EXPERIENCE — ART AND MISHIZU HAAVISTO, WICKLIFFE, OHIO
ANYTHING BUT A TYPICAL FAMILY

Mishizu and I met in Japan in 1978, about a month after I received the Gohonzon. Mishizu was born into a family that practiced Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, and had received her own Gohonzon a couple years earlier. We were married on May 10, 1979, and will celebrate our 20th wedding anniversary in just three weeks! I don't recall any big discussions on the subject of children prior to or after our marriage (of course Mishizu will tell you that there's a lot I don't recall anymore), so we had no "master family plan" in place. I guess we kind of assumed that we'd be the typical American/Japanese family with one boy and one girl, and we'd all live happily ever after.

Our family turned out to be anything but typical. In 1983 our oldest son, Arthur, was born. Then 10 years later, in 1993, Alex. Aquilla came along in 1995, and Alan in 1997.

It's no secret that raising children is hard work. If you look around at the rest of the animal kingdom, you'll see that they have it easy. The "kids" hang around for anywhere from a couple weeks to a year, then they're ready to go out on their own. For us humans, though, at the one-year point we've barely made a start at raising a child. To make matters worse, a baby doesn't come with a set of instructions. I believe there is no "right way" to raise a child (although there is a wrong way). Each child is unique and responds and learns differently. As parents, the most we can do is show love to our children, and provide them with the discipline and the example they need to become a responsible human being.

Mishizu's favorite book is titled *Sincere Mother, Bright Mother, Healthy Mother, Buddhist Mother*. This book, written in 1976, is a collection of guidance given by several women's division leaders in Japan. It also contains guidance given by SGI President Ikeda. He states that psychologists have said that there are three important time periods in the development of a child: the first is from age 0 to 3, the second from age 5 to 7, and the third around the age of 10 years. By far the most important is the period of less than 3 years. During this time the baby is watching the parents' lifestyle day and night.

President Ikeda goes on to say that the baby may not understand what is going on around him, yet during this time the spirit being developed will be carried throughout the rest of the child's life. This is just like the foundation for a building. It doesn't matter how well a building is built, with a weak foundation it will eventually crumble. The baby doesn't know if mother's milk is good or poison; it just drinks without question. Similarly, the baby is absorbing everything the parents do during this period. He says that at this time the role of the mother is most important. She should practice hard because it not only builds fortune for herself, but also for the baby, and he says the most important thing a mother can do for kosen-rufu is raising a child.

We are fortunate that Mishizu can stay home with the children while they are young. This has involved some sacrifice on our part, as we have not always been in the financial situation we wanted. Although she did work outside the home for a few years, she was able to arrange her schedule so she worked while Art was in school. She worked for a few months after the birth of our second child, but I was able at that time to stay at home during the day. The main reason we moved back to my home state of Ohio was to get to a place where we both wouldn't have to work to make ends meet.

We have never believed in using baby-sitters, even when we lived in Japan and had easy access to a baby-sitter in the form of Grandma. Again, this was not easy, especially in Japan

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when attending a meeting meant catching a bus or train. Often times I would get home from work and see Mishizu returning from a meeting, hiking up the hill from the bus stop with Art being carried on her back. Even now when we do things, even the more mundane such as grocery shopping, we do so as a family. Of course, Art is getting older and has a job of his own that often interferes with our family plans. And for some reason, I get the feeling that as a 15-year-old he doesn't appreciate hanging around with us as much as he used to.

I think that the more time a family spends together, the better. Even those ordinary moments are an opportunity to teach the children about life by setting an example. The same is true concerning teaching children about Buddhism. In *Sincere Mother*, Kazuko Fukushima, a Tokyo area women's leader, relates Mrs. Kaneko Ikeda's experience with raising her children as Buddhists. Mrs. Ikeda related to her that President Toda once said that we can soak in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism through the pores of our skin. Mrs. Ikeda's personal experience bears this out. Her first child and second child were only a year apart, and she took the oldest with her to every meeting. When the second child came along, it was just too much, so that child stayed with Grandma. The end result was a major difference in the way the two children developed.

I guess in our family the role of disciplinarian has primarily fallen on me. Mishizu says she can't do that along with everything else; after all we can't both be mean. I think she's joking. In his book *The Creative Family*, President Ikeda states, "After the age of three, the child becomes more autonomous, the self begins to form…and the period from three to ten is when the child's future will be determined by the kind of training received from the father." He goes on to say what children expect of their father: "They want a father with a good attitude toward life." In the same book, President Ikeda compares discipline in Japan to the Western style of discipline. In Japan, children are "totally spoiled" at an early age, and are gradually disciplined as they get older. In the West, children are disciplined at an early age, and the reins are loosened as they get older. President Ikeda's conclusion is that the Japanese can learn from the Western way of discipline, and he states, "The most important thing that discipline can do in …the United States is to develop a person who is independent and self-reliant."

I believe that discipline and training are inseparable: without one the other is wasted. The difficult task is to provide both in a manner that encourages creativity rather than stifles it. What I try to do is use each situation as a learning opportunity. Most often the lessons are simple; such as respect your mother or that there are consequences for your actions. But these lessons also form the basics for our practice, such as respect for the Buddha nature within all persons and the law of cause and effect. I try to encourage my children to try new things. You never know what talents may be within your child unless they are given the opportunity to express them. And again, the most important thing is to set the example. For instance, when I encounter an obstacle, I don't whine about it. I maintain a positive attitude, and go to work at overcoming the difficulty.

I make my living as a technical supervisor, teach a college course, and am continuing my own education. When I get my grade reports from college, or an evaluation from work, the first thing I do is share them with my children, not to show off my good grades (well, maybe a little), but to encourage them to strive to be the best in whatever they do.

Are we perfect parents? Probably not, but we sure try. We have a limited time to raise our children, we want to enjoy it before it is gone. We try to set a good example — believing that if we are successful in this, the kids will follow. When it comes to our Buddhist practice, it is the same.

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