

**PASSAGES TO VICTORY (4)
VICTORY THROUGH CONSTANT PRACTICE
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Over years of practice, particular passages from the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin have become favorites of those who practice his Buddhism. This series introduces some of those passages and the people whose lives they have impacted, proving that it is, indeed, a living Buddhism.

“None of you who declare yourselves to be my disciples should ever give way to cowardice. Neither should you allow concern for your parents, wife or children to hold you back, or be worried about your property. Since countless kalpas in the past you have thrown away your life more times than the number of dust particles of the land for the sake of your parents, your children, or your lands. But not once have you given up your life for the Lotus Sutra. Each and every one of you should be certain deep in your heart that sacrificing your life for the Lotus Sutra is like exchanging rocks for gold or dung for rice” (“The Actions of the Votary of the Lotus Sutra,” The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, p. 764)

I was born into a family that practices Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism in Korea. Even though I knew this Buddhism was wonderful through attending meetings and listening to other members’ experiences, I was not sure it would work for me. I never tested it because I was fortunate enough — due to my parents’ practice — to have few difficulties in my family, school or elsewhere.

When I joined the young men’s group and went to a university in 1990, I seriously wanted to know if my Buddhist prayers would be answered. I set a goal to study abroad and become the best computer scientist for kosen-rufu. This seemed impossible at the time, but I was determined to challenge it. No one in my family had ever studied in a foreign country. Even though it was hard and required unbelievable efforts in terms of study, Buddhist practice and financial savings, my dream came true eight years later. I was accepted to a master’s program in computer science at the University of Southern California.

When I came to the United States in 1998, the economic situation in Korea was bad. Due to the surprising increase of the currency exchange rate between American and Korean currencies, the amount of money that I saved for one year’s tuition and living expenses would only last six months. I was planning to find a research assistantship after one year, which is hard for international students to obtain due to a lack of English proficiency, but I had to get one within one semester or go back to Korea. Since going back to my country without a graduate degree would have been a defeat, I was desperate to continue my studies in the United States. It was another impossible goal, but I tried my best to show my capabilities to my professors.

The difficulty during this time was balancing my studies and involvement in SGI-USA activities. When I came to Los Angeles, I joined a district comprised mostly of Koreans and some Americans. Because of communication problems, few Korean members were attending district meetings. Even though my English was not great, I was determined to help them communicate by interpreting. I went to the district more than twice a week to support the members.

At that time, many Korean youth who were born in the United States or came here at an

early age, did not attend meetings because they did not have an interest in Buddhism. One reason was the language barrier with their Korean parents. Their parents could not explain Buddhism well in English. Some other youth and I started a weekly meeting with these youth and invited leaders to the meetings to connect with them. At the same time, we began visiting each one at their homes. I ended up going to SGI-USA activities several times a week. As a graduate student majoring in computer science, it was not easy.

I worried about homework assignments, keeping up in class and exams, but I did not want to stop attending activities. Every day, I had to balance my studies and SGI activities. I always fought against my inclination to take the easy way. At each crucial moment, I kept the passage of Nichiren Daishonin's writing quoted above in mind. I thought of the selfless, dedicated behavior of the first two Soka Gakkai presidents Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda, and how President Ikeda is realizing his mentor's dream. I could not rest or live like other graduate students. I determined to sacrifice my life for the Lotus Sutra and kosen-rufu. I slept less so I could study and still attend activities.

In the beginning, only six or seven members were attending the district meetings. At our district general meeting in 1999, we had 106 members and guests attend. It was because of the beautiful harmony between the Korean and American members that we could accomplish this. We received an award for being the number one district in the United States for new members in June 2000. The Korean youth have grown quickly, too.

Last year we held the "SGI Movements: Peace, Culture and Education" exhibition during the Korean festival in Los Angeles to introduce the SGI to the Korean community. During the four-day exhibition, approximately 700 people visited our booth and 160 guests signed our interest list. Twenty of those people are currently attending our meetings. We also broadcast the Korean version of "Up Close: Daisaku Ikeda" through a local TV channel and more than 150,000 households watched the program.

In the meantime, I found an advisor who offered me a research assistantship, which pays all of my tuition and provides a monthly salary. To be honest, I was not the best student in his class; I did poorly on a mid-term exam and made lots of mistakes. Despite this, the professor said to me: "I am not satisfied with your grade. But I want to work with you because your interaction during class is impressive." Typically, a professor wants to work with qualified Ph.D. students. It is rare for a master's degree student to be an RA, especially after just one semester. As I was chanting to the Gohonzon with appreciation, the passage "like trading rocks for gold or dung for rice" stood out in my mind. I realized that I accomplished my goal because I dedicated myself to kosen-rufu. I looked for more opportunities.

During the spring of 1999, some student division members and I formed an official student club at USC called the Value Creation Society. We started with weekly chanting sessions held in classrooms, dormitory libraries or members' apartments. We chanted to succeed in our exams, attain happiness and overcome our problems. Whenever we met, we invited leaders to help us refresh our determination and to help other students connect to the organization. We held monthly introductory meetings and had a Victory Over Violence workshop to create awareness among students on how to make a difference in diminishing violence in society. Currently, we even have our own Web site! (<http://www-scf.usc.edu/~vcs>)

Now I am working toward a Ph.D. in computer science. The more I devote myself to kosen-rufu, the more capable I become, and that is reflected in my daily life. I want to continually expand my capacity and see how far I can go!