

HONORING OUR PIONEERS—JOSEPH O'RAYEH, SAIPAN WAVES OF PEACE FROM THE SOUTHERN PACIFIC

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Buddhism teaches the concept of deliberately creating appropriate karma, which means that we are born with karma that we voluntarily created so that we can practice Buddhism, change our karma and prove the greatness of the Mystic Law, thereby leading others to happiness. When I finally realized that this concept describes my own mission, I felt inexpressible courage and joy.

I formally converted to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism on Nov. 18, 1954, while in the U.S. Navy. I had been introduced to the practice a year earlier by a young Japanese woman named Yaeko, whom I married in 1954.

Early that year, I wrote to tell my parents that I intended to marry Yaeko and that I was practicing Buddhism. Their reaction was explosive. They immediately solicited the help of Congressman Addonizio of New Jersey to fight my marriage. Together with the Navy's chaplains' corps, they waged an intense two-year campaign. I, in turn, practiced with intensity.

Yaeko and I received guidance from second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda. He told us, "The Daishonin's Buddhism will spread to the world without fail, so I hope you will devote your lives to the kosen-rufu of America."

Yaeko and I were married in a Japanese ceremony in November 1954, but it was not recognized by the U.S. Navy. We never gave up. In July 1956, they finally granted us permission to marry.

My mother passed away in the summer of 1956. In the years that followed, my faith and practice nourished her "universal" life, and I know that she's been reborn into fortune-filled circumstances. My father spent the last six years of his life practicing the Daishonin's Buddhism. He could always be counted on for a personal experience at discussion meetings.

With President Toda's guidance in our hearts, we left Japan for San Diego in 1957. I was assigned to a new ship, and while I sailed through the Aleutians, Yaeko, with no English-language skills, introduced Buddhism to any Japanese person she could find.

In 1959, I was discharged from the Navy, and we moved to Reno, Nev. On Oct. 4, 1960, we met SGI President Ikeda in San Francisco during his first visit. He appointed Yaeko and me leaders of Nevada District. We fought hard for kosen-rufu in Nevada for many years.

In the early 1980s, I was diagnosed with diabetes and told that I'd probably had it for several years. By 1991, it took a turn for the worse—my left foot turned purple because of poor circulation, and I was in hellish pain. Doctors spoke of amputating my left leg, but it was precluded by the discovery of blocked coronary arteries. In March 1991, I had quintuple-bypass surgery. The cardio-thoracic team was amazed that there was very little apparent damage to my heart.

The pain worsened, however, and doctors decided to amputate. I had no fear; I trusted the Gohonzon. Then, suddenly, just before the amputation, I felt an overwhelming need to keep my leg and began chanting passionate daimoku, inwardly shouting to the universe that I needed my leg for kosen-rufu. After I had chanted with intensity for a while, a vascular specialist told me that, rather than amputate, they had decided to perform a procedure to improve circulation to my leg. Amazing! That surgery was meant as a

temporary measure, but I still have the use of my legs today.

In March 1998, I underwent another type of bypass surgery. Many of my fellow SGI members chanted for me. To this day, I sincerely appreciate their daimoku. President Ikeda sent me these words: “By winning the last battle, you are a winner in life. Let’s fight together. I am sending you daimoku.”

I have undergone operations one after another. Each time, I have recovered and risen up stronger, like a phoenix.

Yaeko and I were enjoying our SGI activities in Ventura, Calif., when, in early 1999, I was asked to make a two-week consulting trip to the island of Saipan. I have been here ever since, and Yaeko joined me in October 2000.

Guam, southernmost of the Northern Mariana Islands, is a territory of the United States. The 14 other islands in the chain, including the three inhabited islands of Saipan, Tinian and Rota, comprise the U.S. Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Tens of thousands of lives were lost here during World War II, and Tinian, only three miles away, is the island from which the two atomic bombs were flown to the skies above Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

What more appropriate site could there be for a monument to peace? At President Ikeda’s instructions, it was completed and dedicated in November 2000. In addition, we are in the process of installing three peace memorial gardens in the names of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and President Ikeda on that same historical island.

We realize that monuments and memorials are inanimate. Without our action for kosen-rufu, there can never be peace. Our activities now include Goshu study, world peace prayer meetings, group discussion meetings and new member/slow gongyo meetings. We have collectively decided that these beautiful islands, once the location of the hell of war, are the ideal place from which to launch a powerful campaign for peace.

I have divided my practice into 10-year periods. The 1950s were a period of pure seeking mind. There were no English-language study materials available yet, but I sincerely sought Buddhism in every way I could. The 1960s were a period of study. Thanks to President Ikeda, English-language study materials gradually became available, and I studied voraciously.

In the early 1970s, I thought I knew everything there was to know about Buddhism. It was then, not coincidentally, that my life took some negative turns. The 1980s were a period of awakening—rude awakening, that is. I figured out, thanks to cause and effect, that I understood very little about Buddhism. In the 1990s, I began a new period of pure seeking spirit. I fought hard against my arrogance and began to manifest degrees of humility that I had never let surface before. I studied again with a strong desire to be able to teach others.

Finally, the 2000s are a period of joy. I feel a constant thrill that I can chant Nam-myohorenge-kyo. My practice has allowed me to transcend the obstacles, the devils and the demons of life. There is no doubt in my mind why this is so: Throughout the past 47-plus years, no matter what the circumstances, I never failed in my daily practice, and I always stayed with our organization.

In December 2000, my doctor told me that I had advanced, inoperable prostate cancer. I was not panicked by the terminal prognosis. Rather, I rejoiced, grateful for another chance to challenge my karma. To this day, I feel extremely well and have an appetite that rivals a teenager’s. I try to make positive contributions every day for the sake of kosen-rufu.

This is indeed the time of my life. What will the next 47 years be like?