

**VICTORY OVER VIOLENCE 2001  
MASTERING THE ART OF DIALOGUE  
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**‘Across the United States this summer,’ says Darin Nellis, ‘let’s utilize our VOV campaign to the fullest to spread the joy of the Mystic Law and, through dialogue, inspire millions of Americans to awaken to their greatest potential.’**

In my last article, “Cherishing Young People Creates a New Future” (May 25 *World Tribune*, p. 11), I wrote about the importance of cherishing young people to overcome the problem of youth violence and the significance of the mentor–disciple relationship in addressing this. In this article, I want to share some thoughts on the mission of our Victory Over Violence campaign in helping us master the art of dialogue in order to create a new era of human rights.

**Igniting a new nonviolence movement.**

In preparation for our VOV Family Youth Festival this summer in Los Angeles, I have been working with several youth leaders in conducting a grass-roots VOV community outreach campaign. Our goal is to work with many other community and faith based organizations to inspire thousands of people to come together across all boundaries to address the issue of youth violence through dialogue and, in the process, create lasting bonds of trust and friendship.

Our hope is to create a groundswell of excitement in advance of the festival through a series of workshops, community dialogues, seminars and school outreach activities—enough to attract 50,000 concerned citizens to the festival. At the beginning of our campaign, we asked ourselves how we were going to achieve such an unprecedented goal.

After much anxiety, we began a unified early morning daimoku campaign and studied past campaigns where SGI President Ikeda had been successful in creating a groundswell of excitement to accomplish a great goal. For example, at the young age of 24, he led the Kamata Chapter to an unprecedented record of 201 new member households in just one month. Then in 1956, at the age of just 28, he led the famous Osaka campaign, where he spearheaded the introduction of 11,111 households to Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism in a single month.

In each case, Kamata and Osaka, President Ikeda made a deep pledge to his mentor, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda, that he would win the campaign no matter what criticism or obstacles he encountered. In both of these campaigns as well, President Ikeda engaged in an all out struggle to have sincere dialogues with as many people as he could. My understanding is that he visited some 8,000 people in Osaka and went through three bicycles in less than one year. Talk about tenacity!

We also read from President Ikeda that SGI-Bolivia had a remarkable success in attracting 110,000 citizens to see the “Nuclear Arms: Threat to our World” exhibition, which they hosted last year. And that they did this with a total of only 500 members in Santa Cruz, where it was shown. President Ikeda said with admiration, “The exhibit’s great success was the direct result of their steadfast, earnest efforts to carry out dialogue with as many people as possible” (June 8 *World Tribune*, p. 4).

After learning from President Ikeda, we were determined to engage as many people as

we could in heart-to-heart dialogue. Since then we have visited and spoken with more than 50 community- and faith-based organizations in Los Angeles County concerned with youth violence; this is on top of the many visitations to like-minded organizations made by many other engaged SGI members in our area. And we are just getting started!

One of our first visits was with a well-respected African-American church in Los Angeles to attempt to involve its membership in the festival. We were all wary of how we were going to approach them, and how they might accept the fact that VOV is spearheaded by a Buddhist organization.

I did my best not to panic and just thought of the thousands of people that President Ikeda had engaged one-on-one for the sake of world peace. If we could just connect to the church youth minister's heart and regard each moment of this encounter as a once-in-a-lifetime chance, I thought, everything would turn out great.

The minister accepted us into his church. Before and after our meeting, he held our hands, while he said a prayer to God. At the end of our meeting, he even thanked God for sending us and praised VOV. He didn't do this because he was fanatical about his religion or over zealous; rather, he seemed to be genuinely inspired by the sincerity and passionate resolve of the SGI youth to transcend racial, cultural and religious barriers for the sake of peace and to stop youth violence.

Our relationship with this youth minister and his church has become so strong that he now is hosting our festival organizing committee meetings at his church.

### **Believing in another's capacity for good.**

What we have found is that the majority of people we speak to are open to hearing what we have to say. However, that is not always the case. For example: Our next meeting with a Christian church was with the youth minister of the largest Christian congregation in Los Angeles.

We approached this visit the same as every other: We chanted powerful, unified daimoku, studied President Ikeda's guidance and put our entire lives into the encounter. It was not more than two minutes after introductions and a brief explanation of VOV when the youth minister asked, "Is this a Christian thing?"

When we proudly explained that the festival was interfaith, and that we were Buddhist, he immediately pulled out his Bible and began preaching to us how "even though some people don't believe it, Jesus really does exist." He went on to say that he felt strongly that we were really sent there to be saved by God and not just to talk about VOV. By this time, we were feeling a bit uncomfortable and a bit disturbed. I then began to close down myself and found it difficult to listen with an open mind.

But rather than letting my anger at the youth minister for not listening to us get the best of me, I remembered what President Ikeda had said about Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi's deep belief in the value of each person's life: "They believed ceaselessly in the capacities for good that reside in the human spirit. They uncovered and discovered the capacity for good in all people, equally and without exception" (April 27 *World Tribune*, p. 8).

I began chanting inside to connect to the minister's heart, to believe deeply in his Buddha nature despite my negative reaction. This determination fortified my life-condition and prepared me for his next onslaught. He proceeded to tell us that if we did not accept Jesus into our lives, then we would be condemned to hell. But none of us flinched. Our determination and confidence in our cause was unshakable.

By the end of the meeting, we were able to turn the tide on the conversation; we talked about the intent of the festival and even asked the youth minister many personal questions about his life and why he is so passionate about his work. We left on very good terms and even more importantly, we had won over ourselves in the quest to live up to President Ikeda's example.

Across the United States this summer, let's utilize our VOV campaign to the fullest to spread the joy of the Mystic Law and, through dialogue, inspire millions of Americans to awaken to their greatest potential. I am determined to make this happen by challenging myself first to cultivate the three traits, according to President Ikeda, that summarize the character and mentality of a person who is a master in the art of dialogue:

- 1) To be rigorously strict toward oneself, like a sharp autumn frost.
- 2) To be warm and embracing toward others, like a soft spring breeze.
- 3) To be uncompromising when confronting evil, like a lion monarch. (May 1999 *Living Buddhism*, p. 18).

*Coming up next in this series: "The Victory Over Violence Philosophy."*