



Group photo of participants.



By Willie Mack, 23
Los Angeles

This recent Young Men's Division Conference at the Florida Nature and Culture Center (FNCC), June 8-11, was truly an amazing experience. The theme of the conference was "Forging a Solid Alliance of Shared Purpose", and its goal was for each of the participants to come away with a feeling of camaraderie and sense of responsibility for kosen-rufu.

But honestly, many of the guys who attended the conference did not feel any responsibility towards kosen-rufu, and they didn't feel any connection to SGI President Ikeda. In fact, some didn't even do gongyo unless we kept encouraging them to join us. That's what made the conference interesting. Each of us was seeking something whether we knew it or not. Every person went there seeking something inside, uncertain as to what it was, but found something new in our lives when we left.

Before the conference even began, guys were struggling just to get to the FNCC. There were so many experiences from people who struggled to get the money, the time off from work or any other thing to prevent them from going.

One experience that was truly inspiring concerned a young man who had decided to go to the conference two weeks before it was supposed to start. At first he thought he could go, no problem. But when he sat down and thought about it, he realized he had

no money at all!! Actually he had minus \$17.

This young man was determined to go to this conference to develop his faith and to awaken the mentor-disciple relationship in his life. He pulled together every dollar he had left and cut back drastically on his expenses.

Eventually he was able to save the money, bought a ticket and signed up immediately. He realized that he had to challenge himself and follow his heart. This experience was repeated over and over again by many other participants, who struggled to the last minute to get to this conference.

Cory Taylor, the SGI-USA Young Men's Division Leader, began the conference by talking about the three levels of friendship President Ikeda has spoken about. The first level is the type of friendship where two people enjoy each other's company. The second level is enjoyment of each other, but working to support each other. And the third level is where there is enjoyment and support, but there is also the shared purpose that is so deep and strong that the people involved are willing to die for it and for each other.

I feel that we all worked to develop this third level of friendship at the conference. We became comrades in faith and life.

Other topics of the conference included: "Forging a Solid Alliance of Shared Purpose", presented by the Young Men's Division of the Southern California Zone, "Taking Full Responsibility for Kosen-rufu" presented by the Northeastern Zone Young Men's Division, and

"Soka Spirit" presented by the Northwestern Zone Young Men's Division.

Each topic was a powerful and moving experience, where all the conference participants were able to open up and share their feelings, questions and determinations through meaningful dialogue. The spirit of the conference was incredible and the presentations were strong. By the end of the conference, we had all taking a step forward in our faith and in our daily lives.

Also, people found family members they had not seen in years and were certain they would never find. There were guys over 35 hanging out with teenagers like they were best friends. There were musical performances that knocked the roof off during the talent show. The creative abilities of these young men were incredible. The annual Young Men's Division Basketball tournament, which was won by the team from Oakland, Calif. also created a relaxing and bonding effect.

To truly understand the desire that these guys had to participate in this conference could be seen and heard in the faces and voices of those who arrived after the conference began. They kept arriving, from very early Friday morning and continued into early Saturday morning.

It meant so much to each participant that there was a shared desire to seek out the mentor and disciple relationship and to overcome the many personal obstacles. Their many struggles led to so many friendships, friendships that will lead the movement of kosen-rufu in the 21st century. ♪

IMPRESSIONS

from the FNCC YMD Conference

Jason Evans

Virginia, 19



Isaw the Young Men's Division conference as a significant event in the progress of the youth of America. These individuals arrived with many questions and left with many determinations. I am really confident that these young men will make President Ikeda's hopes for the youth of America a reality.

The conference focused on the key issues that these young men are yearning to take responsibility for: The Soka Spirit movement, propagation, the mentor and disciple relationship and responsibility for kosen-rufu. These are the aspects that the young men really developed a plan of action for.

I am certain that as these men return to their respective communities, they will spread great waves of determination to all the youth. When President Ikeda arrives next year, the youth of America will present him with the gift of actual proof. Part of the development of that gift began at the 2000 Young Men's Division Conference. ♪

Mitchell Tarver

Oakland, Calif., 20



At first I was really hesitant about coming to the FNCC, and to be honest, even after I arrived and saw for the first time how beautiful this place was, my hesitation continued. In fact, I was so negative I failed to go to evening gongyo and chose to force myself to sleep at 9:30 p.m.

Awakening the next day, I decided to take advantage and absorb this place with an open heart, as my mother would say. Within no time at all I found myself not only around SGI members but also around a great group of men. I decided to take advantage of this opportunity and to meet and interact with as many people as possible.

It turned out that I ended up meeting great people and learning many things about their practice that I could use to encourage my practice. ♪

John S. Rajeski

Oakland, Calif.



How do I summarize an experience that's beyond explanation? Honestly, I do not know. What I can share is that it was a tremendous honor to be a part of the first Young Men's Division Conference of this new century. And I would like to personally thank and recognize all of the young men throughout America whose tremendous spirit, sincerity and passion toward learning about Buddhism touched me in ways too numerous to mention. Thank you all very much for allowing me to participate in this experience. ♪

Michael O'Malley

Orange County, Calif., 17

Ibelieve the most important thing I said all weekend was "Keep it real." When the national leaders — James Herrmann, Cory Taylor, Ken Saragosa, Daisaku Leslie and Steve Mortan—said that, I thought they were sharing their compassion and really giving light to the mentor and disciple relationship.

I believe people who had the courage to "keep it real," look inward in their own lives and to keenly develop themselves, fulfilled the purpose of this conference. "Keeping it real" in the sense of the mentor and disciple relationship is also having the courage to realize the mentor's vision and implant it into daily life.

This guidance has sparked my determination to really practice Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism wholeheartedly and to not succumb to my own ego. ♪

Thomas Patterson

Brooklyn, N.Y., 20

Thomas shared the following poem:

Brothers united at Eagle Peak

Sharing their passions

Sharing their struggles.

Today we are reborn

Today it begins

Determined to win,

Let us advance.

Soka Spirit

Champions of Justice

by Monica Ong
Chicago



Monica prepared this presentation this presentation for a Soka Spirit meeting on March 3 with the Chicago Area 1 DOWNTOWN Chapter. "I can't tell you how profoundly this issue changed my practice and my life. It has truly been my greatest battle and benefit in disguise! I hope this presentation encourages many youth to take on the Soka spirit in their daily lives so they can see the power of the Gohonzon while deepening their individual relationships with Sensei's spirit and that of the Daishonin's."

"I say to you, this morning, that if you have never found something so dear and so precious to you that you will die for it, then you aren't fit to live. You may be thirty-eight years old, as I happen to be, and one day, some great opportunity stands before you and calls upon you to stand up for some great principle, some great issue, some great cause. And you refuse to do it because you are afraid. You refuse to do it because you want to live longer. You're afraid you will lose your job, or you are afraid that you will be criticized or that you will lose your popularity, or you're afraid that somebody will stab you or shoot at you or bomb your house. So you refuse to take the stand. Well, you may go on and live until you are ninety, but you are just as dead at thirty-eight as you would be at ninety. And the cessation of breathing in your life is but the belated announcement of an earlier death of the spirit. You died when you refused to stand up for right. You died when you refuse to stand up for justice..."
(*The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 344)

These are the word of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during a sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church, on Nov. 5, 1967. He believed that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (*ibid.* p. 189).

To me, the situation regarding the temple is really a civil rights issue. It is wrong that an arrogant few believe that they are more deserving than others to reap the fruits of life meant for all people. It is wrong to deny anyone the pursuit of absolute happiness and peace in any form, for it is the denial of that person's humanity. Just like racists who believe they have license to distort the Constitution of the United States of America and implement distorted views in society, it is just as evil, if not worse, to twist the writings of Nichiren Daishonin and oppress people based on their position.

The greatest struggle that Dr. King faced was not really with the few white supremacists who attacked and persecuted him. Rather, his struggle was with the silence of fellow clergymen across the United States, the sense of weakness and self-defeat of those who saw themselves as "victims" of oppression, and the complacency and apathy of moderates who watched this civil rights issue on the sidelines. Though so many people were scared into paralyzing silence by a small group of authoritarian figures, it took only one person to stand up and show others that there is another way. This way is the way of love, nonviolence and a commitment to compassionate dialogue that seeks to awaken in others the immeasurable value of each and every human being.

This struggle of course begins with ourselves, with daily life. Dr. King looked up to Mahatma Gandhi saying: "If you ask people in India why is it that Mahatma Gandhi was able to do what he did in India, they will say they followed him because of his absolute sincerity and his absolute dedication Gandhi had the amazing capacity for self-criticism. This was true

in individual life, in his family life, and was true in his people's life" (*ibid.*, 128). His life was his message.

It is our own individual responsibility to reflect on our Buddhist practice, our behavior as human beings and our efforts to construct harmonious relationships with others in light of this civil rights issue. It is our personal responsibility to decide whether that darkness will defeat us or whether we will defeat it. That's why it is said that Buddhism is win or lose. We win in this struggle only when we win over ourselves. This is the example of Dr. King, Gandhi and President Ikeda

I believe the key to understanding Soka Spirit in the context of our own lives lies in chanting abundant daimoku, developing and making sincere efforts to study the Goshō and the world around us. When we study, we are able to recognize this issue from an impartial reference point, unclouded by personal feelings or emotionalism. Together with practice and faith, we are able to clearly see right from wrong and courageously act on behalf of solid convictions that are built on experience and reason. The Goshō states:

You must never seek any of Shakyamuni's teachings or the Buddhas and bodhisattvas of the universe outside yourself. Your mastery of the Buddhist teachings will not relieve you of mortal sufferings in the least unless you perceive the nature of your own life. If you seek enlightenment outside yourself, any discipline or good deed will be meaningless. For example, a poor man cannot earn a penny just by counting his neighbor's wealth. That is why Miao-lo states, "Unless one perceives the nature of his life, his practice will become an endless painful austerity. Miao-lo therefore condemns such students of Buddhism as non-Buddhist." (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, pp. 3-4)

Making the arduous efforts to do human revolution on the battlefield that is your own life is a chance to develop the courage and wisdom required for an absolutely happy state of life. President Ikeda states: "To lead a life in which we are inspired and can inspire others, our hearts have to be alive; they have to be filled with passion and enthusiasm. To achieve that, as President Toda said, we need the courage to 'live true to ourselves.' And to live true to ourselves, we need the strength of mind not to be swayed by our environment or be obsessed with superficial appearances. Rather than borrowing from or imitating others, we need the conviction to be able to think for ourselves and to take action out of our own sense of responsibility" (*Faith Into Action*, p. 102).

I'm thankful to be alive at this crucial time, in the age of Dr. King and Gandhi, alongside President Ikeda and most of all here with you, my fellow Bodhisattvas of the Earth, whom I deeply admire and respect. Let's make a commitment to win, to stand up in our practice, to study together, chant together and together advance with a courageous spirit that sings, "We Shall Overcome!" ♪

MATERIAL REQUEST

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GET REAL!



By Shan Serafin, SGI-USA Vice High School Leader

A Painful Truth: Violence Wears a Tricky Mask

Recently, in reading about—of all things—torture, I discovered something profound. I had always fancied myself someone who'd never, ever participate in torturing another human being (and note, I never have), but...I came across the Milgram Study.

The Milgram Study is a well-known study conducted at Yale in 1960. Imagine this: you're in a room with a doctor in a lab coat and a trussed-up student. The doctor asks the student, let's say, a math question. The student gets it wrong; the doctor tells you to electrically shock the student. You do.

This continues, and with every new instance of a wrong answer the doctor tells you to increase the level of the electricity. So, you do.

Soon the student is shrieking, "Please stop!"

You look to the doc to end the ordeal. Instead he calmly assures you this is all expected, "The experiment must continue; you aren't responsible for the effects."

So, the test continues, and again, the student answers incorrectly. This time you're told to use a dangerous voltage. You hesitate, but the doc reassures you this is all quite beneficial. You proceed.

And thus we have the Milgram Study.

The results of this bizarre scenario were astounding. The truth is that the doctor and the student were both actors. The people in your position, the shockers, were the test subjects. And *more than half* of these test subjects cooperated with the doctor. Even when the "student" was screaming with pain, pleading not to continue, over half the shockers followed directions and zapped away.

This is the total abandonment of humanity.

The Milgram Study concluded, among other things, that ordinary people would carry out torture under two conditions: an authority assuring them a) the responsibility would fall on someone else and b) the act would be beneficial.

Psychologist Stanley Milgram wrote, "It is psychologically easy to ignore responsibility when one is only an intermediate link in a chain of evil action but is far from the final consequences of the action."

("Impressions..." continued from page B)

Al-Fuquan Fladger

New Jersey

Al-Fuquan shared the following poem:

To be a Buddha

Like a denominator with no numerator

The range is undefined

A mentor and disciple

Proctor for the mind.

Creator of the causes

Student of the effect

Unsatisfied in the search for wisdom

Misunderstood by those with no respect

Humbled warriors exhibiting compassion,

Sacrificing a lifetime for the fight.

Surging ahead for kosen-rufu because

There's a world we must enlighten

Potential....

The word strong enough to make a

Buddha shed tears;

Because it means we haven't accomplished

Enough, for actual proof around our peers

Miguel Atwood-Ferguson

Student at The University of Southern California, 20

To Fight until the very last moment!!

Buddhism is win or lose. There is no other way to realize our goals unless we dedicate our lives wholeheartedly. For me, this means to fight until the very last moment. At the recent Young Men's Division Conference at the FNCC, I was continually inspired to look more closely at how I was leading my life.

Right away, I found I had a recurring problem. I was giving up the fight before it was over!!! Although in some facets of my life I was succeeding, I could trace this tendency to give up to all areas of my life. This was especially evident in my work as a musician and in my efforts to spread this Buddhism. After digging deeper, I found this was due to a lack of focus and faith in myself. Then it sort of dawned on me that this had been my life-long battle.

In the past I had always concealed this problem from myself with drugs, lies, ignorance and concentrating on other people's problems. I was miserable!!! A new chapter in my life has begun. I have promised the Gohonzon to steadfastly finish what I have started. I will not defeat myself. As a Bodhisattva of the Earth, I have decided that there is no better time than now to take responsibility for my life and show actual proof to the world!!! Thank you very much. ♪

Consider this: another study exploring how prison guards became torturers found several characteristics always present: The torturers 1) believed torturing was for the good of the country; 2) believed they were properly following their superior; and 3) regarded their victim(s) as sub-human.

Such are the ingredients for civilized ruin!

Torture is the extreme of inhumane action. But there are thousands of social facets—pollution of the environment, disregard of animals, disrespect for education, tolerance of war, and so on—which we allow to exist, not because these things are unchangeable, but because trusting our humanity, challenging the norm and owning personal

responsibility is all enormously difficult.

When I realized I myself could have "cooperated" in the Milgram scenario, I knew I had to make a vow. So, here's my vow: I am determined not to be a cog in the machine. I will always strive to be governed by my humanity. I will resist the great comfort of mindlessly following authority. And, in a sense, I re-pledge the Victory Over Violence Pledge we made last year.

Human life is dynamic. Any one of us is capable of any form of behavior. The struggle to conduct oneself in an altruistic way, to tap into Buddhahood, is the great struggle that will help us reject the certain cruelties of society. ♪