

THE NEW HUMAN REVOLUTION
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At the America East General Meeting in New York, Shin'ichi Yamamoto holds a Q-and-A session with the members. (President Ikeda shares here several points on the importance of Q-and-A sessions and how to lead the most encouraging Q-and-A sessions.)

Greetings were then given by Student Division Leader Goro Watari, Young Women's Division Leader Tokie Tani and vice general directors Seiichiro Haruki and Katsu Kiyohara, all of whom had traveled with Shin'ichi Yamamoto from Japan.

Kiyohara had also accompanied Shin'ichi some two years earlier to the discussion meeting where New York District was formed. She was particularly impressed by the tremendous growth of the New York members.

She shared her impression frankly: "I can't believe this is the same New York! You've changed beyond recognition. At the first discussion meeting I attended here, everyone was crying in misery, and the joy of faith was nowhere to be found. But now you're all in high spirits, and your faces are shining bright. Why, you all look like princesses! I'm sure that in your hearts it's New Year's. Well, Happy New Year!"

The audience laughed appreciatively.

"Let's remember that our work has just begun," she continued. "President Yamamoto often states that we must be courageous in faith. When you think about it, whether we're brave or cowardly determines whether we live happily or unhappily and also decides the direction of society. If we are cowardly, then not only will we be unable to defeat our weakness and laziness, but we won't be able to say what needs to be said to fight injustice. Exerting ourselves in faith means courageously taking on all challenges.

"I think that you, the New York members, will lead the way for American kosen-rufu as courageous champions of faith," she said.

Shin'ichi, who sat in a chair near the speaker's table, slapped his knee in agreement and exclaimed, "Yes!"

Everyone laughed.

Smiling, Kiyohara went on: "Your victory here in New York will be the victory of America and will lead to the victory of the entire world."

"That's right!" interjected Shin'ichi again.

"Let's stand up!" Kiyohara called.

"We already have!" Shin'ichi chimed in.

"And let's open a new era of worldwide kosen-rufu!"

"Yes," said Shin'ichi, "We'll do it!"

Each of Shin'ichi's interjections drew boisterous laughter, and Kiyohara ended her speech amid general merriment.

January in New York was extremely cold. Outside it was freezing, but in the cheerful warmth of the meeting place, it felt as if spring had come early. The sun of hope, vitality and joy shone brightly in the members' hearts, breaking through all clouds of sorrow and despair.

As the America East General Meeting continued, Shin'ichi again fielded questions from the audience.

Had it been possible, he would have liked to visit each of these friends at home, speaking personally with them, offering them encouragement in faith, guidance on individual problems and answering any questions. But given the shortness of his stay and the increased size of the membership, this was just not possible. So instead, he decided to hold a Q-and-A session at the meeting, where all had gathered.

Even in Japan, Shin'ichi strove wherever possible to open the floor for questions. This was to ensure that the meetings weren't always just one-sided affairs with the leaders doing all the talking. He would then give detailed guidance in response to the members' actual problems and concerns.

In such exchanges, the character and substance of the answerer are truly put to the test. If the leader isn't trusted by the participants, or has an authoritarian air, no one will even want to raise their hand. The unpredictability of the questions also demands that the leader study Nichiren Daishonin's teachings thoroughly and be able to give appropriate guidance in response to any question.

Equally essential is the ability to provide clear answers in a very limited amount of time. If the leader is unable to give a clear response to every question asked, instead trying to palm people off with vague, unsatisfactory answers, it will only sow distrust in their hearts.

Of course, that doesn't mean that leaders have to have all the answers. It's only natural that there will be things that they don't know. But in those cases, it is important that they later consult with an appropriate person about it or, if it's a study point, go research it and then get back to the questioner and sincerely try to answer the question.

There may also be questions that aren't to the point. When fielding such a question, a leader should try to help clarify and organize the questioner's points, aiming to identify exactly what he or she is trying to say and wishes to know.

There may also, on occasion, be someone who asks questions specifically designed to embarrass the leader or put that person on the spot. Or someone who asks questions out of the desire to criticize and attack the Soka Gakkai and the Daishonin's Buddhism. Such situations sometimes call for the leader to boldly refute the questioner's claims.

Another crucial challenge of a Q-and-A session is to ensure that one's answers not only satisfy those who ask questions but are also understood and accepted by everyone gathered, serving to inspire everyone to stand up in faith. Leading a Q-and-A session therefore requires qualities like strong conviction in the power of faith, clear, logical thinking and the flexibility to respond to all sorts of situations.

Leaders must never forget that if they do nothing but issue activity directives or give one-sided guidance, they will end up alienating people.

To be continued