

WHAT CAN THE SOKA GAKKAI CULTURE DEPARTMENT DO TO ADVANCE BUDDHISM?

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Today, in the short time allotted, I want to mention a few ideas as to how we Culture Department members can advance Buddhism.

If we truly believe that Buddhism is the best hope for the future of humanity, we must commit ourselves to take action to expand Buddhist ideas throughout society. Just as every one of us has the potential for Buddhahood within ourselves, every single one of us also has the potential to use our position to spread the message of the mystic law to all of our contacts.

I teach a class at the University of Southern California, called “Overcoming Prejudice.” In the course of preparing this class, I did a lot of research on the most effective ways to change peoples’ attitudes. Whether it is concerned with reducing prejudices, or spreading new ideas, the principles are the same.

What I have found in my research is that the single most effective way to spread an idea is through ongoing, repeated, one-to-one dialogue. President Ikeda is always talking about this, and the research shows that he’s right. We must spread Buddhist ideas by repeated, ongoing conversations, with our relatives, our friends, and our co-workers. If we will give them something to read, anything from a short pamphlet to a book, to follow up on our dialogue, that is even more effective. This is the single most effective way to influence social attitudes.

The second most effective way is through the mass media. Most people are, sad to say, more influenced by the mass media than anything else. Rather than lament that fact, we should utilize it. We should make special efforts to contact movie stars and TV celebrities and persuade them to become Buddhist, and then to speak publicly about how Buddhism has helped them in their personal life. This is how public attitudes are shaped.

My research has shown that people are very influenced by what they read in newspapers, magazines, popular novels, and on the internet. I wish Soka University would build a strong journalism program, and then provide

opportunities for their students to intern with the World Tribune, SGI magazines, and SGI websites so that they could get valuable real-world experience. Rather than just depend on a permanent staff, the SGI should maximize its publications influence by using interns and assisting as many members as possible to gain experience before moving on to other jobs. This would give them a great advantage in landing jobs in the mainstream media. The more SGI members we have working in the mainstream media, the better. Each member can then have a huge influence by radiating Buddhist influence by the one-to-one dialogue method with their co-workers in the mass media.

The future is the internet. In 1996, I established the world's first academic journal to be published entirely online. Today I have a website called "Live Fully" with a number of essays that I wrote, that has a lot of Buddhist content. We need many more Buddhist websites, in all fields of writing. The SGI needs to expand its internet presence dramatically.

Whenever I talk to young SGI members I encourage them to learn how to make their own websites, and to enter careers in journalism, popular writing, filmmaking, radio and television production. Rather than teaching their students in English classes to write the Great American Novel, I wish the Soka University writing program would train students to write pop romances, comic books, and other best-selling genres that are more commonly read. The Culture Department ought to set up a cinema-television-radio group, a journalists group, a fiction writers group, and also a songwriting division, to encourage and assist aspiring songwriters to come up with popular tunes with Buddhist ideas in the lyrics. The goal is to incorporate Buddhist ideas and approaches into every form of mass media imaginable.

The third most effective way to spread an idea is through education. I wish it was first in importance, but education is still very influential. Universities are where the next generations of leaders are trained. Not only for the United States, but for many countries around the world. If we can focus SGI efforts on college campuses, we can have a great impact.

Since I am a teacher, let me discuss what I have done at the University of Southern California, to perhaps provide a model for what you might do in your own workplace.

First, back in the late 1980s I organized the USC Soka Gakkai Buddhist Association, got it officially recognized as a USC religious group, and thus became

eligible to get free space in the University Religious Center to hold Buddhist meetings. I have been the faculty advisor for the group since its beginning.

Because we are an established student group, we were able to sponsor a visit to USC of the Gandhi King Ikeda exhibition. I persuaded several academic departments to co-sponsor this exhibition, and raised over \$3,000 which we used to pay for extensive publicity on campus. Hundreds of students, faculty and staff viewed the exhibit, and were exposed for the first time to the ideas of Daisaku Ikeda.

Second, I've organized panels and discussions that include Buddhist ideas. Most recently, in association with the Gandhi King Ikeda exhibition, I organized an academic symposium, for which I chaired and served as commentator. I invited other professors on campus to speak about Gandhi and King, and then invited Dr. Lisbeth Gant-Britton (an active member of the SGI Culture Department) to speak on Daisaku Ikeda. About fifty people attended this symposium, which went on for over three hours in the evening, without a break. I had to finally cut off a lively discussion because the building was about to close. It was a great success.

Third, I speak about Buddhism in my classes. No matter what the subject, I manage to bring in Buddhism. When I teach about American Indians in my Anthropology class, I compare Native American spirituality to Buddhism. There are in fact some amazing similarities. When I teach about gender and sexuality, I talk about Buddhist ethics on questions of gender and sexuality.

No matter what the subject, I bring in Buddhism and let the students know that I'm Buddhist. I've found that it's important for me to be an open role model as a person who is actually himself Buddhist, instead of just someone who studies Buddhism. Students resonate to personal involvement.

Second, I go around campus and offer to speak about Buddhism and the Soka Gakkai to student groups. Any kind of student group: a dorm discussion group, a dinner group, a sports team. Doesn't matter; if they have a meeting and invite me to speak, I'll be there.

Third, I seek out and talk individually with professors who teach about religion, or about Buddhism in particular. I have found that some have very negative attitudes toward the Soka Gakkai, especially some Japanese professors. I try to engage in ongoing one-on-one dialogue with them, to try to educate them that their image of the Soka Gakkai is not accurate, and it is their responsibility to educate their

students to the reality rather than to a stereotype. I tell about the personal impact that the SGI has had on my life, and I quote SGI writings.

To one USC professor who was particularly condemnatory of President Ikeda, I gave her copies of several of his books. I am still working with her, in an ongoing effort. She is a strong feminist, so if any women want to help persuade her, I would love to get her to an SGI meeting.

Another professor, who teaches East Asian Studies, invited me to speak to her class. I spent an hour talking about the Soka Gakkai to this class of 200 undergraduates, and then she said, “well, I want to hear what some of the actual chanting sounds like.”

So, I started chanting the Lotus Sutra. The students were sitting there with their mouths hanging open. Then she said, “can’t you teach us how to chant?” So I wrote “Nam Myoho Renge Kyo” on the blackboard and led these 200 students in chanting for about ten minutes until the class ended. Several students came up at the end of class and said they wanted to learn more, so I referred them to the meeting of the USC Soka Gakkai Buddhist Association.

I am inspired to do these efforts because I am so grateful to the SGI for how it has helped my life. As I look back on the last two decades of my life, since I got my Gohonzon in 1986, I don’t think I would have been as effective, and I know I would not have had the strength and the fortitude to get through some of the challenges and discrimination that I have faced if it had not been for the SGI. I owe this wonderful organization a lot, especially for introducing me to the inspiring words of such profound philosophers of life like Nichiren Daishonin and Daisaku Ikeda. Their approach to life has been invaluable to me in my activist human rights work to bring about equal rights for all people, but especially for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people.

Nichiren Daishonin lived in a class-based militaristic and feudalistic culture, yet he offered a vision in which even the most uneducated, low-class, downtrodden, and impoverished person had the potential to reach Buddhahood. He lived in a patriarchal male-dominant society, yet he fearlessly spoke out in favor of equal rights for women.

Dr. Ikeda has continued in this tradition, and his commitment to human rights has been unwavering. I remember so well how Dr. Ikeda spoke out for equality for homosexuals back in the 1970s, before it became popular.

He is always quoting the great gay poet Walt Whitman as one of his major influences on his life.

Let me give you just a few short quotes, taken from his book “Faith into Action”, that may show you why he has been such an inspiration.

Ikeda writes:

“Everyone has a right to flower, to reveal his or her full potential as a human being, to fulfill his or her mission in this world. You have this right, and so does everyone else. To scorn and violate people’s human rights destroys the natural order of things. We must become people who prize human rights and respect others, above all.”

“Human rights are fundamental and must take priority over all else; without human rights, neither peace nor human happiness is possible....

“Our schools must TEACH human rights, our religions must PREACH human rights, our governments must RESPECT human rights....

Unless we can build a society that regards human beings NOT as a means to a goal but as THE goal itself, we will remain forever a society of discrimination, unhappiness, and inequality.”

“We must stand up for our beliefs and take action. Human rights will never be won unless we speak out, unless we fight to secure them.... Do not say you will do it ‘someday;’ now is the time. Do not say ‘someone’ will do it; you are the one. Now is the time for you to take full responsibility and courageously pave the way.”

Wow. What a world we could create if every religious leader thought like this. Imagine these words coming from the lips of a Pope, or an Ayatollah, or a fundamentalist preacher on television. If they did, then maybe we would indeed be able to create a world in which the most important thing is to bring about peace, and to maximize happiness, and to love one another.

I have had the great fortune to hear Dr. Ikeda speak on several occasions, and to meet him personally. His words keep me inspired, to do what I can to help make the world a better place. In one of his speeches, he counseled youth:

“Rather than a life of blank pages, live a life crammed full of memories—of battles well fought, and wonderfully diverse experiences. Not to leave behind any history, just to grow old and die, is a sad way to live.”

On reading these words, I realize that my life has indeed been blessed by being so “crammed full of memories.” As I look back on the battles I fought, in both the civil rights movement and the gay rights movement, I’m so grateful to have lived long enough to see what has been accomplished, and to know that I was on the right side of history. I’m so grateful for the strength that the SGI gave me to help make history, and for the inspiring words of Nichiren Daishonin and Daisaku Ikeda. To whatever extent I’ve been able to accomplish some things in life, I don’t want to ever forget that I am standing on the shoulders of giants.

This is why it is so important for each one of us to engage in dialogue with our relatives, our friends, our co-workers, and to do everything we can, to spread this message of Buddhism. For the sake of peace, for the sake of human rights, for the sake of the happiness of all humankind. Do it. Now is the time.