place on stage for that wonderful festival, which was held in the world-renowned Carnegie Hall. That was in June 1996.

Joining him on stage were the beautiful fellow members who had supported and

encouraged him over the years. They were his friends, his fellow musicians, the world's leading jazz artists.

On saxophone, there was Wayne Shorter, whose beloved wife, Ana Maria, died shortly after in an airplane crash. I also sent him words of encouragement and condolence at that sad time. He has risen above his grief with great strength and gone on to win Grammy Awards in 1997 and 1998.

On piano, there was Herbie Hancock, who won an Academy Award for Best Original Score in 1987 and Grammy Awards in 1995 and 1997.

There was also Buster Williams on bass, Larry Coryell on guitar, Nestor Torres on flute, Robin Eubanks and Steve Turre on trombone, Kenwood Dennard on drums and Frank Colón on percussion.

Each is one of the world's top artists in his field; each is a great musician of the Mystic Law. They lent their warm support to Mr. Ono privately and professionally, and together they created a superlative culture festival that will go down in the annals of our movement and be remembered for all posterity.

We must never be deceived by corrupt individuals.

Mr. Ono has always shared life's joys and sufferings with these good friends, with these wonderful fellow members. And, in fact, he has made it his guideline to do so. That is why he's strong. That is why nothing can defeat him. That is why he continues to grow.

The Daishonin repeatedly exhorts us to associate with good friends. He cites the Sutra passage "Thrust aside evil friends and associate with good companions" (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 78).

We mustn't allow ourselves to be deceived by corrupt, self-serving individuals. Such people are arrogant and seek only to use others for their own ends. People of this kind exploit the Gakkai, the members' sincerity, social status and even political power, using everything as a means for increasing their own wealth and prestige. They are consumed by self-interest.

The day of the culture festival, Mr. Ono's fellow musicians, knowing his condition, rallied round him with a sublime harmony of spirit. I'll never forget that sight. "The Song of Human Revolution," transformed by a jazz arrangement, resounded powerfully through Carnegie Hall.

Today, the Soka Gakkai Brass Band also performed a rousing rendition of the same song. I thank them for it.

The performance in Carnegie Hall was the magnificent crystallization of the indestructible bonds of comrades. It was simply stunning — art at its most brilliant. Electrified by the jazz musician's stirring performance, the audience responded with unrestrained cheers and thunderous applause. On and on it went, conveying their heartfelt joy and approval.

Professional musicians and music critics have also raved about Mr. Ono's trumpet playing as he has returned to the limelight, making such comments as "Ono's back on top!" and "Ono has made a comeback from illness to play better than he ever has before."

I was overjoyed, too. "The SGI's champion trumpeter has risen again like the phoenix," I thought.

Sharing sufferings and joys with his fellow members, with the SGI and with me, Mr. Ono has performed a brilliant song of the triumph of the human spirit.

Let us join in a round of applause for Mr. Ono and his fellow artists in New York!

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Headquarters Human Ikeda Japan Leaders Major Meeting Musicians Nothing Ono] People President Relation

As we exert ourselves tirelessly for the sake of kosen-rufu, we transform our lives from those filled with the sufferings of birth, aging, sickness and death and win lives of joy, lives infused with the four noble virtues of eternity, happiness, true self and purity. This is faith in the Mystic Law. This is the Daishonin's Buddhism.

In the "Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings," the Daishonin states: "The four sides [of the Treasure Tower] represent the four sufferings of birth, aging, sickness and death. These four aspects of life adorn the tower of our individual lives. By chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo through birth, aging, sickness and death, the fragrance of the four virtues [of eternity, happiness, true self and purity] are made to issue forth [from our lives]" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 740).

How do we overcome the inescapable sufferings of birth, aging, sickness and death? The answer is: only through faith in the Mystic Law. No other religion or political or economic system can provide a fundamental solution to these innate problems of human existence.

Without coming to grips with this one most essential issue, there can be no true happiness for the individual. Nor will it be possible to create a resplendent global civilization in the coming century.

And the time has come to usher in a Century of Life. But what *is* life? How do we live our lives? How do we overcome the sufferings inherent in the human condition? These questions must be humanity's focus. The undercurrents of the times are flowing steadily in this direction as we move inexorably toward the 21st century.

Since we are pioneering practitioners of the Daishonin's eternal Buddhism, let us sound a great, joyous and exuberant trumpet call of victory, like a bugle heralding the dawn. Let us work, with courage and vigor, to further spread throughout the world our great philosophy of hope for the new century.

Victorious reports of your activities in each region have been pouring in to our Headquarters. From the start of the year, each and every region has been making remarkable strides. A powerful momentum toward a year of perfect victory has begun. I commend all of you from the bottom of my heart.

All your dedicated efforts are for the sake of your fellow citizens and for your local communities. They are for the sake of kosen-rufu and for your own happiness as well. Please advance with that conviction.

The essence of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is sharing it with others.

February is the month in which the Daishonin and second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda were born. It is also the month of the Soka Gakkai's February Tradition — a tradition of redoubled efforts in propagation. This tradition has its origin in February 1952, when I, then a 24-year-old youth division member, joined Tokyo's Kamata Chapter as chapter staff and achieved with the members an unprecedented monthly membership increase of 201 households.

This was at a time when even the chapters with the highest propagation records could only manage at most around a hundred new households a month. Not even under the direction of veteran leaders could they get the numbers past this level.

President Toda watched this situation closely. "At this rate," he said, "the Soka Gakkai will never grow into a large organization. We won't be able to realize kosen-rufu." So he

summoned me and said, “Daisaku, would you take on the position of Kamata Chapter staff and begin to get things going in earnest?”

Having worked side by side with President Toda day and night for many years, I understood his meaning well. Kamata, too, was my hometown.

“Leave it to me,” I told him.

Embracing my mentor’s heart as my own, I challenged myself with all my might. And I made Kamata the No. 1 chapter in Japan.

I created a breach for the advance of kosen-rufu. After that, this momentum for propagation spread rapidly to other areas of Japan, and our movement to widely share the Daishonin’s Buddhism began to grow and make significant progress.

The Kamata Chapter leader and women’s division leader at that time, Takashi Koizumi and Shizuko Shiraki, my wife’s mother, also poured all their energies into propagation efforts.

I went to Kamata. And Kamata began to take off. Then Tokyo began to take off. And then our chapters all over Japan began to take off.

The new membership total for the whole Soka Gakkai for January 1952 was 635 households. After the landmark results of Kamata Chapter in February, the new membership total for that March showed a dramatic increase, surpassing 1,000 households — a figure that had long been a monthly target for the Gakkai but never before achieved. By November and December the same year, the new membership monthly totals both reached in excess of 2,000 households. The entire Gakkai membership at the beginning of 1952 was 5,727 households. By the end of the year, it had leapt to 22,324 households.

There were many leaders who had far higher positions than I. But ultimately, positions have nothing to do with kosen-rufu. Truly praiseworthy are those who introduce and lead others to Buddhism.

The essence of faith in the Latter Day, the essence of the Daishonin’s Buddhism, is propagation, introducing others to the Mystic Law. Those who do so are Buddhas; they are the proud disciples of the original Buddha, Nichiren Daishonin. Viewed from the Buddhist perspective, all other honors cannot compare.

Those who share the Buddhist teachings with others are far more admirable than the most powerful leaders in society. I declare that those who advance kosen-rufu are the greatest people of all!

In any event, everything began with my mentor, President Toda, sending me, his young disciple, into the “battlefield.” If President Toda hadn’t taken this step when he did, and if I had failed to realize his vision, today’s Soka Gakkai would not exist.

Because I fought with the spirit of oneness with my mentor, I opened a great path toward the realization of kosen-rufu.

I have spoken of this history today for the sake of posterity.

Let’s do our best this spring!

You are all extremely precious. A terrible influenza is raging in Japan, so please take good care of yourselves. I am praying each day, with all my heart, for your health and longevity. As honorary Soka Gakkai president, I am, after all, here to serve you.

As the English poet Shelley says in “Ode to the West Wind,” “If Winter comes, can

Spring be far behind?”

Let's make another great stride as we head into March! Let's make the SGI the foremost organization in the world! Let's do our best!

The conclusion of SGI President Ikeda's speech at the 31st Soka Gakkai Headquarters Leaders Meeting, held at the Tokyo Makiguchi Memorial Hall in Hachioji, Feb. 2. Part 2 appeared in last week's issue.

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