

EXPERIENCE—DANIELLE FATH, BOULDER, COLO. NAM-MYOHO-RENGE-KYO: A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE

Danielle Fath is embraced by the SGI family in Chile as she faces the challenges of living and studying in a foreign country.

Upon my arrival in Santiago, Chile, in July 1998, it seemed as if all the Spanish I had been studying for the past six years had escaped my mind. All of the chaos and confusion of this enormous city enveloped me. I felt like I had made a big mistake in deciding to spend my junior year of college abroad in Chile.

I moved in with a Chilean host family three weeks into my stay and was overjoyed to discover that I was to live in a very small room separated from the main house. At this point, I lacked the ability to tell my host family that I was a Buddhist and conducted a daily practice. Having a room to myself meant that I could chant with relative freedom, not disturbing the other members of my household.

Just after I settled my belongings in my new Chilean home, I looked in the phone book for SGI Chile's phone number and address. The name of the street where SGI Chile's community center is located is Hernando Magdallenes, all the way across town. It would be about a two-hour bus ride from my house. Still I was ready and willing to trek across the city a few times each week so that I could practice with SGI Chile members.

I gathered the courage to call SGI Chile (phones can be very intimidating when you are in a foreign country and do not speak the local language very well). A lady with a very kind voice answered the phone, but on hearing that I was an SGI-USA member, she told me I needed a letter from my host area before I could come and visit their culture center. I was outraged. I couldn't understand why there were restrictions, because I had always thought that Buddhism was open to all people. I sent an e-mail to my good friend Sarah expressing my outrage at the circumstances but asked her to have SGI Denver send a letter to Chile confirming my membership. For the time being, I practiced in my small room, looking out my one window at some laundry lines and a lemon tree.

During these first two months of my stay in Chile, it was quite challenging for me to meet people and immerse myself in Chilean culture. I found myself feeling very alone and intimidated by this situation.

In September, I went to Uruguay to visit some good friends of my family for two weeks. It was such a relief to be in a more comfortable environment where I was familiar with societal rules and regulations. These two weeks were especially invigorating because I was able to take hourlong walks along a never-ending beach, and I chanted on its long, narrow docks facing the tranquil river waters of Rio de la Plata. Through my chanting here, I came to many important realizations; the most important being my own small, closed attitude toward SGI Chile. I had been outraged because they were restrictive about who they let enter their community center, but I had failed to understand that a fundamental aspect of the SGI is to adapt to local culture and customs in every country where people practice Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. I then realized that it made sense that SGI Chile doesn't just open its doors to everyone. In a conservative and Catholic society, Buddhism is not always well accepted. Realizing my own shortsightedness, I was determined to become involved with SGI Chile.

The day after I returned from Uruguay, I called the SGI Chile center to explain that I was still waiting for the letter to arrive from my host institution. To my extreme joy, Señor Imai informed me that the letter had already arrived and that I could attend a meeting on Friday. I asked Señor Imai if he could tell me how to reach the culture center since it was far from where I was living. To my surprise, there turned out to be two streets called Calle Hernando Magdallenes, one several hours away from my house, the other a five-minute bus ride away.

I couldn't believe it. The SGI center was in my neighborhood and I had been so close yet not participating for two full months! This was the first of many benefits that I received in Chile.

Friday finally came and I arrived at a small quaint brick building surrounded by a black iron gate. I was let in by a youth about my age and led to a small room where about 25 people had just started to recite evening gongyo. The pronunciation was a little different than what I was used to but I could follow along well enough. When daimoku began, tears of happiness came to my eyes. It was the most beautiful sound that I had heard thus far in Chile. I had really missed practicing with other people.

After the meeting, a small woman with huge, sparkling eyes approached me. "Hello, my name is Maite," she said in English. She further explained: "I lived in Berkeley, California, for a year and that is where I was introduced to this Buddhism." I replied with amazement that I had grown up in the Bay Area of California.

I immediately felt a strong connection with Maite, and as we exchanged phone numbers I asked if I could come and chant at her house to her Gohonzon, since mine was not enshrined in my host family's house.

She seemed surprised. "How did you know that I have a Gohonzon?" she asked. I didn't know. I had just assumed so. She explained to me that in Chile, it is a lot more difficult to receive a Gohonzon than in the United States. One must practice for many years and have studied a great deal before being granted a Gohonzon. Often people practice for around five years before receiving a Gohonzon. She then explained how she had just received her Gohonzon last June in Berkeley. We discovered that we had received our Gohonzon within four days of each other. She was my gift from the Gohonzon and I was hers.

The relationship that blossomed between Maite and me was more than I could have ever wished for. We chanted and studied Buddhism together. She helped me immensely with my Spanish. And best of all, in long after-meal conversations, she would openly discuss with me aspects of Chilean culture that other people, such as my host family, were unwilling to discuss.

In addition to my friendship with Maite, interacting with all SGI Chile members was a tremendous benefit. In an extremely class-segregated society, I was initially confined to only meeting people from the middle-upper class. I encountered more diversity and people of all economic social backgrounds in the culture center than anywhere else in Santiago. I received the opportunity to interact with and learn from people whom I would never have had the chance to meet without SGI.

My time in Chile turned out to be a period of exponential personal growth and learning. I can separate my experience "Before SGI," and "After SGI." Chanting with people in different cultures is so tremendously powerful because it is truly a way of communication and understanding that transcends culture and language barriers. All SGI members are so fortunate because we have an international family where we are welcomed in every country to which we may go. For myself, combining my voice with the voices of others was the most powerful evidence of the feasibility of kosen-rufu.