

NATIONAL LEADERS PANEL DISCUSSION—PART 1 UNITING WITH ‘10 BILLION DAIMOKU AND 1 MILLION HEART-TO-HEART DIALOGUES’

During recent conference calls with SGI-USA national and zone leaders, everyone unanimously embraced the ‘10 Billion Daimoku and 1 Million Heart-to-Heart Dialogues’ campaign proposed by the youth division (see p. 3). This idea arose in response to many requests from SGI-USA members, who expressed their desire for a unified response to the Sept. 11 tragedies and a concrete way to express our conviction for peace to society.

The following is part one of a panel discussion highlighting the essence of this SGI-USA campaign. Participants include SGI-USA General Director Danny Nagashima, Women’s Leader Matilda Buck, Men’s Leader Tariq Hasan, Youth Leader James Herrmann, Young Women’s Leader Wendy DeSouza and Young Men’s Leader Steve Mortan.

Danny Nagashima: I believe this nationwide daimoku and dialogue campaign is a wonderful way to unite members throughout the SGI-USA— to communicate with and empower everybody based on the faith and practice of Nichiren Daishonin’s teachings and SGI President Ikeda’s guidance. To know that our prayer every day is resonating with waves and waves of daimoku being chanted by people through-out the United States has a powerful impact in giving us the confidence to create peace in our own communities and the world. I especially want to respond to voices like one of a mother who called to tell me, in tears, that she did not want to send her son to war. I know many of these individuals will initiate the daimoku and dialogue campaign in their own areas and become sources of unlimited encouragement and power.

Matilda Buck: I think it’s great you got that phone call, Danny, from one member who said from her heart: “What are we going to do as an organization? What will you do?” Then you talked with the youth leaders, who immediately responded with something so concrete, so doable and so encompassing. I think there is great meaning in the fact, that from one woman’s voice, in a sense one plea for peace, your immediate response was your dialogue with the youth and then a clear, focused action that we can all take.

In our discussions, we realized that if each member chants 45 minutes a day for peace and has two meaningful dialogues each week, by Jan 2., 2002, we will achieve our goal.

Danny: I think women are a symbol of peace. On my recent trip to New York and Washington, D.C., I could really see the great courage and power of women. It was amazing!

Matilda: I’m very grateful that the underlying point of this dialogue campaign is daimoku. Without daimoku, we may speak to people, but it can end up in just conjecture or debate. Our prayer wakes up our bodhisattva nature, and through that we can have a dialogue that is expansive and compassionate.

Religion should transform our hearts. That is, in a sense, the purpose of religion—to bring forth the greatest humanity from a person’s heart, having a positive effect on his or

her actions. When millions of people are doing that, developing a more humanistic view of things and behaving in a value-creative way, that means humanity is changing. President Ikeda talks over and over about this transformation of the individual life. Social or political solutions are only effective when individual transformation takes place, and this daimoku and dialogue campaign can really help us to transform society.

Steve Mortan: Sometimes during times of struggle, like we are facing now, there is a tendency to keep things bottled up. I have that tendency myself, and what really helps me is having someone to talk to that sincerely cares about my life. It changes everything in that moment. I believe that dialogues like that are what solidify peace in our hearts and become the foundation for world peace.

In college, my friends had various struggles and many times I encouraged them. They knew I was a Buddhist, but our relationship was not based on religion, just simple friendship. We had incredible conversations and, years after graduation, I get calls out of the blue from these friends wanting to talk.

Eventually they ask me about Buddhism. Not only has our friendship deepened, but their lives are gravitating so naturally toward Buddhism. Some of them have begun attending SGI-USA meetings.

Wendy DeSouza: On the subject of prayer, I was very encouraged by what you shared, Matilda, during a phone conversation we had while I was in Whistler, Canada, along with the other SGI youth training course participants after our plane was diverted on our return from Japan on Sept. 11. At that time, many of us had mixed emotions. Though we were in high spirits because of our determination to go back to our local areas and work for peace, we were also worried about the safety of our friends and family. We were not certain when we would be returning home, and the estrangement we felt was amplified because we were witnessing this whole drama unfold from afar. You mentioned the power of prayer, and read an excerpt from SGI President Ikeda's book, *Learning from the Gosho*, where he says that "Prayer is not a feeble consolation; it is a powerful, unyielding conviction" (p. 92).

As youth, I think we are frequently moved to take immediate action, to respond to the needs of the present moment. I am always learning from the women's division members that, in addition to the noble spirit to take immediate action, we have to start with prayer as our prime point.

Matilda: And combined with prayer, dialogue is essential. You know what I love, James, is your explanation of the purpose of the dialogue. I think that is really important. Could you expand on that?

James Herrmann: Relieving suffering and turning it into joy?

Matilda: Yes. Sometimes, people feel pressured that they have to convince somebody to become a pacifist, or convince them that they should embrace Buddhism. Relieving suffering and bringing forth joy is so broad.

James: I think based on this prayer—and as you were saying, to really elevate our state of life, bringing forth our genuine compassion and highest humanity—we need to engage people in dialogue. It's one way that we can really relieve their suffering. The goal is to

take away their suffering and give them a sense of philosophy that they can base their life on, that will help guide them through this difficult time. So many people have been affected by the terrorist attacks. Like never before, people are genuinely searching for something to relieve their suffering. I firmly believe that through our daimoku and dialogue campaign, we can give them something substantial and really helpful.

Matilda: So, in some cases we might be imparting the philosophy of Buddhism, but when we talk about removing suffering and giving joy, that joy could be simply giving somebody hope. So those dialogues are not necessarily about encouraging someone to chant. But they could be just talking to people, saying, “Let’s live with hope right now.”

Danny: I really agree with what Matilda is saying — awakening to a deeper sense of our common humanity. We can talk about peace from the deepest part of our life, from our heart. We do not necessarily need to try leading other people to chant. We can help others awaken to the message that humanity must unite beyond religious and cultural differences, for peace.

Tariq Hasan: That is what I hear a lot from the members in New York, where I live. They do not want to be just an insulated group that simply helps each other feel better. A member recently said to me: “I have seen so many people suffering all over the city. We need to reach out to them.” And of course she had many different ideas how to do it. Our members want to take united action as an organization based on this most incredible philosophy.

If you think about it, even if we are miserable, we can always chant to the Gohonzon and change that feeling. Not everyone has the power to do that, really. This dialogue campaign can help every member feel that “I am empowered to engage in dialogue and really help people overcome their suffering at this crucial moment.”

We should not forget that we have something very unique to offer: We can chant daimoku and, based on our strong prayer, be that person at our job, at home, at school — anywhere we are in society — to give people hope with our life-condition, even if they don’t chant with us.

To be continued in an upcoming issue.