

# Lecture By Linda Johnson, SGI-USA, 2001

Why are we leaders in the SGI? We have made a commitment to help other people change. The only reason we should take on responsibility in the organization is that we continue to make a commitment to help other people change their life through Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. Each of you is a "life coach" and your job is to teach people how to win in life through Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. The job is coaching; helping each person to keep expanding their capacity. This requires us to constantly use our life to challenge that person to go beyond what is comfortable. You don't become a great athlete, or you don't become a great person without going beyond what is comfortable. Growth is uncomfortable. It means stretching beyond what you think you can do. Getting out of your comfort zone. We must grow beyond expecting it to be easy.

There is a difference between not being easy and having to suffer. How can we use our lives to help people change? Growth can be a joyful challenge. How can we really use our lives to help people really change?

We detach from our members' problems. "Yeah, he/she is suffering with that; I've visited them and tried to encourage them, and I call now and then. How can I help them if they don't have a seeking spirit? There's nothing I can do. It's up to them. We need to go to the next level of learning; of using our ichinen to ensure that our members grow. This has 100% to do with us, not them.

President Ikeda's definition of ichinen: 1996, the last time he was here, I attended a private dinner with about 50 people. He talked about what happened when he became president in 1960. He looked at all of us, without any arrogance.

"When I became the third president of the Soka Gakkai, the organization was in financial debt. There were three dilapidated headquarters buildings in Japan for the members. There were six staff members. That's it. Those were the conditions under which I assumed the presidency. Today, there are 1,300 community and culture centers in Japan alone, for the members to meet at. Our finances are very secure. We have established the Soka school system. Even more than that, Buddhism has spread from Japan to 138 countries (now, 165) around the world." He looked at us and said, "I am telling you this for one reason only. This is what the ichinen of one person can do."

There was absolutely no arrogance in him; he was trying to share with us the power of prayer, the power of ichinen, such that shoten zenjin would emerge. He was trying to shake up each one of us. We have the same potential. We accept way too little. Wake up! "I'm not special; I'm just an example of what you have."

Last year, I went to Japan. When we arrived, I wrote a memo to President Ikeda. I truly believe he has x-ray vision. There is no point in pretending, he sees it anyway. I might as well let it all hang out.

As a result of recent appointments (Southern California Zone Leader, Matilda Buck's Vice WD) plus a big job (supervising 8 attorneys for the government), I was feeling

overwhelmed. Every time I would chant about this responsibility, I kept going back to this guidance. Somehow, I knew this was my answer. It wasn't about how many places I could visit. It was about prayer.

So I wrote in my memo, "Sensei, I came back for you to explain about ichinen at a deeper level. I need it in my life. I need to understand ichinen better."

I never got to speak with him personally, but at dinner, he started talking. "Ichinen means to pray without doubt. Whenever you pray without doubt, all of your prayers will be answered. This is the kind of prayer Nichiren Daishonin is talking about." Buddhism equals actual proof. He was strict with us. "If you're not showing actual proof, you are not practicing correctly." He talked about faith. Its invisible; it is only revealed through your behavior as a human being. He challenges all of us to go for all our dreams and win, because the other people who watch your example must be able to say, "This Buddhism is great."

This made an impact on my life. I started chanting a lot about ichinen. I realized that in addition to our moving our bodies, the first thing is to pray; to take total responsibility with our prayer that our members are going to win. Prayer without doubt.

The weakness he felt here is that the leaders were not wholeheartedly praying for the members' happiness. It is another level of faith. "With my prayer, I will ensure that people will win, no matter what."

Let me share an experience here. At a Culture Department meeting, a man got up to share his experience. The year before, he was diagnosed with cancer. Terminal cancer. After many years of practice, this diagnosis caused him to lose all hope. He lost such hope, that he shut everyone out of his life. He went to bed, waiting to die. Fortunately for him, a gutsy WD chapter leader showed up. She made such a racket, he had to open the door. She barged on in, and started talking to him. She convinced him to chant with her. He hadn't chanted in weeks. She made him sit front and center; she sat in back of him. Failure was not an option for her. They didn't chant very long; maybe 30 minutes. While they were chanting, he literally got hot inside. He felt heat enter his body from his back. All this physical stuff started happening. When they got done, his will to fight for his life was re-awakened. He went to see the doctor. It was a very bleak environment. He went in and said, "I want to thank you for everything you are going to do to try to save my life. Even if you don't succeed, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart."

The doctor was so shocked. He talked to him for a full hour, even though he had many other appointments waiting. They started a full course of treatment. Ultimately, this man was diagnosed as cancer-free. Through his life and example, we see how this woman's ichinen woke him up. She poured her life into it. She didn't go there with the attitude of, "I'm here to encourage you, but what you do is up to you."

Whether it's us personally suffering in relationships, or with members, I really feel that in 1996 Matilda and I received got guidance to change any relationship problem we've every had in our life. Vice President Hasagawa shared that this was guidance President Toda gave President Ikeda. He was suffering from watching leaders hurt the members. It's guidance for any situation.

"Every pain, every hurt on account of another human being, engrave it in your heart. Never forget; never do it to another human being."

People teach us through negative example of how not to be, as powerfully as how to be. Some people's mission is to teach through negative example. Our problem is that we separate from them; we don't get that they are a teacher on how to be better. Or, do we turn around and do the same thing?

The reason we're there, experiencing that problem, is because it is our mission to find the solution. The solution is never, ever, ever waiting for the other person to change. If we do, we miss our own opportunity to do human revolution.

There was a person who's sister had a child killed by a drunk driver. She spiralled downward in grief. The member was in pain, watching her sister. She was feeling really helpless; "What can I do?" I shared with her an experience I had where I was suffering on account of a senior leader. I was judgemental of her. After two years, I finally remembered Vice President Hasagawa's guidance. "Hmm, maybe it would be a good thing to apply it." It's my mission to find a solution. The answer is only inside of my life. And, a prayer emerged.

I would take responsibility through my prayer that the person would be able to win over her own weaknesses.

When you look at another human being you just see them in one moment of their process of their human revolution. At this moment, they may be controlled by the dark side. Like me; for two years, I could not win over being judgmental. We usually think, "They're not doing their best." But it's not about someone doing their best. I realized that's not what it's about. Sometimes things are so deep in our life, it's a process. We have to keep chipping away. This is just another human being working on their own weakness. I take responsibility through my prayer that she has a breakthrough. This is different than praying for someone's happiness. That doesn't work for me. When I am in judgement, it's, "You are so messed up, you need my help." That is not a place of compassion. You can't win until you change your judgement of them into compassion. When I took responsibility, I couldn't chant that prayer without changing myself. Immediately, the prayer had the power to change our relationship.

So, I shared this with that member; it didn't matter that the sister was in another state. Nam Myoho Renge Kyo is so powerful, you can reach anyone in the universe "Study the Goshu; believe Nichiren Daishonin when he tells you that it can change immutable karma." Don't just sit back and observe the problem of our members, but ensure their breakthrough.

Within a month, I got an email. She had started chanting that way for her sister. Not only did her sister have a breakthrough over her grief, her sister started chanting. She had tried to shakabuku her for years. Through that prayer, something reached her sister. She is like a new woman. Another sister also started chanting. That prayer is so profound.

As leaders, we have the responsibility and obligation to not be bystanders. We have to

learn to use our ichinen to ensure that each person has a victory. With that prayer, we are helping another human being win. What else is Buddhism? We become alive; we become invincible; not shaken by obstacles, by using our life to help someone else win.

This is vital and crucial. Our only function is to help other people grow. In order to do that, we must let go of control. People can't grow if we keep denying them opportunity. Whenever we are in this process, i.e., "I know how to do it the right way," we are reticent to allow someone else to do it because it might not be up to our expectation. No matter how good we are, someone gave us an opportunity at some point. And we weren't good right away. Why do we expect others to be great the first time? And, we don't get better by just doing it again ourselves.

I was in an area where there were these "control freak" women district leaders. The meetings were suppressed. "I'm the district leader; we will do the meeting the way I want." It's not my personal organization; it's all of ours. We have to let go. This is a real test; if you think you're good at something, how many people can you teach to do it even better than you? How do we do it all? We are busy people. Wife, mother, leader, lover. Time management comes down to letting go, and inspiring others to do something. This frees us and gives us more joy in our practice. We need lots of people doing things. Buddhism is not about "you doing more and more and more and more. When we hold on to things, we are not advancing kosen-rufu; we are stifling the development of Buddhism in the world. What is easier in the short term is death in the long run. It is easier for you to do it; but it stifles other people and prevents other people from growing. We keep bogging everything down with an attitude of "it has to be my way or no way."

How many people can we raise? Everybody in your [group] chapter, district, or area; it's each person taking responsibility. We should not deny them the opportunity. I only rise to the occasion when I have to; it's human nature. If you let me sit back and slide, I will. Somebody puts the ball in my lap, if I'm responsible, it changes my ichinen. Suddenly I say, "I guess I'd better study and chant." It encourages me to grow. We have to really focus on helping others grow. Raise others by letting go.

"Letting go" doesn't mean that they "rise or fall on your own." Don't go on remote control. Stay in control with your ichinen, but not with your mouth or your behavior. Ensure their success with your prayer. When we do that, practice becomes more fun for us. We start to realize that we have the solution to every problem. "I will take 100% responsibility for everybody's success." Practicing will become more enjoyable for everyone; it creates freshness in the organization. I go to a district, and I see the same old plan we used in the 80's. It seems to me we should be improving all the time. Buddhism is about creativity; constant growth. we need that freshness. One of our greatest assets is diversity. If we don't give every kind of person opportunities, we can't create the kind of organization that is inclusive everyone. Keep trying to put your arms around a bigger, more diverse group of people to see things differently. No matter how sensitive we might think we are, we never really know what it's like to walk in that person's shoes. It's hard to know another person's pain and suffering.

If you've been straight all your life, it's hard to know the pain of being gay. If we don't have someone at the table contributing to a meeting in a way that's meaningful to them, we miss an opportunity to make a meeting that is meaningful to everybody.

If it's not your experience, you don't think like that. Unconsciously, we talk about "husband or wife," not "partner." We need someone to point that out. We need someone to sensitize us; we come from our own reality. It's from interacting with others that we expand our own reality. People force us to view things from a broader perspective.

So many of you say you rarely go for guidance. "I know what they'll say; 'chant.'" I want to encourage you to change that attitude.

The purpose of guidance to send you back to the Gohonzon with a new attitude. We can't always do that for ourselves because we are too close; just like the part about the eyebrows. We can't see it. And, we think we already know what they are going to say...chant!

One of my leaders said, "The act of opening our life to another human being is the cause to cut the karma in half." We need each other. We need at least a minimum of one good friend; someone you could share your most painful dirt with, and it's OK, you know that person will never reject you. We need somebody who can always help us stay on the straight and narrow. We can't see our own negativity until we are so off-track that to come back, takes tremendous effort. If we are just one step off, it's much easier.

We must challenge ourselves to grow. We need someone to be strict with us to challenge us to grow.

It is absolutely vital that we go for our dreams. As women we are born nurturers. The weak side of nurturers is that we sometimes lose ourselves. This is a disservice. Flip the order, and put yourself first. This is not selfish. Only in going for our own dreams do we have the motivation to get out of bed with enthusiasm. We can't do it because of other's stuff. The burning passion in your own belly is what moves you; it adds a whole dimension of excitement to your life. When you give up on your dreams you give up on yourself.

On TV, I saw a story about a woman's experience when her husband left. She cleaned houses. It was her dream to teach. She went to school, and is now graduating. She's in her fifties, because it took many years. She will be speaking at the commencement ceremony. She says, "You can never give up on your dreams because when you do, you give up on yourself."

Leading by example: when you're alive, really challenging life for some purpose, it's infectious to people around you. People closest to you get the worst of you. They deserve the best of you, not the worst. If you put yourself last, they get your worst. Don't be satisfied with the crumbs in life. Don't sit on the curb and watch everyone else go by. I don't think so; I didn't start practicing to watch everybody else win. When you are pursuing your dreams, happiness oozes out of you.

Only with struggles can we win over ourselves and encourage others. It's our experience that allows us to have the conviction in the power of prayer, and take that conviction and put it in someone else's life. Some leaders share everybody else's experiences instead of any of their own; you feel nothing coming from their life. James Hermann quoted, "A fate greater than death is to be dead but still alive." When we give up on our dreams, we are

accepting slow death. I don't believe we become happy merely because we chant, or chant for a certain number of years. We become happy because we decide we are going to, and chant from that decision. Failure is no longer an option. "I've decided the obstacle will not win." When we make that decision, fueled by prayer, our life transforms, changes.

We keep going on; accepting; "This practice is too hard." We don't need to accept being unhappy. "I'm taking back control of my life; I refuse to allow suffering to control me." Everything immediately changes; not on the outside, but on the inside.

The difference is between deciding to drive the car versus being a passenger in life. Those two attitudes will produce fundamental differences in your life.

Mrs. Hachiya talked with a woman who was failing in her battle with weight loss. Mrs. Hachiya gave her lots of advice, then stopped. "Don't ever confuse your ability to be happy with losing weight. Lose weight because you choose to do that. It has nothing to do with your ability to be happy."

Enlightenment just as we are. Nichiren Daishonin de-mystifies life. All life has two functions; an enlightened, constructive side, and an unenlightened, destructive side. Nothing in life is all positive or all negative. We have it; everything has it. The circumstances we find ourselves in never define who we are. It's how we choose to use our circumstances are the reason we are the way we are - or the reason we can change.

I can choose to use my circumstances as justification for failure, or choose to use them as a motivating factor to change my life. The world of Buddha exists in every world. I really feel we never need to get rid of anything we go through; fear, doubt, anger. We associate these things with "negative." I used to chant to get rid of them. I decided I need to understand that the world of Buddhahood exists in everything; I should understand there's a constructive side. I chanted to connect with the enlightened side, to transform my life in a positive way.

President Ikeda says, "Persevere without fear or doubt." Honestly, as long as we are human, we'll have fear and doubt. Those are natural. I don't believe he's saying, "You won't have it at all." When we get this point, through chanting I can connect with this point and master it, and no longer fear fear. Now I realize it has a positive side I can always connect to through my prayer. It's my choice; it's a condition we create by winning over the negative side of the doubt and fear to call out the positive.

Never be defeated by the circumstances we find ourselves in. "Faith should never be an obligation; rather, it is our right." Only we can win our happiness. An easy-going life does not lead to happiness. Only when we face life and challenge it can we achieve true happiness.

We must not detach, whether it's in our or a member's life; there's nothing we can't change in our life.

END OF LECTURE

## Q & A

Question: What about training? How do we do that?

Answer: We all need training, constantly. We need training, nurturing, support on Buddhism and how to do everything better. It requires consistent dialogue. Create an atmosphere where we constantly dialogue about how to do things better; share with each other. We all learn so much from each other. Constant hands-on; we need leader's training meetings every month. I need training. We assume people automatically know what to do, or want to do it.

These are false assumptions. Leaders constantly need nurturing. Focus on specific weaknesses sometimes; constantly keep bringing out issues we need to address. Do a critique after the meeting; how could we do better?

President Ikeda says we must say what needs to be said. But, it must be said from a place of compassion. If it's from judgement, we can't reach their life even if we are right. People need to feel safe to say what they have to say, and that's a constant struggle.

Comment: In one part of Washington, D.C. they have leaders' training every other month, from 9:30-1:00. They cover how to be a good group leader, everything. They have a website: [laureldistrict.homestead.com](http://laureldistrict.homestead.com).

Question: I'm scared of hurting someone's feelings, so I don't say anything.

Answer: We have to get over it. Even when it's well-intended, sometimes it hurts. We have to have the confidence we can fix it with Nam Myoho Renge Kyo. If our true heart is to help that person, they need a great friend in Buddhism, who tells them what they need to hear in spite of not wanting to hear it. They may get mad. If we can't rely on someone in Buddhism to tell us the truth, who can we rely on? They may not like it. We need that person we can rely on to tell us what we need to hear in order to grow. We need people who tell us the difficult stuff; pushing us just a little bit further than what we think we can do. It's compassion for a person's life. Sometimes in Buddhism, it's like 'tough love.' We have to tell someone something that might be difficult. "Will they reject me?" What is my purpose? To help you win in life, or to win a popularity contest? We have to be in there for the long haul. Stick with them no matter what. Ensure with prayer that they will win. We all need the honest friend who doesn't just say what they think we want to hear.

It's not easy. Dialogue like President Ikeda. Before he ever meets with the person, he first sits down in front of the Gohonzon and conducts the dialogue he wants to have. Then, he sits down with the person. Then, he goes back to the Gohonzon again and chants to open the person's life, to get the points he wants them to get. Look at how much effort he puts out; he uses prayer to reach another person's life.

Use that process, along with courage, and we learn to expand our life. Do the tough stuff, not just the easy stuff. You will consequently develop deeper bonds. It's a very superficial relationship to only say what we think the other person wants to hear so that they don't reject us.

Question: I want more actual proof.

Answer: Set new goals for yourself. Keep growing by constantly taking on new challenges. Yearly, five year, ten year goals. We also need to see progress with daily goals. We need all kinds of goals. They are a good measure that we are growing. When you accomplish a daily goal, you develop the confidence that your life is moving forward. It moves forward in all areas. "Because I see this, this, and this happening; then surely, this is happening, too."

Regarding judgement. I chant always to be able to use my life; be the vehicle through which the Gohonzon speaks to the members. Whatever comes out of my life is what that person needs for their life. Don't focus on "Linda." Take on the greater mission as bodhissattva. "Let me be able to manifest wisdom to clearly see what's going on in a person's life to help them chant." When I pray that way, I'm not influenced by judgements.

See that everyone is a magnificent work in progress. They're just stuck at this one moment in time. Anybody can change anything. Sometimes I feel judgement creeping up; I start chanting inside to win over that judgement. "Don't let my stuff get in the way of this person." I have watched the session transform; we connect. It's a constant battle.

Question: How do we support Men's Division? Also, I'm confused because my husband wants me to leave on a trip with him as soon as I get back, but there are activities to support.

Answer: One way is to do what we've talked about. Take responsibility with our own prayer that they will really shine; manifest their full potential in their life. We will take full responsibility with our prayer. When your prayer is that magnanimous, then, "What must I do to make that happen?" You have to chant to pull that answer up from your life. Then, do it. It's different with each one what they need. Day by day, how to support? Prayer; get an answer; get the courage to do it.

We have to role-model a new kind of leader in this organization. If people joining today look at you, and think you don't have a life because you're a leader, nobody's going to want to be a leader. Ultimately, using our life to help other people grow is how we enrich and allow our own life to grow. All the success and joy and achievements are because I've been a leader. Members have forced me to grow. I have to keep challenging myself to encourage them. Members are my greatest asset in my life.

Each of us has got to start thinking about how to be a better example. Show a person who's winning in life. Family, career, whatever. You can have it all; you don't have to settle. Instead of being irritated at our leaders, remember that people teach us how to be a better leader through their weaknesses, too. The point is, do we get the lesson, or do we turn around and do the same thing?

Taking that trip with your husband is the best thing you can do. Let others feel responsible. As a woman and a wife, you have a mission to inspire your husband. If you are always so tired because of activities, i.e., "Don't bother me, I'm tired," with our own life, we're discouraging them about faith. Our family starts resenting activities. Mrs. Hachiya is very strict with herself. No matter what, no matter how late it is when she gets home, she says, "Everyone else relax, I'm home, I'll take over." Our faith activities don't stop when we get to the house. We need to be constantly challenging ourselves to

be better. You have a mission to make your husband so appreciative of your activities, because when you come home, you give him the message that "You're important in my life."

Trust your prayer. We don't need to be physically with other people to impact their life. It is so profound. Trust that prayer.