

## AN ESSAY BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA BUDDHISM IS AN OPEN FORUM

**‘An open forum for dialogue, where all can share their thoughts freely — this is the world of Buddhism,’ SGI President Ikeda writes in praise of SGI-Italy. ‘In contrast, authoritarianism that creates a closed, oppressive atmosphere cannot hope to deeply convince anyone of Buddhism’s greatness.’**

It was 19 years ago, on May 28, 1981. I was on another long journey for world peace and kosen-rufu, and had just completed visits to the Soviet Union, West Germany, Bulgaria and Austria. On that May afternoon, my party and I disembarked at Pisa International Airport to make our way to Florence. It was my sixth trip to Italy, two decades after my first visit there, in 1961.

And it was two years after my 1979 resignation as third Soka Gakkai president. In Japan, I found myself in a situation where, because of the insidious schemes of a traitor and the impediments created by the envy-ridden priesthood, I was still unable to freely attend meetings, and this saddened many of our members.

My feeling was, however, that though my movement in Japan might be restricted, there was still a big, wide world waiting beyond its shores. I decided that I would stand up as SGI president and launch a fresh phase of kosen-rufu, making the entire world the focus of my activities.

I put that decision into action. And so it was that I visited the beautiful city of Florence — renowned birthplace of the Renaissance — and began my work of bringing a glorious new flower of kosen-rufu into bloom.

On the fourth day of my stay, May 31, a friendship and culture general meeting was held under sunny skies to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the kosen-rufu movement in Italy. The meeting took place in a lovely green field on the outskirts of Florence, city of poetry. Our members came from all over Italy, filled with exuberance and excitement.

To the strains of “O Sole Mio” (O, My Sun!), 80 members from Rome, 180 from Milan, 160 from Turin and 240 from Florence, as well as members from other cities and regions, poured into the grounds. The majority of them were in their 20s. Members from the United Kingdom and France also joined us that day. The air was filled with youthful vitality and a bubbling enthusiasm to work for kosen-rufu toward the 21st century.

Youth! For me, these young people spelled the shining sun of hope!

In a discussion with Italian members the previous day, I had said, my heart filled with emotion: “When the sun rises, the earth is illuminated. Those who embrace the Buddhism of the sun, by their very presence in their families and their communities, bring happiness to all people, just as the sun brings its light to all the world.”



For a long time, the propagation of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism in Italy progressed slowly. It was people such as present SGI-Italy General Director Mitsuhiro Kaneda and Vice General Director Tadayasu Kanzaki who threw themselves earnestly into the challenge of breaking through the daunting obstacles that blocked the way forward.

Mr. Kaneda arrived in Italy from Japan in 1969, and the following year, at age 30, he was appointed the Italy Chapter leader. But the chapter was still so small that discussion

meetings were held at only one venue in Rome. Almost all the members were Japanese, and Mr. Kaneda, the leader, could speak little Italian.

Though he worked hard to develop the Soka Gakkai movement in Italy for several years, no new members joined. Only the same small group of members gathered together month after month.

Sometimes, Mr. Kaneda felt that all his painstaking daily efforts were in vain — as futile as trying to empty the vast ocean with a tiny cup. However, after racking his brains long and hard over the problem, he reached the conclusion that the key lay in returning to the basics. In other words, he had to first foster one person.

At the time, many young Italians were deeply disillusioned with society and politics, and were aimlessly drifting through life. The Italian Soka Gakkai members in those early days went out and engaged such young people in dialogue, patiently explaining to them the unerring life-compass to be found in the Daishonin's philosophy and the way of inner transformation known as human revolution.

The members thoroughly supported those who decided to start practicing Buddhism. They carefully taught them the basics of faith, until they had established a consistent practice of gongyo and daimoku, regularly attended discussion meetings and gained a strong conviction in how the power of faith related to their daily lives and society.

The members' devotion, their incredibly sincere and humanistic spirit to cherish and respect each person, inspired one Italian youth after another to stand up in faith. The astonishing positive growth of these young people, in turn, opened the eyes of their parents to Buddhism.

In this way, the Italian members put into practice a formula that has been articulated by the great Italian thinker Giuseppe Mazzini: The secret of strength lies in constancy and unity of effort.



Q-and-A sessions have become a fine, well-known tradition of SGI-Italy.

In Q-and-A sessions, we can see the different perspectives people have toward life, religion and the meaning of happiness. By having to rise to the challenge of answering an onslaught of penetrating questions, the central figures in the organization also have the opportunity to humbly deepen their understanding of Buddhism.

An open forum for dialogue, where all can share their thoughts freely — this is the world of Buddhism. In contrast, authoritarianism that creates a closed, oppressive atmosphere — like that evidenced in Nichiren Shoshu — cannot hope to deeply convince anyone of Buddhism's greatness.

Some six centuries ago, Coluccio Salutati, chancellor of Florence, wrote that it is a mistake to believe that the path to self-perfection lies in separating oneself from others, in turning one's back on all attractions, in hiding away in a monastery far from human habitation. I agree completely.

We must go into the midst of the people! We must be involved with people's lives! We must participate in the wide forum of dialogue! This is the way to be truly human! This is the spirit of the Renaissance, which broke the rusty chains binding humanity and extolled the joy of ordinary people's lives.

In the early days of the kosen-rufu movement in Italy, a new, vibrant Renaissance of Life began to take place, born from earnest, heart-to-heart dialogue.



During those nine golden days in Italy in 1981, I devoted almost all my time, from morning to night, to meeting and talking with my beloved fellow members. I held dozens of informal discussions and personal guidance sessions.

And I still remember fondly, as if it were yesterday, the walk I took through the streets of Florence one day with several young people, among them a number of students, who were brightly working toward the future. They showed me the home of the great Italian poet Dante and other noteworthy sights: the Piazza della Signoria and the Palazzo Vecchio; the two-story bridge, the Ponte Vecchio, spanning the Arno River; the Piazzale Michelangelo and the hills of Florence. Walking along the stone-paved streets and resting in the shade of the trees, we talked to our hearts' content. We were comrades in faith. The future belonged to these youth—they were precious treasures that I wanted to cherish above all else.

Later, in Milan, thinking of the day I would crown them with the laurels of victory, I called out to the youth, the young champions of kosen-rufu of Italy: “First, let’s aim for 20 years in the future! Continuing in faith is vital, my young friends! Please never stray from the realm of Soka!”



Eleven years later, in June 1992, when I made my seventh trip to Italy, those same young people were waiting for me. And the growth and development they had achieved were dazzling. I recognized them—that young man, that young woman! Each and every one was a brilliant living example of the greatness of the Mystic Law, of manifesting faith in society. It was clear that all had made great strides in human revolution, that all had become fine leaders of kosen-rufu.

They had built a force of young fellow members that was dozens of times larger than it had been on my last visit. In fact, in those 11 years, our membership in Italy had increased 50 times.

We now had an SGI Italy Culture Center, in a building once connected to the Medici family, the great patrons of the Italian Renaissance. This precious citadel, renowned in days past as a Palace of Wonderful Enjoyments, now resounded with the happy cheers of victory of the pioneers of the Renaissance of Life, who based their lives on the Mystic Law that brings true joy and ease.

The 20-year goal that the Italian youth and I pledged to strive for in 1981 is fast approaching. In Italy in October, with the year 2001 only a short time away, some 29,973 people attended discussion meetings in 2,600 locations across the country—from the Alps in the north to the islands of the Mediterranean in the south. The members are now determined to break through the 30,000-attendance barrier next.

Action determines the value we create in life. Indeed, faith exists only in action. Faith *is* action.

The Daishonin’s Buddhism teaches that our actions reflect our faith. And the immeasurable benefit we receive by implementing this principle is just as the Daishonin describes in his writings.

Renaissance is a never-ending process. It is always striving for fresh growth. It is always looking toward the future.

The sun of the new century is dawning! My beloved Italian friends, let us advance, singing a song of triumph of the human spirit in full voice, while drawing forth the inexhaustible spring of hope and joy from the vast earth of life that has existed from time without beginning!