



SIGNIFICANT DATE:

Celebrating the 100th anniversary of Josei Toda's birth.

pages 4-5

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SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA'S JAN. 6 SPEECH — PART 1

Entering an Age of Hope

'I believe that we have entered an age in which we must let a philosophy of hope shine brightly like the morning sun,' SGI President Ikeda says, 'dispelling the darkness and illuminating the way forward for humanity a thousand years into the future.'

Part 1 of SGI President Ikeda's speech at the 41st Soka Gakkai Headquarters Leaders Meeting, held at the Tokyo Makiguchi Memorial Hall in Hachioji, Jan. 6.

My friends, young heroes, future professors of life! My fellow members throughout the world! Happy New Year!

Second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda once gave this New Year's guidance: "The courageous lead the most brilliant lives, while the cowardly are like animals. Those who live their lives courageously are

happy, while those who lead cowardly lives are self-serving and miserable."

A hundred years ago, the great geochemist Vladimir Vernadsky, a graduate of St. Petersburg State University, offered these well-known, inspiring words to the Russian people, who were living in extremely dark times: "We are on the brink of an unprecedented time in history. We are ushering in the dawn of a new life. No matter how painful the times may be now, people of later generations are sure to envy us."

I believe that we have entered an age in which we must let a philosophy of hope shine brightly like the morning sun, dispelling the darkness and illuminating the way forward for humanity a thousand years into the future.

It is a great honor to usher in this brand new dawn for our planet together with such illustrious guests. [President Ikeda was conferred an honorary doctorate at this meeting by guests from St. Petersburg State University, Russia.] St. Petersburg State University is a prestigious academic institute that ranks among the top in the world.

Rector Ludmila Verbitskaya has inherited the university's venerable 276-year tradition.



Courtesy of SEIKYO PRESS

SGI President Ikeda receives an honorary doctorate from Russia's St. Petersburg State University, Jan. 6, at the Tokyo Makiguchi Memorial Hall in Hachioji.

The university's first woman rector, Dr. Verbitskaya, is a person of exceptional leadership. During the past six years—a period that has been one of the most difficult times in Russian history—she has steered St. Petersburg State University to remarkable development. It is a source of profound joy to wel-

come such an eminently fitting guest for the start of this new Century of Women.

Where learning is elevated, the people are, too.

Most esteemed Rector Verbitskaya; Vice President Yuri Petrosyan of the St. Petersburg Scientific Center at the Russian

Academy of Sciences, with whom I share fond memories; and Dean Ivan Steblin-Kamenisky of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at St. Petersburg State University.

There is a saying, "Where learning is elevated, people too

PLEASE SEE SPEECH, 6



Photo by LUCY ESTEPHANOS

Atlanta youth enjoy the Interfaith Unity Convocation at the Georgia Dome, Dec. 21, 1999.

Atlanta Members Join Interfaith March

At Atlanta news reporters told "from Buddhists to Baptists" stories on evening newscasts on Dec. 21, 1999. Approximately 1,000 people of various faiths—including 100 SGI-USA members—had turned out to march in Atlanta's Interfaith Unity March. At the convocation that followed in the Georgia Dome, the SGI-USA Atlanta Four-Di-

vision Chorus sang the SGI-USA song "I Have a Dream" for the crowd.

SGI-USA Vice General Director Richard Brown, who grew up in Atlanta, reflected that Atlanta is "an international city, a diverse city, a city too busy to hate, the birthplace of Martin Luther King Jr. As I have grown older, I have begun to realize that our city has not

only been too busy to hate but also too busy to love. This march has ushered in a new era of genuine love and compassion truly representative of the city's heritage and spirit."

Members involved in the planning process for the event were able to forge new relationships with many leaders of other faith communities.

—PAULA GRANGER

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON FAITH

How Does Buddhist Practice Change Us?

By TED MORINO

STUDY DEPARTMENT SENIOR ADVISER

Q: How will Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism change me?

A: The basis of the internal condition of our lives can be revolutionized through Buddhist practice. And this fundamental change in us will bring about all sorts of positive changes in our day-to-day existence.

As we solidify our innate Buddha nature as the foundation of our being, we also make joy the basis of our lives. This is a great shift if that basis was previously suffering, which is often the case in this defiled age of egoism and skepticism.

Our life-condition can vary. The quality of our inner lives, at any given moment, is highly changeable, Buddhism says. Like an elevator in a 10-story building, we go up and down among the Ten Worlds between the lowest and the highest—from Hell, where our suffering and rage envelops us and drains our energy, to Buddhahood, where joy, compassion, wisdom and courage are commonplace.

Nichiren Daishonin says, "Nam-myoho-enge-kyo is the greatest of all joys" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 788). We practice Buddhism to experience the truth of this passage with all our hearts.

Whole-hearted daimoku is the immediate way to gain entry into our Buddhahood within. This is called practice for oneself.

Trying to awaken others to the same process, which is called practice for others, is also good for ourselves. Of course, it is not so easy to inspire those who have little confidence in the power of chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo to try it. They may be too bogged down with mundane problems to believe in their inner strength.

We often feel how powerless and incapable we are when we face a person who is deeply depressed and hard to encourage. But in struggling to help someone establish absolute happiness within and an unshakable sense of mission for kosen-rufu, we will realize how much we need to strengthen our power of prayer for the happiness of others, to develop compassion, wisdom and courage to penetrate the hearts of people who are lost. In other words, practice for others breaks down the walls of our inner limitations. It takes us to a new level. Buddhist practice for others ultimately strengthens our Bud-



dhist practice for ourselves. That the state of our lives becomes enriched through Bud-

dhist practice means that we have developed fortune—a quality that attracts good opportunities and good influences to us and distances us from the destructive forces in life.

Also, by practicing as SGI members, studying the Daishonin's writings and learning from the examples of the successive Soka Gakkai presidents, we can develop a deeper sense of purpose and mission in life. When we live up to our noble sense of mission for kosen-rufu, our life force will continue to grow.

As this happens, the life within us becomes greatly different from what we were like before we began to chant. In the SGI this fundamental change is called human revolution—it is the process of establishing a Bodhisattva lifestyle that is an expression of the Buddhahood inherent in our lives.

Then, what does not change, despite our practice to the Gohonzon? First, as Buddhism expounds the principle of individuality (Jpn *o-bai-to-ri*: the cherry is the cherry, the plum is the plum, the peach is the

peach, the damson is the damson), we must know that our individual traits are essentially magnificent—and they will remain magnificently intact as our inner lives progress. Our inherent characteristics will manifest themselves more and more beautifully through our Buddhist practice.

Buddhism teaches that we attain Buddhahood as we are. Along the same lines, Ralph Waldo Emerson stated: "That only which we have within, can we see without. If we meet no Gods, it is because we harbor none. If there is a grandeur in you, you will find grandeur in porters and sweeps." Our unique character is an expression of Buddhahood. This is the enlightened thinking of Buddhism.

Our character is just like the constant width of a river. The change in our life-condition is something like the river's waters changing—from impure to pure, or shallow to deep.

By developing our Buddha wisdom and Buddha courage, we can use our character effectively instead of being controlled by it. Being wise enough to realize something that we have never realized about ourselves is a great benefit.

For instance, it is not so easy for selfish people to realize how selfish they are, since such peo-

ple always live within the realm of selfishness. The same may be true with cold-hearted and arrogant people or people who are always angry.

It is indeed difficult to see the truth of the matter when it comes to the reality of our own lives.

Once we have realized what we need to change, though, everything gets much easier. All we have to do is change ourselves. It can be simple. We know exactly what kind of effort we need to put forth.

When I encounter those who have not been able to achieve an inner breakthrough, often it turns out that they are not trying or what they are trying to change is wrong. Frequently, they are trying to change people in their environment rather than their own life-conditions. Knowing this, the mastery of Buddha wisdom—even a bit—is a great, great benefit of Buddhist practice.

According to the "Expedient Means" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha appears in the world to help people gain the Buddha wisdom through his own example. Vowing to fulfill our mission in life, resolving to win, having specific targets in every aspect of our lives and practice, taking the necessary courageous action for ourselves and others—if we set this as a stan-

dard to strive for, we ceaselessly bring about positive changes in our lives.

All in all, the Daishonin's Buddhism teaches that once Buddhahood has actually become our fundamental life-tendency—when our elevator always returns to the 10th floor—the happiness we have achieved will be lasting and indestructible.

SGI President Ikeda explains it this way: "We need to cultivate a state of life where we can thoroughly enjoy ourselves at all times. We should have such joy that even at the time of death we can declare with a happy smile: 'That was wonderful! Where shall I go next?' This is the state of mind of a person with strong faith. Such individuals will be reborn without delay and in a form and in a place exactly according with their desires. Faith enables us to attain the kind of generous and all-embracing state of mind where we enjoy everything in our lives" (*Faith into Action*, p. 134).

The change we experience through Buddhist practice is that we find the freedom to enjoy everything. This is the revolution in life-condition that Buddhism talks about. And this fundamental change brings about positive changes not only in our day-to-day existence but in our lives for eternity. **W**

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Using Common Sense in Facing Depression

PERSPECTIVE

By LORI McDANIEL
CHICAGO



I am writing this perspective with the hope that it will help give people a better understanding of depression. An understanding of the illness and appropriate treatment can ease severe pain, expedite the healing process and possibly save lives. A misunderstanding of the illness can cause irreversible harm and even death. I have witnessed much misunderstanding.

Over the years, I have heard guidance encouraging depressed members of this organization to "overcome their lazy natures," chant many hours a day to "raise their basic life tendencies," and "do a vigorous gongyo to increase their energy." In the past, I had even heard people suggest chanting instead of therapy. While chanting and doing gongyo obviously have positive effects in our lives, they are not a substitute for medical treatment.

We are not religious fanat-

ics. Buddhism does not teach us to "just chant" in lieu of receiving needed professional treatment. A cancer patient might be encouraged to chant more to challenge his illness, but he would hardly be encouraged to "just chant" and forego any chemotherapy or radiation therapy that might help. Why, then, are depressed people in many cases advised to "just chant"?

The answer probably lies in the fact that depression is misunderstood by society as a whole. Clinical depression, that is depression that is clinically diagnosed, is not "the blues" or "a mood swing." It cannot be "shaken off" and it does not "just go away." It is a biological illness related to unbalanced brain chemistry that affects the entire body: thoughts, feelings, behavior, physical health and appearance. The brain, like any other organ of the body, can become ill.

Furthermore, depression is an illness that can be treated.

The medications used to treat depression are not mood elevators. (They have no effect on people without depression.) They simply restore the brain's chemistry to its normal state.

In spite of the ability to treat this illness, of the many millions of Americans who suffer from depression in any given year, 80 percent can be effectively treated, but only 30 percent seek help and of that number, slightly more than half are accurately diagnosed and receive appropriate treatment. Every year, 30,000 people die of suicide nationally. The number one cause of suicide is untreated depression. (SAVE Suicide Awareness Voice of Education, www.save.org).

Recently, it was my pleasure to attend a lecture at the Chicago Culture Center given by Dr. Yoichi Kawada, Soka Gakkai vice president and director of the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, who spoke in part about depression. He first explained that in general as we continue to do gongyo, we improve in mind and spirit. As our physical functions become healthier, our mental functions

naturally do, too.

Dr. Kawada then stressed, though, the importance of treatment for a person suffering from clinical depression, bipolar disorder or any other mental illness. Before attempting anything else, that person first must be able to live in a stable, normal manner. Dr. Kawada explained that medical treatment alleviates feelings of desperation, restores psychic energy and allows a person's life to regenerate to its natural level.

He also pointed out the importance of patience, both on the part of the depressed person and people offering encouragement. Pushing a person to do things — telling him he must chant a certain number of hours or chastising him for not doing gongyo twice a day — would be detrimental and could cause a relapse back into depression. Likewise, the depressed person cannot benefit from telling himself "I have to do gongyo" or "I'm going to cure this with daimoku." This kind of pressure causes the opposite result.

If a person receives medical treatment and is patient with himself, both his mental health

and his practice will improve, Dr. Kawada stated. Then the person will continue to improve, far past what doctors expect.

I was so happy and relieved to hear Dr. Kawada's lecture about practical, common sense treatment of depression that incorporates — but does not solely rely on — the practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

I am not a medical professional, but as a Buddhist and SGI member who is being treated for clinical depression, I am an expert on the subject. I know that pressure only hurts. I know that people can be chanting daimoku and doing gongyo regularly and still be depressed and even suicidal.

I urge such people who suffer from depression to seek professional help from a licensed psychotherapist and psychiatrist. If you are one such person and are tempted to rely solely on your Buddhist practice for recovery from such an illness, I hope that you will remember that this Buddhism does not teach us to suffer needlessly, and does teach us to use common sense. **WT**

Learning From Loss

PERSPECTIVE

By VERONICA EVANS
CHICAGO



I knew my ex-husband for 26 years before he died in February 1999. For 10 of those years, we worked side by side for kosen-rufu as youth leaders. For another 13 years, we were married and continued to strive side by side. For the majority of our marriage, we did everything based on mutual respect, love, trust and the Gohonzon as our foundation. Those things turned out not to be enough to sustain us. Even though I did everything based on solid faith, after a two-year separation and further two-year failed reunion, much to my dismay and embarrassment, we were divorced in 1995. I'd like to talk to you in terms of what I lost, and more importantly, what I gained through these challenges.

In a move from one apartment to another, I lost original manuscripts given to me from my mentor in music. These original classical piano pieces were

handwritten by Rudolph Ganz — for whom Ganz Hall at Roosevelt University is named. It was the first time in my life that I had allowed myself to trust someone else with my possessions. But with one child in tow and one literally on the breast, I thought all would be fine because I had strong faith. These manuscripts were my most prized and valuable possessions. With 14 years of classical piano training under my belt, I was so crushed that my mate had left them and my piano, that I silently vowed never to play again.

Not only did I lose the family structure I always wanted, I was also confronted with the loss of two close friends to cancer. To add to the stress, I also had to readjust my friendship with my very best friend who was at a crossroads in her own life.

As a result of my situation, for 11 years I lost the ability to contribute to kosen-rufu via financial contribution. I even lost confidence that I was a valuable

person for kosen-rufu. I was near eviction on at least two occasions. And even though I was complimented on looking so slim after having two children, it was because I literally had no food. All I had during this time was my relationship with the Gohonzon and compassionate leaders who kept encouraging me.

It is with much delight that I can say because of these challenges many amazing things happened to me. I lost my shallow understanding of the power of chanting Nam-myohorenge-kyo. I realized I am a much, much better member than leader for kosen-rufu. I was able to solidify my passion to contribute to this organization until I die. I lost the false persona of who I thought I was and what I showed everyone I met. I became a true fighter for other's happiness in a way most natural for me. I became a woman truly worth knowing. My talents for writing and parenting came to the forefront. I was able to transform myself into someone who only said and did things based on sincere prayer to the Gohonzon. I be-

came, through a very, very long and painful process the Veronica people know today.

As I reflect on the anniversary of my ex-husband's death, I am so grateful, so very, very grateful to those people who consistently encouraged me with guidance, kind words and shared my tears. I am so grateful to my mentor, SGI President Ikeda, and to Nichiren Daishonin for their examples of how to live.

I see a bright future for myself, my daughter, Laural, and my son, Zack, as we pray for the enlightenment of their father, William. I did and continue to do my human revolution without any hesitation or fear.

I believe if you maintain your gaze toward the Gohonzon and commit to doing your own human revolution, understanding that all your problems are truly of your own making, you can not only survive, you can absolutely blossom into what you are meant to be. You can truly thank the other person for being the conduit that brings your problems close so you can overcome them. What more could anyone ask for? **WT**

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Now in its sixth year, Soka University of America's graduate school in Calabasas, Calif., is accepting applications for its master's degree program in second and foreign language education. Individuals seeking admission to the master's program must hold a baccalaureate or bachelor's degree with a minimum grade-point average of 2.7 (B-) on a four-point scale. Applicants whose native language is not English are required to submit a Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) with a minimum score of 600. Applications for the 2000-01 academic year are due by April 30, 2000. For more information, contact the Graduate Admissions Office at 26800 West Mulholland Hwy., Calabasas, CA 91302. Telephone: (818) 878-3717, e-mail: grad_admissions@soka.edu

FEB. 11: THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF JOSEI TODA'S BIRTH

Celebrating a Life of Nobility and Grace

SIGNIFICANT DATES

ON MILESTONES IN THE HISTORY OF THE DAISHONIN'S BUDDHISM AND THE SGI

By DEBORA ANN BELARDINO
KANAZAWA CITY, JAPAN

Shin'ichi quietly placed his hand on his chest. In the inner breast pocket of his coat, he carried a photograph of his mentor, Josei Toda. He would never forget the time that Toda, ill in bed at the head temple just prior to his death, told him he had dreamt he had gone to Mexico.

Toda had said to him: "They were all waiting. Everyone was waiting. They were all seeking Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. I want to go—to travel the world on a journey for kosen-rufu.

"Shin'ichi, the world is your challenge; it is your true stage. It is a vast world." (—The New Human Revolution, vol. 1, "Sunrise," p. 8)

Oct. 2, 1960. Japan Airlines Flight No. 800 takes off from Tokyo, bound for Honolulu. Rising above the clouds, Daisaku Ikeda sets off on his first visit overseas, on a mission for world peace.

Oct. 2, 1999. The Soka Gakkai Special Memorial Exhibition commemorating the 100th anniversary of Josei Toda's birth opens in the town of Shioya (birthplace of President Toda), in Kaga City, Ishikawa Prefecture.

Some 156 commemorative items, panels and gifts display SGI President Ikeda's unceasing actions and history of dialogue with various leaders, intellectuals, artists and citizens of the world. Representing only 0.5 percent of the approximately 30,000 items President Ikeda has received, each item evokes a beautiful bond of friendship and trust.

Four large photo panels of the Himalayas, Andes, Rockies and Alps taken by President Ikeda, cover the right wall; paintings of plum trees by Soto Ten, one of China's most famous painters, cover the left. In the center stands a line of three bronze statues: Napoleon crossing the St. Bernard Pass; Gandhi embracing the children of India, and a bust of Rabindranath Tagore.

Nearby stands a glass case displaying replicas of two Nobel Prizes for Chemistry and Peace, presented by Linus Pauling Jr., to President Ikeda.

"Lotus flowers" by Houshorin, a famous painter of Hong Kong, bloom next to a vase painted with plum trees, presented by the Bright Society International Club in Korea. Against the back wall stands a line of medals received from Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Austria, France, Paraguay and Africa. Like a line of soldiers, they protect this citadel of peace.

At the entrance is a painting of President Ikeda standing next to his mentor, Josei Toda. Next to it proudly stands a bust of President Toda. The overhead lights seem to shine in his eyes...it's almost as if he were saying: "My dream. It's come true."



In *The Geography of Human Life*, authored by Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (first Soka Gakkai president), he describes the sea as a "place that opens to the world," suggesting that the lives of those born near the sea are also open to the world.

Josei Toda, the second Soka Gakkai president, was born on Feb. 11, 1900, in the town of Shioya, Kaga City, located along the Sea of Japan.

Photo by DEBORA ANN BELARDINO



Josei Toda, second president of the Soka Gakkai.

*The splendid, raging waves of the Sea of Japan
the roar of the waves crashing against the shore
bring back memories of the Port of Shioya.*

— From President Ikeda's poem, "Song of the North Country" (Feb. 17, 1988, *Seikyo Shimbun*)

The seventh son, Josei Toda came from a family of fishermen; his father was a sailor, and worked for the Northern trade fishing line known as the *kita-maebune*. The family moved to Atsuta Village in Hokkaido in northern Japan when Mr. Toda was 2. "Napoleon," his nickname as a child, as he was even then somewhat of an idealist, spent the first two years of his life in Shioya.

At the height of the fishing industry, Shioya boasted a population of 20,000—today it's down to 990. A vast number of

cats usually sit on the pier, along the emerald green Daishoji River, waiting for the fishing boats to come in from the Sea of Japan.

President Toda's birthplace is usually bursting with flowers—daffodils in February, plum blossoms in March, apricot blossoms in April, and for a brief two or three days white lilies bloom among the weeds and grass in September.

The past still remains in the house that my mentor was born in, where my mentor spent the early years of his childhood. The black tiles of the roof, the cracked foundation stones; there is a well...the source of the water is rich, and still flows unceasingly. Yearning for the virtue of my master, even now, the flow of visitors is never-ending.

Only once during his lifetime, he was said to have visited his own home of birth. Then there was a woman living there.



The Daishoji River in the town of Shioya—Josei Toda's birthplace—in Ishikawa Prefecture, Japan.

Courtesy of SEIKYO PRESS

Photo by DEBORA ANN BELARDINO



(Above and below) Soka Gakkai's special exhibition commemorating the 100th anniversary of the birth of Josei Toda in Kaga City, Ishikawa Prefecture, where the town of Shioya (Toda's birthplace), is located. The exhibition ran from Oct. 2-11, 1999, in Shioya, and then traveled to other cities, ending its tour Nov. 30, 1999.

Photo by DEBORA ANN BELARDINO



Photo by DEBORA ANN BELARDINO

Photo by DEBORA ANN BELARDINO



Bronze sculpture of Gandhi.



Bronze sculpture of Josei Toda.

One cold day, with the collar of his coat turned up, a tall man came to visit her. "I have heard I was born in this house," he said to her, a light shining in his eyes. He fondly stroked the pole in the entranceway. "Please take care of this house forever. Good luck to you," he told her.

That man was my mentor, Mr. Toda. It was the year before he was imprisoned, at the end of autumn. Perhaps he wanted to keep the memory of his birthplace in his mind before his impending great difficulties (—From "Essays on The New Human Revolution," April

2, 1999, *Seikyo Shimbun*, tentative translation).

Shioya District Leader Yuji Adachi summarizes the feeling of the members of Shioya by saying, "We have tremendous pride and joy at being able to be alive and practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism from the soil of President Toda's birth, on the 100th anniversary of his birth. That is truly a wonderful thing."

It is ironic that President Toda, who suffered oppression from the national militarist government, was born on Feb. 11, National Founders Day, which



Photo by KAZUHIKO MAEKAWA

Fishermen on Shioya Beach.

Photo by MASAHIKO KUSAWAKE



Members of Shioya and the SGI Hokuriku International Group set sail from Shioya Port.

Photo by DEBORA ANN BELARDINO

commemorates the founding of Japan as a nation. It was on this day that the first emperor of Japan, Emperor Jimmu, was said to have ascended to the throne. *Kumo no ue no hito*—"one who dwells above the clouds"—is a phrase that describes those who seem to lead lives of nobility and grace. Indeed, President Toda's life and spirit were of the highest nobility, soaring above the clouds into the skies of peace.

(I would like to thank my friends, the members and the people of Ishikawa for their support in writing this article.)



Shioya, birthplace of Josei Toda.

FROM SPEECH, I

are noble.” In accord with this spirit, St. Petersburg State University has created a great river of capable people, which flows powerfully like the timeless Neva River, on whose banks St. Petersburg stands.

Just now in her speech, Rector Verbitskaya introduced some of the famous graduates of St. Petersburg State University. Their names are known to people around the world.

As the recipient of an honorary doctorate from this distinguished Russian university, I want to introduce a few of its renowned graduates.

First, there is the literary historian Dmitri S. Likhachev, who was widely respected as “the conscience of Russia.” Likhachev taught at St. Petersburg State University and is famous for such works as *Ethnic Awareness in Medieval Russia and Letters on Goodness and Beauty*.

Another graduate is the Russian-born U.S. scientist George Gamow. In my youth, I used a textbook written by Gamow in my studies with my mentor, Mr. Toda. It was the most modern textbook on science available in Japan at that time.

Physicist Aleksandr Popov is another graduate of St. Petersburg State University. He conducted the world’s first successful experiments in radio transmission and is regarded as one of the inventors of the radio.

In addition, among the great names who have taught at St. Petersburg State University are the literary critic Boris Eichenbaum and the philosopher Vladimir Solovyov.

The noted writer Nikolay Gogol also lectured on medieval history at St. Petersburg State University in his mid-20s.

Gogol’s short story “Taras Bulba” is one I remember well. It is an important work that Mr. Toda made us youth study earnestly and that he lectured on in depth.

As a student, Ivan Turgenev, later to gain fame as a writer, attended Gogol’s lectures. A close friend, the great poet Aleksandr Pushkin, is also said to have sat in on his lectures. Incidentally, Pushkin visited the university a short time before his death and sat in on a lecture on literature.

I understand that Russia’s current Acting President Vladimir Putin is also a graduate of St. Petersburg State University.

And, of course, all three of the distinguished professors we have with us today are outstanding graduates of this prestigious Russian school. So, too, incidentally, are my friends Dr. Margarita Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya, who is a leading authority on Lotus Sutra research and the supervisor of the Manuscript Department of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences, and Dr. Evgenij Kychanov, the



SGI President Ikeda meets with (l-r) Dean Ivan Steblin-Kamensky of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at St. Petersburg State University, Vice President Yuri Petrosyan of the St. Petersburg Scientific Center at the Russian Academy of Sciences and St. Petersburg State University Rector Ludmila Verbitskaya. They held a dialogue at the Tokyo Makiguchi Memorial Hall in Hachioji, Jan. 6.

institute’s director.

I first visited St. Petersburg State University 26 years ago, in September 1974, on the occasion of its landmark 250th anniversary. I had discussions with professors and students on education, life and other subjects. We shared our hopes and visions for the future.

Standing in the vanguard of the SGI youth, who will shoulder the 21st century, I humbly accept the great honor I have received today from this distinguished Russian university.

When we really grapple with life’s trials, a new way has to open before us.

St. Petersburg State University was established on Jan. 28, 1724. In Japan, this date corresponds roughly to the Kyoho Era, 1716–36, in the middle of the Edo Period, 1600–1868. [This is the time during which the 26th high priest, Nichikan, lived.]

The history of St. Petersburg State University, an institution that has weathered and triumphed over countless trials and adversities, demonstrates the immortal philosophy that “The truly wise are those who fight for justice.”

Writes the great Russian poet Aleksandr Blok, another former student of St. Petersburg State University, “Life is a continual struggle; rest comes only in our dreams.”

When we bravely grapple with life’s trials, racking our brains, using our wisdom and striving with all our might to surmount these trials, a new, creative way forward opens be-

fore us. A Buddhist text states, “Regard meeting difficulty as true peace and comfort” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 750). Another informs us, “The three obstacles and four devils will invariably appear, and the wise will rejoice while the foolish will retreat” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 637).

The city of St. Petersburg, where this Russian university is located, is a center of learning, art and culture that Pushkin extolled as Russia’s “leading intellectual center.” It is a beautiful city of water, palaces and green, whose streets the Russian-born American poet Joseph Brodsky described as “the most beautiful on earth.”

In the towering work of his youth, *The Geography of Human Life*, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, the Soka Gakkai’s first president and founder of value-creating education, discussed the construction of St. Petersburg and delved into the reasons why the city flourished as it did.

It is the hallmark of youth to stand up for justice when the time comes.

This former imperial capital, a priceless treasure in itself, suffered the brutal assault of Nazi Germany’s forces during World War II. The madman Hitler issued an order to “wipe the city from the face of the earth.” In fact, the city of St. Petersburg, then known as Leningrad, was held under siege for close to 900 days and pounded by endless air and artillery bombardment.

When I visited the Russian city, I laid flowers at a cemetery

and, as a Buddhist, prayed deeply for the repose of the victims—close to a million—who died in the siege. I prayed for lasting peace in Russia. This morning, during gongyo, I again offered solemn prayers for all those who died in this tragedy.

The proud citizens of St. Petersburg are known as the “people of light.” They bravely endured the relentless Nazi siege on their city, winning with great tenacity and fortitude. They launched a rigorous counterattack and finally succeeded in driving the aggressors into retreat.

Let us in the SGI, too, stand up and fight against injustice.

St. Petersburg State University became an invincible stronghold in the effort to repulse the Nazis. More than 2,500 students bravely rushed to the battlefield. Many women students volunteered for the perilous infantry division. Students from one of the world’s leading universities threw aside their pens, threw aside their books and went to the front as common soldiers.

It is the hallmark of youth to stand up for justice when the time comes—for the sake of their homeland, their fellow citizens, for peace.

I want you, the SGI youth division members, to also learn this spirit of giving one’s life for a cause. Though the times may change, the essential formula for fighting against evil and injustice remains the same.

Those who trample on human rights must be vigor-

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION MEETINGS

Living Courageous Lives

From This Speech:

Second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda once gave this New Year’s guidance: “The courageous lead the most brilliant lives, while the cowardly are like animals. Those who live their lives courageously are happy, while those who lead cowardly lives are self-serving and miserable.”

- 1) Why do you think President Toda gave such strict guidance at New Year’s?
- 2) Why do “the courageous lead the most brilliant lives”? Can you think of examples of people in history or people you have known whose lives were inspiring due to the courage they had?
- 3) Why are “the cowardly like animals”? And why are cowardly people “self-serving and miserable”? Can you think of examples of people in history or people you have known whose lives were held back by their cowardice?
- 4) President Toda suggests that courage is a prerequisite to happiness. Have you found this to be true in your own life?
- 5) What in your life right now requires the greatest courage to face? How do you muster courage when it does not come forth naturally? Have you had the experience of changing cowardice into courage?
- 6) How do you encourage other people to have courage when they are facing big problems?

SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA'S JAN. 13 ENCOURAGEMENT

Give Full Expression to the Unique Strengths of America

This year will be a decisive year for the youth division," SGI President Ikeda declared at a conference on Jan. 13, voicing his hope for a triumphant Year of Youth. Attendees for the conference, held in Shinanomachi, Tokyo, included SGI General Director Eiichi Wada, SGI-USA General Director Danny Nagashima and representative Soka Gakkai leaders.

"If the youth division achieves magnificent victories for kosen-rufu this year," President Ikeda explained, "we can confidently pass to them the baton of our kosen-

rufu movement for the 21st century. But victory in any realm of endeavor can only be realized by arduous, all-out effort. We cannot win by pretending to work hard or by leaving things to others.

"I hope that as leaders you will live your lives always advancing bravely and sparing no effort for the sake of the Law, for the welfare of others and for society as a whole. Struggling for kosen-rufu is more respectworthy than any worldly honor."

Thanking visiting SGI-USA leaders for traveling to Japan, President Ikeda said: "I hope that in the United

States you will do things in a way that best suits the United States, enabling members to practice joyfully, without constraint. Allow the unique strengths and qualities of America to be given full expression through faith. Please work together in a spirit of friendship and mutual respect to make the United States a center of worldwide kosen-rufu that overflows with good fortune."

Addressing all gathered, he concluded: "Please live each day valuably, with 'Health First' as your motto, getting enough sleep and taking good care of your health." **WT**

FROM SPEECH, 6

ously opposed and defeated without fail.

In my youth, I stood alone and shouldered the entire struggle for our movement. Wherever enemies of the Buddha appeared, I would immediately go to confront them. The important thing is not numbers but the presence of one person of earnest commitment and resolve.

I hope you will not be cowardly youth, who fail to fight for justice when the time comes to do so. If we do not stand up for justice now, Japan will again become a society in which the state blatantly represses human rights.

Some of the teaching staff at St. Petersburg State University also fought against the invading German forces. A famous professor of literature volunteered to serve in the Baltic Fleet. He wrote: "I am happy that I am not on the sidelines in these decisive days." It was a source of

happiness to him that he was taking action and not just idly standing by. He died in action, having fought with a courageous spirit that did not fear the prospect of death.

Unperturbed by the ceaseless onslaughts of the enemy, St. Petersburg State University kept the bright flame of academia alight. While enduring indescribably bitter cold and starvation, many researchers at the university continued to give lectures and pursue their research—in darkened classrooms, air raid shelters and cellars. Blazing with a determination to advance academic learning irrespective of the difficulties it faced, St. Petersburg State University refused to bow to the inhumane, violent forces of destruction that threatened it. The university remained steadfastly committed to developing the human spirit.

(To be continued in the Feb. 4 issue)

Radio Broadcast From Philadelphia Center Tackles Issue of Youth and Drug Abuse

By DAVID SHADOVITZ
PHILADELPHIA

For the second time in the past 18 months, "Voices in the Family," a Philadelphia-based public radio program, taped a two-part broadcast before a live audience at the SGI-USA's Philadelphia Community Center.

Hosted by Dan Gottlieb, Ph.D., a leading Philadelphia therapist, the program explored the subject of youth and substance abuse, including steps that can be taken to help prevent drug abuse and assist those who may be facing it. It featured six panelists, including four experts on the treatment and prevention of drug abuse and two 18-year-olds, Rick and Terri, who have received treatment for drug abuse.

Experts on the panel included Hollie Brayer, a licensed psychologist and the clinical coordinator of The Bridge, a facility that provides long-term therapy for dependent youth; Myra B. Shure, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at MCP Hahnemann University in Philadelphia; Jim Berman, M.D., chief of staff of the Caron Foundation, a leading treatment facility; and David O'Connell, Ph.D., clinical director of the adult and adolescent services at the foundation.

In addition, Larry Mendte, a

news anchor for the local NBC affiliate, served as the program's co-host. And Sonny Hill, founder of a well-known city basketball league and host of a popular sports radio show, assisted in fielding questions from the audience, which included many SGI-USA youth division members.

During the roughly two-hour taping, panelists responded to a wide range of questions from those in the audience.

In response to a question on what adults should be saying to their children to ensure that they don't become entangled with drugs, Dr. Shure commented on the concept of slogans. "'Just Say No' or 'Just Don't Do It,' that's what we've been hearing we should tell kids to say," she explained. "The problem with these slogans is that they don't tell children to think about what else they can do. It doesn't take into account their fears. After they say no, what do they do next?"

As adults, she advised, it's important to focus them on their goals in life and how drugs can interfere with their ability to reach them.

Dr. Shure emphasized the importance of listening to what young people are saying. "When the ideas are their ideas and their thoughts, they're much more likely to carry them

with them and make them internalized."

Responding to a question from a young woman in the audience who asked, "What do you do if someone offers you drugs...and they threaten to hurt you if you don't take them?" Terri responded that they wouldn't be saying such things if they were truly your friends. "Don't hang with them again," she advised.

Terri, who started using drugs when she was 13 years old, admitted that she didn't always know that.

Many of the panelists emphasized the need for young people to have someone they can turn to for help.

Rick, who admitted he didn't have such a role model, said that he wished he had one.

Dr. Berman noted that it's important for people to understand that drug addiction is a disease, no different than diabetes or heart disease.

"It's not so much that you grow up in a family with drugs," Dr. Berman said, "but it's the genetics that's passed on. What the research hopefully will bring to light is what we can do to change that chemistry so that Ricky and Terri won't go out, use a drug and get the wrong message [in their brain]."

Some people, he explained, can use drugs one or two times

and walk away from it. But others like Terri and Rick can't.

Responding to a question on what role hope may play in overcoming drug addiction, Ms. Brayer of The Bridge said that "the treatment process is entirely dependent on the adolescent and his or her level of hope."

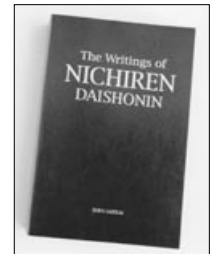
Dr. O'Connell then commented on the role spirituality can play in a person's recovery. "Research has shown that people who have a strong religious affiliation, have a spiritual program, engage in spiritual practices such as prayer, contemplation and meditation, do very well not just with this disease, but with any chronic disease.

"Hope," he explained, "is directly associated with the larger picture—that there's more going on here than the horrible position I am in as an addict.

"From my perspective," he continued, "spirituality is at the cornerstone of recovery."

"Voices in the Family" selected the Philadelphia Community Center as the site for the broadcast because of the SGI-USA's active role in helping young people in the city, according to the show's then producer Eva Blackwell, who is also an SGI-USA member. The broadcast was taped in late September. In 1998, the program broadcast a program on youth and violence from the same center. **WT**

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AN ESSAY BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA

One-to-One Education Is the Best

SGI President Ikeda explains that real education comes from the relationship between teacher and student. Remembering 'Toda University,' he says, 'The truth is that I am the product of the personal, one-to-one education of our second president, Mr. Toda.'

In January 1950, Mr. Toda said to me, an extremely grave expression on his face: "The Japanese economy is in a period of turmoil, and I am going to become busier and busier at my business. Would you consider giving up school and helping me full time?"

Without hesitation I replied, "I will be only too happy to do whatever you say."

A glimmer of kindness shone in Mr. Toda's stern eyes. "In exchange," he said, "I will make it my responsibility to personally give you an education."

And so it was that Mr. Toda invited me to his house every Sunday for private, one-to-one study with him.

The classes of this "Toda University," emanating with the light of our spiritual communion, started in the morning and went through the afternoon. Mr. Toda frequently asked me to stay for dinner as well, and I always returned home in the best spirits.

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As time went on, Sundays were not enough. Mr. Toda started to also hold classes for me every morning. These classes, which took place at the company, began on Thursday, May 8, 1952, and continued through 1957. They started right after Mr. Toda's first year as second president of the Soka Gakkai and continued until just before his death. The lecture hall of the Toda University was in Mr. Toda's company office in the Ichigaya Building in Ichigaya, Central Tokyo.

While President Toda specifically held the classes for me, he also later let several other employees attend, too. I have fond memories of my fellow students in those days,

friends and companions whom I will never forget.

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When he first began the classes, Mr. Toda told me: "I will give you a broad higher education. I want to give you a better education than what you could receive at a prestigious university. Most people who graduate from college don't remember anything they've studied. The best they can do is retain general outlines. I want to teach you all kinds of living fields of study."

The classes were held before work began, from a little past 8:00 a.m. to 9:00 — just short of an hour in length. Mr. Toda was strict about the time we had to arrive at work. We had to be there before him, clean the office and wipe the desks, and then be waiting when he arrived.

He would come in with a friendly greeting and start the class almost immediately. I would sit directly in front of him, and the other students would pull up their chairs around us.

The classes started with students taking turns reading aloud from the textbook, and then Mr. Toda would comment and expand on the readings. At times, he would criticize the textbook, saying things like: "This is an illogical argument." "This theory won't stand up to analysis." "This line of reasoning is not based on deep consideration of the issue." "This scholar is trying to make his case apply more broadly than it actually does." His keen analyses shone with astonishing genius.

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We were not allowed to take notes. It seems that Mr. Toda wanted us to engrave every word and every sentence in the substance of our beings.

He used a historical anecdote to explain why he wouldn't permit note taking. During Japan's feudal period, he said, there was a scholar of Western learning who went to Nagasaki to study Dutch medicine. He took prodigious notes, and his notebooks filled up his whole travel case.

But the ship he took on his return home sank, and he lost all his notebooks. He had concentrated so heavily on recording in his notes everything that he had studied — instead of in his head — that he hadn't retained an iota of it. "That is why," said Mr. Toda, "I want you to put



International Higher Education Academy of Sciences President Valentin Shukshunov presents SGI President Ikeda with the Certificate of Honorary Academician, Nov. 14, 1999, at the Central Tower International Conference Hall, Soka University in Hachioji, Tokyo.

everything inside your heads. No note taking!"

We thus had to concentrate intensely during class. I later heard from one of my fellow students that Mr. Toda said of me, in my absence, "Daisaku soaks up everything like a sponge."

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Our course of study began with economics, followed by law. Then we studied chemistry, astronomy and life science. There were also classes in Japanese history, world history and classical Chinese literature. Finally, we got to political science.

We used the most modern, advanced texts available in every subject. For example, for science we used the New Science Compendium series. Sometimes, within a matter of days of a new volume coming out, it would be incorporated into Mr. Toda's early-morning lectures. Mr. Toda was trying to impress upon us the importance of always being at the forefront of the times.

Of course, there were also classes on Nichiren Daishonin's writings and Buddhist doctrine, including lectures on "The One Hundred and Six Comparisons," which represents the quintessence of the Daishonin's teachings, as well as Nichikan Shonin's *Six-Volume Writings* and his commentaries on various Goshos.

When I look back at my diaries from that period, I find fre-

quent references to Mr. Toda's classes. For example: "How can I ever repay my debt of gratitude to my mentor, who has striven to raise this disciple without regard even for his own health? Now is the time — the time to accumulate capability, strength and ability. Must accumulate ability in every area in preparation for the future." This is from an entry on Dec. 22, 1953, when I was 25.

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In one of our classes, we studied the theories of the universe put forth by the Russian-born U.S. scientist George Gamow. Recently, on Nov. 14, 1999, Moscow State University Rector Viktor A. Sadovnichy and others came from Russia to present me with an honorary membership to the International Higher Education Academy of Sciences of Russia. I am deeply grateful for this.

After the presentation cere-

mony, we discussed education in the 21st century. Dr. Sadovnichy, a world-renowned mathematician, said: "Truly outstanding intellects do not emerge from big classrooms. You have to sit students down next to the teacher and educate them one to one. In short, we must not think of schools as buildings but as something that is formed around the character of the teachers."

I immediately agreed: "I know that my beloved mentor would be glad to hear you say that. The truth is that I am the product of the personal, one-to-one education of our second president, Mr. Toda. I am a graduate of Toda University!"

This essay was published in the "Thoughts on *The New Human Revolution*" series in the Dec. 7, 1999, *Seikyo Shimbun*, the Soka Gakkai's daily newspaper.

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the new HUMAN REVOLUTION

SGI President Ikeda's novelized history of the Soka Gakkai

'EARLY SPRING'

VOLUME 7, CHAPTER 3, PARTS 33-34

In Lebanon, Shin'ichi Yamamoto starts to discuss the merits of interfaith dialogue. The problem in Lebanon, he says, is that "the conflicting interests of the different parties are hindering their ability to cooperate with one another."

Though Lebanon recognized more than a dozen religions within its boundaries, this figure seemed rather small when compared with Japan. In Japan, there were nearly 60 main religious schools and more than 180,000 legally registered religious corporations. But Lebanon's population at the time was some 0.017 percent that of Japan, and the role and importance of religion in Lebanese society was completely different.

Many Japanese religions had a long history of subordination to the Japanese government and had come to function as nothing more than instruments for holding ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. Only rarely in Japan was religion a social force. And it was difficult to describe religion as being deeply rooted in the thoughts, beliefs and lives of individual Japanese.

As a result, some people in Japan belonged to more than one religion, and it was not unusual for them to be completely ignorant of the teachings of their religion or denomination. Japan

was basically inundated with empty, formalistic religions.

The situation in Lebanon was very different: Each of the various religions formed its own community, possessed political clout and was deeply rooted in the lives and customs of the people. Religion was a foundation supporting the life of each individual both spiritually and socially, and also had a history of sometimes serving as an opposition force against the ruling authorities.

The strongly religious nature of Lebanese society was evident in government as well, resulting in a political policy of sectarian distribution. This policy, whereby top government posts were proportionally assigned to members of various religious denominations per their number of followers, was established during the French mandate after World War I.

World War II saw the movement for an independent Lebanon gain strength, and when Lebanon won its independence in 1944, the policy was maintained. For example,

the president of the country was traditionally a Maronite Christian, while the prime minister was a Sunnite Muslim. The other cabinet posts and the number of national assembly representatives were also decided by quota depending on religious affiliation.

But when Shin'ichi Yamamoto visited Lebanon in 1963, a change was taking place. There was a striking increase in the Islamic population. The proportions of the population affiliated with the various religious denominations were changing, and there was a growing dissatisfaction among certain sections with the number of government posts allotted to each group. In addition, war in the Middle East had driven many Palestinian refugees, followers of Islam, into southern Lebanon, further contributing to the growth of Lebanon's Islamic population.

After checking into their hotel, Shin'ichi and his party lost no time in going out to see the capital city. The Middle East conjures images of the desert, but Beirut was bounded by the deep-blue sea and was pleasantly warm and green, reminiscent of southern Europe. In the distance, the majestic peaks of the Lebanon Mountains sparkled.

Beirut was a leading center of finance and business in the

Middle East. The population of Lebanon was about 1.6 million, of which roughly a third was concentrated in Beirut. It was a bustling city with an international flavor, filled with signs in Arabic, French and English. In Iraq and other strict Islamic countries they had previously visited, there had been few women on the streets. And those they had seen had been dressed head to foot in the black chador. But in Beirut, there were many women openly walking around, wearing many different styles and colors.

The city was divided into residential districts according to religious grouping, with Maronite Christians living in one area and Sunnite Muslims in another.

Youth Division Leader Eisuke Akizuki said to Shin'ichi: "I'm sure that the Lebanese have adopted the political and social structures they have to insure that the people live in harmony. But it seems to me that Lebanon is just a conglomerate of smaller, sectarian societies. Individuals do not seek interaction with those outside their group. The division separating the various groups seems deep.

"I also hear that the Islamic population is growing, which is upsetting the balance of power among the different religious groups. People are becoming dissatisfied with the current state of government and society. I fear that if this trend continues, even a small dispute could result in a religious war."

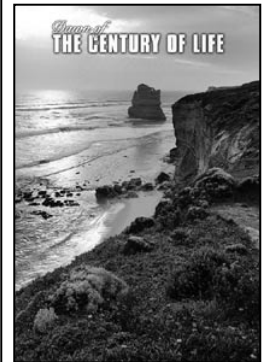
Shin'ichi agreed: "And there is the additional problem of Lebanon's relations with the Jewish state of Israel, with which it shares a common border. That's why I have been silently chanting daimoku for peace in Lebanon since we arrived."

Looking contemplative, Soka Gakkai Director Yoshihiko Ohya asked Shin'ichi, "Does that mean that what Lebanon needs most of all for peace and stability is dialogue among its many religious groups?"

"Well, I believe such dialogues have been held a number of times already," Shin'ichi responded. "But the problem, I think, is that the conflicting interests of the different parties are hindering their ability to cooperate with one another."

Daisaku Ikeda appears in the novel as Shin'ichi Yamamoto. The events take place in 1963.

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Illustration by KENICHIRO UCHIDA

EXPERIENCE — VALERIAN RUMINSKI, PHILADELPHIA

A Global Citizen of Opera

Valerian Ruminski
 ‘set a course to achieve something that would lead to travel and the ability to share the truth of this great Buddhism far and wide.’

I was adopted and raised by a Roman Catholic, lower middle-class family, as an only child. I grew up in Upstate New York, near Buffalo, and my father died when I was 10.

At a young age, I had some interest and an aptitude in music, singing in a boys' choir and learning to play the organ. I listened to Big Band records and conducted symphonies to the records on my parents' hi-fi.

At 19, I went to Alaska to work in the fish canneries, earning money to finance a music career. Pop music was foremost on my mind.

After seven months of hauling halibuts and sliming salmon, I drove to Los Angeles with visions of becoming a professional musician. Yet all the while, I had a question in the depths of my being crying out to be answered. I had always believed that there was a defining equation “out there” to guide us toward fulfillment, but I did not know where to look or whom to ask.

For two years in Los Angeles, people approached me in the street a number of times, asking if I wanted to chant to be happy. Frankly, I thought they wanted to sell me drugs. But finally as I walked home one evening from my job selling shoes, I was asked again to go to a Buddhist meeting, and with a sense of adventure, I agreed to tag along.

That evening in September 1988, I felt I had found what I had been envisioning for the last few years; it made sense. Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism agreed with science and with reason. It was practical and powerful.

I began to chant that week bearing my dream in mind. SGI President Ikeda described the purpose of chanting as something with which we can realize our dreams, and at the same time, polish our inner selves to become great people who achieve Buddhahood in this lifetime. Young and idealistic, I committed to using my Bud-



Opera singer Valerian Ruminski

dhist practice as a crowbar to pry open the door of my dreams.

I wanted a career in music, but in what capacity? Being a songwriter, keyboard player and singer who sang in different styles — pop, nightclub, opera — I didn't know in which direction to turn. I changed my legal birth name of Martin Matthew Ruminski to Martin Matthews, believing it was a better stage name and would aid me in my quest for fame.

I chanted to connect to the right musicians, made phone calls and shopped my tapes around, but nothing happened. This was the start of a personal upheaval; I felt my time in L.A. was being wasted. Still I chanted for the right things to happen because I believed this practice would put me on the correct path.

I considered moving back to Buffalo, even though my friends thought me crazy to trade sunshine for snow. I had a gut feeling and I was practicing hard, so I knew it could not be a coincidence. Then an old friend, a teacher from high school, called. Amazingly he offered me a position in the Buffalo Opera Chorus, singing in a staged production of *Carousel*. He hinted that I was wasting away in L.A., that my talents were going untapped. Even though the position paid little, I took him up on the offer. This was a turning point in my life, entirely due to my Buddhist practice.

After singing in the chorus of *Carousel* and a number of operas, I was introduced to the artistic director of the company who said he could help train my voice and develop my opera career. I enrolled in the nearby State University where he taught singing in the opera

workshop at school and slowly developed my voice with the aid of another teacher. In time, this person turned out to be the person I had been chanting for, the mentor for my career.

Other singers around me became immersed in head and ego games, falling victim to vanity and misguided thinking. They worked with teachers with whom they did not connect. I felt fortunate to be able to use my practice to open my mind and see things for what they really were; I was not wearing rose-colored glasses. I had found a musical mentor, just as I had found a spiritual/life mentor in Daisaku Ikeda.

But my environment was bearing down on me. My Buddhist practice began to slip. I had to help my grandmother in her final days as her battered body deteriorated from a mastectomy, hysterectomy and colostomy. On top of this, I had car, school and girlfriend problems. My teacher had plans for me, which I only half believed in; I had lost the will power to believe in myself.

Four years of college passed, and my teacher wanted me to audition for and attend the Academy of Vocal Arts (AVA) a four-year, full scholarship, opera-intensive program in Philadelphia. My Buddhist practice had faded to a mere blip on the screen. I wanted to audition, but I was weak in manifesting my determination with daimoku every day; my life force was low.

Singing two arias, my audition for AVA was successful. But in order to graduate from college, I had to perform a recital. If I did not navigate it well, my hopes for an opera career would be ruined. I wanted to graduate so much that my Buddhist practice rose from the ashes to reestablish itself as a driving force in my life. My recital was successful.

I was determined to thrive at AVA. I was contacted in the summer of 1995 to receive a new Gohonzon. I had ignored the schism between the SGI and the temple. But that summer, things were explained to me. It was eye opening to say the least. As I was preparing to enter the AVA, I received my new Nichikan-transcribed Gohonzon, and I felt something had changed in my life. I had a deeper, more inspired attitude

toward my practice. With this renewed spirit, I made a determination to set a course to achieve something that would lead to travel and the ability to share the truth of this great Buddhism far and wide. I wanted to be the global citizen that President Ikeda speaks of.

I began to practice more seriously that summer. I started to take my study of my voice seriously too. Until then, I had never devoted any introspection to my growth as an artist. I had always approached my singing as if I were working at Burger King. I began to ask the crucial questions that needed asking about the regions of my voice that needed work. There was a whole practical approach to singing that I had previously ignored. I had begun to utilize wisdom in learning how to train my voice.

When I moved to Philadelphia to study at AVA, I was full of anxiety. Would I be good enough? What would I actually have to do to succeed? I chanted that the artistic director at the Academy would be the right influence in my life and that my new voice teacher would know the correct path to take for my voice. I did not want to be another casualty in the opera business. I knew too many singers with not enough fortune and/or wisdom who had chosen the wrong voice category, the wrong teacher or sang the wrong way for too long and lost out in the long run. Thriving in the opera world derives as much from being in rhythm with the environment as with being in rhythm with yourself. It's crucial to be in the right place at the right time, all the time.

I began keeping a journal of my voice lessons, drawing diagrams and describing the sensations that I felt were correct in building my voice properly. My teachers believed that tension is a sign of improper technique. I was seeking ways of producing big sounds with a minimum of tension. I was searching for my “true voice,” much like a person practicing Buddhism, who seeks to find his or her true self—as a Bodhisattva of the Earth. To be in touch with the voice, a person must be in touch in some way with the self. Otherwise the product becomes a falsely produced “affected” sound that does not strike a chord in the lis-

tener. Sung music has the ability to pull emotions from an audience and a “true” sound will be more resonant, both sonically and spiritually, than a “false” sound. I prayed to the Gohonzon to raise this “true” sound from the depths of my life so that I could share a part of my “true self” with others.

At first I would lose focus of the requests of the maestro during the opera coachings. Not surprisingly, he quickly became frustrated with me. But I then began to chant to get in tune with him and his “language.” This was a humbling, long-term process. But eventually things improved and I was reviewed favorably.

My path was beginning to define itself. I was a coloratura basso cantante, a voice type that is considered more valuable than I thought. It was like being a unicorn. My voice category is one of the most sought after in the opera world. I had only to perfect the instrument to make a viable career possible, but this was easier said than done. My top range was shaky, I had trouble feeling the support of my diaphragm, my command of languages was weak and I had an awkward sense of stage movement — I had to work hard.

A summer opera program at the Chautauqua Institute in Upstate New York, not far from my home in Buffalo, accepted me and I would be apprenticing roles in four operas.

With permission I began holding introductory meetings of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in the small “religious affairs” office next to the Chautauqua post office.

Seven guests attended the first meeting. All were kind and courteous and asked many basic questions. I provided them with copies of the *World Tribune* with glossaries of the basics. I did part of gongyo and chanted daimoku for a few minutes before concluding the meeting. I felt so hopeful and wanted my efforts to help me grow as an artist.

Future meetings exploded into “events” I never expected. The largest meeting included more than 40 guests! I was the only SGI-USA member there, so I led gongyo, did the explanations and experiences, and using the *World Tribune*, encouraged the guests to practice. I was struck by the seeking spirit of these men and women,

Photo by MARK PARSONS



Valerian Ruminski plays the role of Zuniga, in a scene from 'Carmen' by Bizet with the Greater Buffalo Opera Company at Shea's Theater in Buffalo, N.Y. in September 1997.

most of whom were over 50.

These efforts were a springboard to the future: I won first place in a small local Philadelphia voice competition. After consulting my voice teacher and supporters, I decided to honor my deceased father by adopting his name as my own. I became Valerian Ruminski.

During the 1997-98 season, every time I made some effort at an SGI-USA meeting, I would have a success at a voice competition. Between September 1997 and May 1998, I won five major voice competitions, taking first, second and third places. My winnings at that point totaled nearly \$15,000.

Still, I chanted sincerely to rise to the next level. I traveled to Santa Fe where I received great feedback for my role in *Salome*, all the while continuing to practice consistently despite my tiring schedule. Having won an award for outstanding apprentice, I was invited to audition for a number of opera houses, including the New York City Opera at Lincoln Center. Eventually an agent heard me sing and put his trust in me, and I began to make plans to participate in more prestigious international vocal competitions.

My mother, who had been leery of my practice for 10 years, began to encourage my

practice because she could see the enriching effects it had had on my life. I brought her with me to Poland and France for voice competitions, and our relationship improved. It was a joy to call her a month after the European competitions to tell her I had been asked to sing for the director of the New York City Opera. A few hours after that audition, after returning to Philadelphia, I received a call informing me that my audition had "knocked them out of their seats." They felt I had a ripe future with the company.

My mother couldn't believe it, but I told her that this is what I had been chanting for, for

many years. I wanted to make my living as a musician, and here it was, being handed to me.

While all this was going on, I did my best to support my district as a newly appointed district young men's leader, but my schedule left me with only infrequent opportunities to do so, usually singing an aria for members and guests alike. Before leaving for Italy, and another competition, that same director called me to inform me that I had been nominated for a special Outstanding Debut Artist Award from Lincoln Center, and that I would receive a cash award of \$5,000 to be presented to me by the legendary Beverly Sills. In both the SGI and my career, I was taking on larger responsibilities and influence.

In April 1999, I debuted at Carnegie Hall, was given a contract for the 2000-01 season of the New York City Opera for *Carmen* and *La Boheme* and made my way to the New Israeli Opera Company in Tel Aviv for a spring 2000 contract in *Rigoletto* and *La Juive*. I return to New York City for more appearances in *Carmen* and then will be added to the roster of The Metropolitan Opera as a new artist, and have been assigned to work on a new gala in May 2000.

I know with all my heart, that these events have not occurred without my Buddhist practice. It has been the powder keg sparking these triumphs and will be the rudder in my advancing journey into the world of opera and the world of humanity. I truly want to show to the world that I am an upstanding global citizen because I practice the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin. **WT**

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The World Tribune welcomes reader submissions. If you are interested in contributing an article or photograph, please contact us for guidelines. Together we can make a great newspaper.

Dallas Members March Toward the Dream

With the theme "Living the Dream," the SGI-USA Dallas members marched in the Martin Luther King parade on Jan. 15. Interest in supporting the parade began in 1996, when eight members volunteered their efforts behind the scenes to the Dallas parade organizers. Support and numbers have grown each year since their first annual march in 1997. This year's event had 126 SGI-USA members, which included both marchers and support groups. The SGI was one of 120 participating groups that marched nearly three miles in the parade, starting from Dallas' City Hall and ending at the Texas State Fair grounds. Each member was in high spirits singing "Marching Toward the 21st Century." The Flag and Drum Corps also provided a high level performance. In the spirit of "Victory Over Violence," the SGI-USA Dallas members pledged to fulfill Martin Luther King Jr.'s resolution to create a world in which people can respect one another as equals.

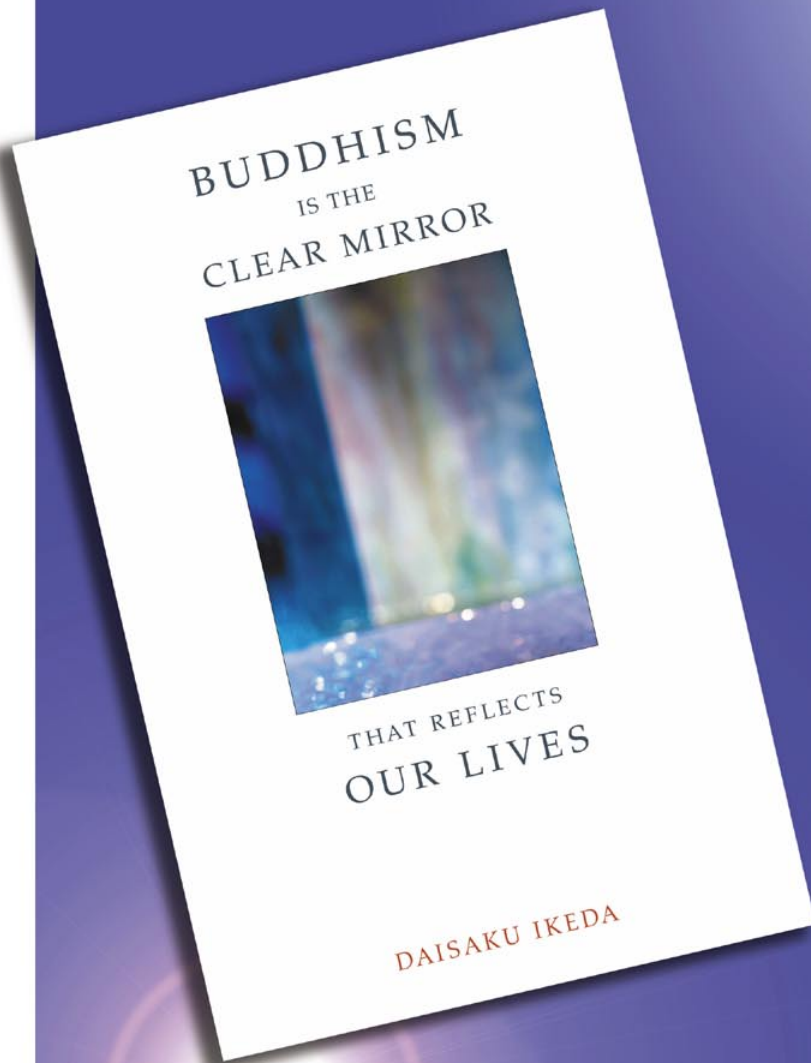
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