

SEIZE *the Day*

SPECIAL YOUTH
PULLOUT SECTION

FREEDOM & DIVERSITY



Ken Saragosa,
Mission Viejo, Calif.

This past March, I attended the conference for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people at the Florida Nature and Culture Center, including those who support them. As I participated in this conference, and shared experiences and perspectives with the many other people attending, I had many opportunities to reflect on the meaning of diversity and the mission of the youth of SGI-USA.

The idea of respecting diversity is so common that it's almost a cliché or buzzword. But from the perspective of Buddhism, this idea is very important. For example, we know that according to Buddhism, there is no discrimination among our fellow SGI members:

"There should be no discrimination among those who propagate the five characters of Myoho-renge-kyo in the Latter Day of the Law, be they men or women. Were they not Bodhisattvas of the Earth, they could not chant the daimoku" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 385).

SGI President Ikeda wrote in his message to the conference that "Buddhism expounds supreme humanism. All human beings have equal rights. There is no difference whatsoever in their inherent dignity" (April 6, *World Tribune*, p. 12).

Recognizing this and creating a world where this is true are different matters. It is easy to say in principle that all people are equal, but it is very different to confront the discomfort or prejudice that exists within our own hearts.

Similarly, it is all too easy to speak of equality in general terms while refusing to acknowledge specific aspects of people's identity. There are, for example, workplaces which say that no person will be discriminated against because of their sexual orientation, but they are not allowed to talk about their identity. However, to say that a gay or lesbian person should not talk about their life, their families or their loved ones in the same way that heterosexual people freely do is not truly creating an environment of equality. On the surface, it might seem to be equal, but it is equality at a cost: you are equal as long as you try to be just like everyone else.

In the United States today, many youth struggle to understand who they are and how they fit in. This is true for many gay or lesbian youth or youth questioning their sexual identity. But it is also true of many young people for many reasons. They struggle to understand what they have to offer the world. They may feel ridiculed or ignored, unable to express their true selves and true potential.

Among sexual minority youth, drug use, running away from home, suicide and other kinds of self-destructive behaviors are common. This is because for many of them, the fear of rejection or violence and the shame of being "different" that

they live with on a daily basis cause so much suffering.

Buddhism teaches that there is a fundamental equality in all people, and it is not an equality that forces all people to be the same. The equality Buddhism expounds is much deeper and richer. It is a concept of equality where each person is seen as offering something beautiful and meaningful to the world. This is expressed in the concept of "attaining enlightenment as we are" and "cherry, plum, peach and damson." Both of these concepts convey that the unique features of each person—whether it is cultural background, race, gender, sexual identity and their individual interests and tastes—make us the valuable and precious people that we are.

Our Buddhist practice enables us to see the beauty of our own life, and therefore, appreciate the treasure of others lives as well. The aim of Buddhism is not to force people into some kind of mold, but rather, to allow people to freely and fully be themselves. By expressing our own creativity, character and ability, we not only lead lives where we are happy, we contribute to the happiness and improvement of society.

We practice Buddhism in order to develop strength and conviction in the unlimited power and potential we each possess. Raising capable youth means to create an environment where no young person ever questions, "Do I belong here?" or "Is my life meaningful?"

The SGI, and in particular, the youth division, exist to empower young people, to tell them: "You are beautiful as you are"; "You are welcomed and cherished in the SGI as you are!"; and "You have a tremendous mission in life as you are!"

YOUNG DISCIPLES



Jomo Thorne
SGI-USA
High School
Division Leader

Grabbing the Rope

The following is the conclusion of a two-part summary from recent discussions I've had with representative members of the SGI-USA High School division. The discussions revolve around issues related to the mentor-disciple relationship, and are

presented here as one dialogue. Participating in this dialogue are Rey Estevez, a 14-year-old high school freshman from San Francisco; Niiayi Quaye, a 15-year-old high school sophomore from Chicago; Brian Nakamura, a 17-year-old high school senior from Metairie, La., and of course, me. (Part 1 can be found in the March 16 issue of Seize the Day.)

Jomo: What are some of the things that can get in the way of us learning from a mentor?

Rey: I think that arrogance can block our connection with a mentor. Lots of times, young people don't really question if the things we think we understand are really as they seem. We sort of become satisfied with a superficial understanding of our lives. It's arrogant for me to think that I don't have anything to learn from others. Unfortunately, usually unaware that I have this attitude, it's hard to see that it's blocking my ability to learn from a mentor.

("Young..." continued on Page D)

Our Uniqueness Builds a Humanistic Organization

Message to the FNCC Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Conference from SGI-USA Youth Leader James Herrmann



Congratulations on this historic conference! I wish I could be there together with all of you. However, this month [March] the youth throughout America are celebrating March 16, Kosen-rufu Day, by taking responsibility for propagation within their districts, so I am unable to attend. I think it's significant that your conference is being held during the same month when the attention of our entire organization is focused on youth, and when the youth are focused entirely on propagation.

When I was a young leader, one young man—a friend of mine who also grew up in the organization—told me he was gay. He couldn't tell anyone else, not even his parents. I felt honored that he would confide in me and I determined to help him accept who he was and realize his mission. Eventually, he shared who he was with his family and friends. But more importantly, he accepted the value of his own life. His path was not easy, but through faith and his SGI-USA youth activities, my friend transformed a life of shame and self-hatred into a life of value-creation.

Across America, lesbian and gay youth are at risk. Many of these youth live in fear of violence from hate crimes and others live in hiding, fearing rejection or even abuse from their families and friends. Depression, addiction and suicide are only the most extreme expressions of the suffering of these young people.

This is why we do *shakubuku!* This is why the youth division exists! SGI-USA must be a haven for all youth in America. Too many people in America are lost in self-hatred. But within the SGI, young people are cherished. Their potential is recognized and their talent is cultivated. This is SGI President Ikeda's expectation for the youth, and it is also our responsibility.

To all the youth in attendance, I hope this conference is not a one-time celebration, but rather a chance to gain ongoing inspiration and confidence in our philosophy and movement. When you return to your districts, let's unite in boldly sharing this Buddhism with our friends throughout the month of March, and continue in greater and greater waves throughout the 21st century. Together, let all of us—of every cultural background and sexual identity—build the most beautiful, humanistic organization in history.

Once again, congratulations! I'll see you all back on the frontlines! ●

Youth United

Poem by Yadiell Deautriell, Miami

Youth united, limitless, free — the sky is the limit as far as the eye can see.

Sure, the pressure is very tight — the war for peace is putting up a fight.

But can you handle the responsibility of bringing the world and all humanity to their senses, their missions? Happiness is for all. Happiness is the mission.

As youth, we must challenge to win over darkness that seems to drag us to our knees, down onto the ground, where one finds pennies — that's not where hope is found.

We are sisters, we are brothers — strong beacons, we help one another. Pray for me and I'll pray for you. Soft power is what I am tellin' you!

Not the violence that rains down on me, or the hatred pouring endlessly, with the warm vibes of the sun's rays and the kind words that we all say to each other, my sister girl and my brother.

As we take on this task, we tend to grasp and uproot a handful of karma. Not in my garden of sunflowers! No siree! Those distasteful devilish functions disguised as weeds, trying to grow in my bed of fortune. Not a chance!

Looking into the field of flowers budding our benefits one by one, not forgetting our mission, we have already won!

Leading our fellow youth onto the correct path, one foot in front of the other — we're not looking back!

We're strong and we're youth, the beacons of hope for all humanity. ●

MATERIAL! REQUEST!

SEND IN YOUR STUFF

Our youth publication is only as strong as what you bring us. Poems, Articles, Pictures, Stories, Commentaries, ...whatever you got, get it to us.

HOW?

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EVERYTHING BEGINS WITH PRAYER



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*BSG Launching
1 Billion Daimoku Campaign*



The SGI-USA Byakuren, Soka Group and Gajokai (BSG) members are striving to become the driving force of the youth in our organization and raise the future leaders of SGI-USA who will respond to the vision of our mentor, SGI President Ikeda. We have determined to constantly take action to ensure success in all of the SGI-USA's activities in this significant year of 2001.

To do this, we must "use the strategy of the Lotus Sutra before all others." President Ikeda has said: "The first thing is to pray. From the moment we begin to pray, things start moving. The darker the night, the closer the dawn. From the moment we chant daimoku with a deep and powerful resolve, the sun begins to rise in our hearts" (*Faith Into Action*, p. 152).

Using prayer as our foundation, we are launching a billion daimoku campaign beginning on May 3 and continuing for exactly one year. Our goal is to involve 1,000 BSG members across the country in chanting one million daimoku each toward four goals:

1) To ensure total victory in all endeavors for SGI-USA throughout the year. This includes our May 3 celebrations, May Commemorative Contribution Activity, the opening of Soka University of America, Aliso Viejo and each zone's SGI Family Youth Festivals. This also includes our prayers that President and Mrs. Ikeda will return to the United States and for their successful activities throughout their stay.

2) To solidify the Soka Spirit movement in America, so that Nichiren Shoshu stops misleading others. As BSG members, we are committed to protecting the Bodhisattvas of the Earth,

and there is no more direct threat to their advancement than Nichiren Shoshu. Let's completely extinguish Nichiren Shoshu's influence in America this year!

3) For each BSG member to introduce one person this year to this great teaching, helping them to join the SGI-USA.

Let's encourage and support one another with the realization that this is the most powerful means by which to revolutionize our lives and become true disciples of President Ikeda.

4) For each BSG member to have personal victories in their lives this year!

Let's raise the bar in our daily lives, not settling for mediocre results or compromising with our weaknesses. Once and for all, let's make this the year that we all create a breakthrough and make 2001 the turning point in our faith.

In order to unite our efforts, stay focused and inform all BSG members about our collective progress, we will have a BSG page on the official SGI-USA Web site (www.sgi-usa.org). The Web site will allow us to collect and chart the daimoku being chanted nationwide, as well as provide a forum for us to encourage and support each other toward our goals. The details about how the daimoku is to be collected will be communicated through each zone BSG representative during this month.

Together, let's unite in prayer and action to advance our movement farther than ever into every area of society while scoring unprecedented victories in our daily lives. Let's become shining examples of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth and people President Ikeda is proud to call successors. ●

(“Young...” continued from Page A)

Niiai: Yeah, once we find someone we consider a mentor we should trust his or her advice. My mom told me about an experience a fellow SGI member had recently. She went to get guidance about how to expand her business. The person she went to talk to had a lot of faith and business experience, and while he gave her a good piece of advice, she refused to listen. It would seem that she ultimately did not trust his words.

Jomo: In the letter, “Questions And Answers On Embracing The Lotus Sutra,” Nichiren Daishonin uses the image of climbing a steep mountain to describe the importance of trusting and having faith in our Buddhist practice. He writes:

Suppose that a person is standing at the foot of a tall embankment and is unable to ascend. And suppose that there is someone on top of the embankment who lowers a rope and says, “If you take hold of this rope, I will pull you up to the top of the embankment.” If the person at the bottom begins to doubt that the other has the strength to pull

him up, or wonders if the rope is not too weak and therefore refuses to put forth his hand and grasp it, then how is he ever to get to the top of the embankment? But if he follows the instructions, puts out his hand and takes hold of the rope, then he can climb up.

If one doubts the strength of the Buddha when he says, “I alone can save them”; if one is suspicious of the rope held out by the Lotus Sutra when its teachings declare that one can “gain entrance through faith”; if one fails to chant the Mystic Law which guarantees that “[concerning this man’s attainment of Buddhahood,] there can assuredly be no doubt,” then the Buddha’s power cannot reach him and it will be impossible for him to scale the embankment of enlightenment.

Lack of faith is the basic failing that causes one to fall into hell (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, pp. 59–60).

I think that in some ways mentors are people who stand at the top of the mountain of their particular fields. They keep throwing down rope to help us climb the mountain. But without even knowing it, we sometimes push away that rope. I think that SGI President Ikeda is like that guy at the top of the mountain of life, and that we need to grab a hold of the rope he’s handed to us. The mentor–disciple relationship in Buddhism exists so that we can learn how to practice Buddhism correctly and apply Buddhist philosophy to our day-to-day lives.

Brian: We need to be humble, which can be hard for young people, even if we don’t realize it. Having to rely on someone else is a healthy check on the part of our minds that believes there is little to learn from others.

Key: We need to start developing relationships that help us learn from each other. We need to try to make a difference in the lives of others at each encounter.

Niiai: Yeah, I agree.

Jomo: Thanks for sharing your thoughts, guys. I feel like I learned a lot from you.

Trailblazers!



By **Julie Kang**,
Southeastern Region
Student Division Leader

Who Could Ask for Anything More?

At some point in our lives, we’ve all sat down at least once and pondered over all of our problems—whether with school, relationships or financial difficulties. But have you ever thought about all those things that you do have, such as good health, a harmonious family or good friends? Well, sometimes it’s easier to focus on the bad rather than on the good.

For myself, I decided to try something new and start appreciating those things that I do have in my life. I started by chanting with appreciation for my mom, dad and sisters. I felt my life condition rising as I was praying. Wow! Then, I started chanting to appreciate the Gohonzon and our SGI organization. Like a ray of sun shining through the clouds, I realized that everything I have in my life is because of the efforts of the SGI organization, which has taught me how to correctly practice Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism.

Without SGI President Ikeda’s guidance and the support of the organization to help me during times of suffering by always leading me back to the Gohonzon, I would not be as

happy as I am today. After recognizing how much I’ve gained, I asked myself what have I personally done to give back to the SGI, President Ikeda and the Gohonzon. I thought, “How can I repay my debt of gratitude?”

Through chanting, I found the answer. Nichiren Daishonin writes: “It is a time when...truth and error stand shoulder to shoulder, and when Mahayana and Hinayana dispute which is superior. At such a time, one must set aside all other affairs and devote one’s attention to rebuking slander of the correct teaching. This is the practice of shakubuku” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 126).

I will repay my debt of gratitude by chanting and taking action toward our Soka Spirit movement. Throughout the history of Buddhism and the Soka Gakkai organization, it’s clear that Nichiren Daishonin and Soka Gakkai presidents Makiguchi, Toda and Ikeda have all dedicated their lives to ensure that the common people correctly practice this Buddhism for the sake of their own happiness.

After recently studying the importance of March 16, Kosen-rufu Day, I could feel President Toda’s great compassion for the youth when he gathered together with them on that significant day, declaring that they each possessed the great mission to correctly carry on the Daishonin’s teachings.

Even though President Toda was in frail condition and near death at that time, he summoned the life force deep within him to talk to these youth. I think this demonstrates President Toda’s

fighting spirit to do anything for the sake of the Mystic Law and for people’s happiness.

After reading how much the first three presidents of the Soka Gakkai have fought to correctly carry on the Daishonin’s spirit, how can I turn the other way when the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood is trying to destroy the Daishonin’s teachings? I can’t. I won’t. I never will.

I think the biggest challenge is not so much recognizing the fact that Nikken is manipulating the Daishonin’s teachings for his personal gain, but rather overcoming my passiveness and indifference. It’s so easy to get caught up in saying that someone else will do it or that the priesthood issue will eventually pass. But it’s been 10 years since Nichiren Shoshu excommunicated the SGI. This issue is not going to just fade away.

I was born here on this earth at this time for a reason—it’s the perfect time. It’s the time when “truth and error stand shoulder to shoulder.” If I don’t help those individuals who are suffering because they are incorrectly practicing the Daishonin’s teachings, then who will? Nichiren Daishonin also states: “When one has had the rare good fortune to be born a human being, and the further good fortune to encounter the teachings of Buddhism, how can one waste this opportunity?” (WND, 60)

At this time, we have been given the rare opportunity to fight side by side with President Ikeda to ensure that the Daishonin’s teachings remain pure throughout eternity. Who could ask for anything more?