



Scenes from the Behind the Scenes Conference at the Florida Nature & Culture Center

Reported by
Brian McCloskey, N.Y.



On Sunday, Nov. 12, 2000, at the Florida Nature and Culture Center, the last youth conference of the 20th century concluded. One hundred seventy-nine young men and women from around the country attended, with participants coming from as far away as Puerto Rico and Alaska. The theme was “BSG, Complete and Total Victory Toward May 3, 2001!” and focused on raising the bar for the youth division support groups. Everyone seemed to be in agreement that it was time to bring the ability and participation of the support groups to the next level in eager anticipation of President Ikeda’s visit next year.

The conference, which was filled to capacity, had only 47 confirmed participants two weeks prior, which meant many participants had to make travel arrangements at the last minute. In order to get reasonable airfares, many people had to leave the conference early Sunday morning. In response, the conference schedule was adjusted to present as much material as possible before Sunday. This led to very long days on Friday and Saturday. In true BSG fashion, the support groups attendees were able to persevere and take the opportunity to connect with Byakuren Leader Stacey Humphrey, Gajokai Leader Eric Freedman and newly appointed Soka Group

Leader Ken Nakagawa.

The session opened Thursday evening with dinner, gongyo and encouragement from Senior Vice General Director David Kasahara and a video from the support groups leaders themselves starring Byaku-woman, Gajo-guy, Byakuren Girl, and Soka Man. Beginning that evening, and following every gongyo throughout the conference, were presentations from the Western Zone youth on President Ikeda’s recent poem “Soar—Into the Vast Skies of Freedom! Into the New Century!” Attendees were encouraged to make it an early night as the following day included four sessions and ran nonstop from 7:30 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.

Each session at the conference was planned and presented by the young men and women in each zone: Northeastern, Western, Southern, Central, Southern California, Mid-Atlantic and Northwestern. Friday’s sessions included a lecture on the mentor-disciple relationship by SGI-USA Youth Leader James Herrmann, “The History and Spirit of Byakuren, Soka Group and Gajokai,” “BSG in Daily Life” and “Soka Spirit.” Each session carried a distinct tone based on the topic and the means by which each zone had chosen to present its respective topic. Some sessions included skits, songs and experiences, while throughout the sessions Hedio Lobo, Mike Fujie and Ali Rhezaei were shooting and editing a documentary video presentation of the conference participants.

Kyung-ah Hwang, a Byakuren member from New York, related her experience for the Soka

Spirit session and told of her ongoing struggle to help her entire family try to disconnect from the temple, of being able to heal an aneurysm through her daimoku and the support she received from her fellow Byakuren members.

On Saturday morning, the Northwestern Zone support groups members presented a very entertaining skit and song on propagation. They were back by popular demand to deliver the song again at the talent show, which followed dinner that evening. Afterward, the Byakuren met with James Herrmann, and the Soka Group and Gajokai met with SGI-USA Young Men’s Leader Cory Taylor, and then with their respective leaders for a heart-to-heart dialogue on the direction of their groups and to address the concerns of their members.

For many of the participants, the conference concluded only a couple of hours later when the first shuttles began leaving shortly after 4:00 a.m. As a testament to the determination and responsibility of the SGI-USA youth support groups, every shuttle left on time with no accidents and with all their passengers—no small accomplishment.

James Herrmann and Cory Taylor held guidance sessions throughout to help support the goal of the conference—to infuse the behind-the-scenes groups with the spirit to connect closely with President Ikeda and achieve “Complete and Total Victory” through Buddhist practice and activities as Byakuren, Soka Group and Gajokai members. Four days, three groups, 179 people, one goal: “Complete and Total Victory.” ♪

SGI President Ikeda's Message to the FNCC Youth Support Groups Conference:

I sincerely appreciate SGI-USA Soka Group, Gajokai and Byakuren members for your devoted activities day and night. I truly thank you for your commitment behind the scenes.

You are living the most respectable and beautiful existence as members of Soka Group, Gajokai and Byakuren, dedicating yourselves to unsung work based on your earnest faith and prayers for the safety and happiness of the members.

Nichiren Daishonin states, "Where there is unseen virtue, there will be visible reward" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 907). While you are still young, please build the kind of fortune that will serve as the foundation of your lifetime happiness. Please

live dauntlessly with the conviction that your growth will determine the future of American kosen-rufu.

I am praying for your remarkable growth, good health and successful endeavors in society. I am also praying for your victory. Please convey my best regards to your families and friends.



*Daisaku Ikeda
November 10, 2000*

D.C. Gajokai Make Determination

The Washington, D.C., Gajokai members who attended the Youth Support Groups Conference at FNCC were inspired to make a fresh determination toward the new century. The following excerpts are from that pledge.

What determines the future of Gajokai? Is it hardcore training, is it developing a strong sense of mission, or is it building a great character by refuting slander and revealing justice?

The answer is "all of the above."

Now is the time to unleash that power. Now is the crucial moment to become votaries of the Lotus Sutra and make 2001 the year of total victory in this new century.

At the core of the Gajokai spirit is the mentor-disciple relationship.

Sensei!
Our blood also burns
With the determination
To ease the pain
Of the troubled and suffering!

My fellow Gajokai members, our moment is at hand. Today, let's make the determination to take our place in history. Today, let's cry out to our mentor: "Sensei! Do not fear! We will be your successors!" ♪



IMPRESSIONS

from the Youth Support Groups Conference

Lisa Yukie Sasaki, Irvine, California



Although I came to this conference as a Byakuren first and foremost, I could not detach myself from being a Student Division member also. I am a fourth-year student at the University of California, Irvine. I have a little more than six months before graduating and I am determined, during this short time, to introduce students to this practice. I do not have a goal of a specific number of introductions, but a goal to truly change the lives of students seeking the Daishonin's teachings.

Every morning before leaving for school, I will make this determination in front of the Gohonzon and pray that those "seeking-minded students" will somehow be attracted to me. After a deeply thoughtful and enlightening dialogue with my roommate at the FNCC, I understand my need to chant to truly understand the question, "Why am I doing shakubuku?" Is it because other members and leaders have said to do so? Is it because I only want to gain benefits? Or is it because I genuinely care about others and want to lead them to a wonderful, most amazing life of happiness? I feel each person needs to answer this question personally.

As SGI President Ikeda writes in *Glass Children and Other Essays*: "[Q]ualities most vital to youth are courage, conviction, and hope. Courageous action

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Soka Spirit

The American Pursuit of Enlightenment

Editor's Note: The following article is a comparative of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and American ideals upheld by the U.S. Constitution. While the article does not deal specifically with the injustice of the current Nichiren Shoshu priesthood, we feel this perspective speaks to the idea that is pivotal to our Soka Spirit movement—freedom (namely, religious freedom). The editors wish to state that opinions contained herein are solely that of the author.

By Ken Corwin, New York West Region Student Division Leader

Life. Liberty. The pursuit of happiness. These are the values held dearest in our civil religion, the pillar of American democratic thought, the meaning of being “the land of the free.”

Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. The sanctity of life. The pursuit of attainable and indestructible happiness for all of humanity. These are the teachings of our faith, the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin, the teaching of absolute freedom.

I decided to write this article while studying the U.S. Constitution and decisions of the Supreme Court. I wondered, what does it mean to be a Buddhist American (or an American Buddhist)? What makes an American anyway, and what does Buddhism have to do with it?

To answer the question about being an American Buddhist, I needed to define the term *American*.

I carefully reviewed the words and phrases of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. I found these documents did not stop at the mere description of a government, but declared the right of a person to live free from unjust constraints by others, to have self-determination and the idea that authority can only be legitimate when it is granted by those who are being governed. In fact, the Declaration declares these rights to be “unalienable,” that is, rights that preempt and supersede any rights of outside authority because they are not granted by any outside authority.

But studying these documents also left me to deal with the reality that the laws and customs of the United States have not always reflected such noble sentiments. Examples would be the paradoxical upholding of slavery by our very same Constitution espousing the aforementioned noble goals, the allowance of child labor, some state laws that declared ownership of a wife by her husband, ad nauseum. However, these laws reflect, I believe, a shortcoming of citizens and their elected legislators in living up to American ideals, rather than a shortcoming of American ideals themselves.

So I arrived at the conclusion that America is



a utopia of life, liberty and happiness pursued — and that an American is one who believes in the ideals of this America.

Once emboldened by this prospect that America was a dream to create rather than an imperfect country to accept, the duty of an American became clear: to be a patriot. Well, then what does it mean to be a patriot? Second Soka Gakkai President Josei Toda struck down the idea of patriotism characterized by blind zealotry. Defending the actions of one's country regardless of the good or evil of those actions is not patriotic. Mr. Toda said that a true patriot is one who works to take his country to a higher standard of justice, peace and prosperity. A patriot strives until the end of his life to make his country a better place, never turning his back on his fellow citizens' suffering (or ignorance).

“So,” I thought, “an American patriot is one who strives to create an American reality that lives up to the American ideal.” Herein lies one of the most heartening aspects of the Buddhism we SGI-USA members practice: it was founded by a man who practiced and demanded freedoms that would be defined as “unalienable rights” some 500 years after his death.

Nichiren Daishonin exercised the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment right of petition of government for redress at a time and place of unquestioned authoritarianism. He exercised freedom of religion, remonstrated with other sects of Buddhism, at the risk of being beheaded or exiled. And his teachings amounted to no less than the declaration that all — male or female, king or footman, priest or child — are inherently, unalienably equal in their right and desire to pursue indestructible freedom.

I recently had the honor of assisting a student division member prepare for a college club presentation on how Buddhism addresses the issue of gay rights. Nichiren Daishonin's writings do not explicitly mention the concept of gay rights, so what could we at least glean from his teachings? Rather than finding the one letter that might be related to the matter, we saw that the Daishonin's entire struggle was one for all humanity. His letters to women, to commoners, even to infants and the illiterate and all his remonstrations with the military government on

their behalf were reflective of his demand for universal recognition of the right of all to be free. In fact, both the Goshu and our nation's founding documents reflect this truth: rights are legitimate only when they are the rights of all. The subject of gay rights is addressed in his letters because the rights of all human beings are universal.

So what does this have to do with us? Today, our country is facing an ever-deepening crisis of leadership, from Palm Beach to Los Angeles. The common people are getting little reassurance or signs of wise reconciliation by those charged with furthering the United States on its voyage toward America. If we cannot look to our elected leaders for guidance, then to whom can we look? We can, and must, cultivate the solution within ourselves. We can because we manifest the power and wisdom of Buddhahood through chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. We must because it is the duty of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth to save humanity from the seemingly unbreakable cycle of suffering.

The United States is surely the place where kosen-rufu must be realized. If it cannot be realized in a land of diversity and religious tolerance, then where can it be? To create kosen-rufu in the land of the free is the task at hand for American Buddhists. It is up to us to finally create America. This is the spirit of the Declaration of Independence. This is the spirit of the Soka Gakkai International—USA. ♪

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By Shan Scerafin, SGI-USA Vice High School Leader

The Winds of Life Give Us Lift

I got really excited when someone told me that, put in perspective, all my hardships are just banks on a billiard table, ricocheting me toward the Gohonzon.

Another elucidating, somewhat bizarre analogy I found is to compare life's obstacles to the rushing air around an aircraft wing. The distinctive teardrop shape of the wing—if you're looking at it as a sliced-off section (never mind *why* you'd be looking at a sliced-off section)—is a clever design that channels air both quickly and slowly around itself. The drag, the pressure of the air, is what actually lifts the wing, which in turn lifts the plane. It's precisely this resistance that a jet manipulates so it can soar through the sky at horrendously insane speeds.

I'm finding that in my own daily life it's precisely the resistance of my mundane struggles—my career troubles, girl troubles, health and so forth—that I utilize to strengthen myself as a young bodhisattva. I'm now finding that struggle is an ally. It's not at all, as I would've sworn in a court of law, my worst nightmare.

Many of us have a little yellow book on or near our altars called *For Today and Tomorrow*. In the introduction, SGI President Ikeda mentions one of his lifelong mottoes:

"A wave grows stronger with each obstacle it encounters."

Simple yet profound!

I'll resist boring you, the reader, with my own woefully inaccurate description of how this physically works—a wave getting stronger—but note that it's pretty easy to picture how true this is. Just close your eyes (not while driving a car) and imagine a heap of boulders near the shore and a majestic wave surmounting each obstacle. How poetically this mirrors our own youthful journey!

As I write this, I'm getting off the phone with my friend Michelle, whose father is on the verge of death. As of yesterday, his doctors gave him one day to live. Michelle's father managed to stay alive long enough for his son to visit him and long enough to encourage many, many people with his valiant spirit.

Michelle, a high school senior, is telling me all this with a penetrating confidence in her voice. I am blown away. All I can do is blurt the word "wow" every few seconds, which I repeat (no exaggeration) some seven times in a row. I'm scrambling for ideas on how to encourage her. But in reality, she's the one completely encouraging me. Her father's plight forced her to summon a mountain of inner strength,

(Impressions continued from page B)

on the part of the young is the source from which all else is created. And it is conviction that guides and lends support to courage" (p. 50). I will have the courage to meet new people and introduce them to this practice. I will have the conviction to

fight each day on the frontlines and become a capable, humanistic and compassionate member of society. I will have the hope that many others will stand up and fight alongside me and become proud disciples of SGI President Ikeda. Thank you. ♪

By Shibani Singh, Dallas

I recently got back from the Florida Nature and Culture Center after attending the Youth Division Support Groups conference. This was my first visit to the FNCC. As soon as I arrived, the beauty and serenity of the place took me by complete surprise. The first thought that came to me was that the FNCC reflects SGI President Ikeda's life—in the huge expanses of green grass, beautiful flora and fauna, and the calm stillness of Toda Lake.

While in prison, President Toda had written, "The Ceremony in the Air is not over yet." I realized this during my four-day stay at FNCC. Bodhisattvas had gathered from all parts of America to remember and renew their pledge for kosen-rufu. While it was a time of intensive training to imbibe the Soka Spirit in our lives and to seek President Ikeda, it was also a time for me to connect and form strong bonds of friendship with my Soka brothers and sisters. Sharing experiences, laughing and sharing one another's joys and victories, crying and feeling for one another's struggles, it was an opportunity for me to learn to open my life and develop greater compassion. At the same time, I determined like never before, that from now on, I would take personal responsibility to raise successors for kosen-rufu. During the many guidance sessions, discussions and cultural presentations, I felt like I was returning to *kuon ganjo* (time without beginning or end) to remember and redetermine my pledge to work for the happiness of others.

Leaving FNCC after four days, I felt sad but excited because I was eager to come back and start taking action based on all that I had learned and determined. Going to FNCC was truly like going to meet President Ikeda and I came back feeling like a different person, determined and confident that I will show actual proof and win. And I will share this most wonderful practice with everyone I meet. ♪



By Vicky Markunas, Northern Virginia



Of course, the first thing I thought when I saw the Florida Nature and Culture Center was: "Wow! It's so beautiful!" Then I went straight to the pool. That night while doing gongyo with everyone, I started to get choked up. I was thinking about how miserable I was in my teens and how much appreciation I had for this Buddhism. Through the many visits I've had from young women and from being in Byakuren, I have overcome so much and feel so happy to be alive.

Early the next morning, our training sessions started. Throughout the day, we received several messages from SGI President Ikeda. He also gave us mid-afternoon snacks. I had never felt a real connection with President Ikeda before. He was just some guy who everyone thought was great and gave great speeches. But now I feel that he really is thinking about every single person in the SGI and cares very deeply about all of our happiness.

Even in the midst of paradise, I realized that I

had to challenge myself to keep up my life-condition. It was so great that the minute I started to feel it drop, I could go chant with other youth and, when I was done, go for a refreshing bike ride, stopping here and there to have conversations and then continuing on my way.

The last night there we had an amazing talent show. There were so many funny and talented people there. I was laughing and screaming and clapping and it was the best show I'd ever seen.

I am so glad I went to the FNCC. My life was really asleep, but now I feel like President Ikeda's poem "Soar—Into the Vast Skies of Freedom! Into the New Century!" when he said:

Awake! Arise! / That you also may know life's deep and genuine joy. / Turn away from a life of sadness, / From passive drifting, / From tragic weeping at death and loss.

My life has really awakened and I am determined to make the Byakuren in my area young women who will be looked up to, as I looked up to the Byakuren when I was a little girl. ♪

and indeed here she is earnest with resolve.

Another friend (to keep her anonymous, let's call her V. Krauss—no, that's too obvious. Let's just say Vicky K.) wrote in her college admissions essay a detailed history of her difficult life in East Los Angeles. She culminated this with an insightful analysis: Because of the mad, foul, nasty things she went through, she is ready to face anything. Vicky is realizing that hardship is the flame in a forge, tempering the steel sword inside it.

In their final confrontation, Obi-Wan Kenobi says to Darth Vader, "If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine." Ah, I love this conviction. I dream of saying this

to some girl who'd be about to break a date. She'd begin, and I'd calmly reply: "If you strike me down I shall become more powerful than you can ever imagine! ...Pass the ketchup." With this mentality, even my worst experience will lead to a positive action, propelling me toward a better Buddhist practice. Everything can go wrong, everything around me can collapse, even my own cellular structure, but nothing can stop me from seeking the Gohonzon. In fact, when things try to stop me, that's when I get my second wind, my lift.

Now, by no means have I mastered this principle. But thus far, just even striving to follow it has yielded amazing results. ♪