

Discussion Meetings — Source of Absolute Victory

Every month, we hold refreshing gatherings of heartfelt dialogue in our communities. During each season—winter, spring, summer and autumn—we spur ourselves on to expand our circle of friends even further. Our meetings mark a fresh milestone of growth and advancement for each participant.

Encouraging us in this movement to revitalize ourselves as well as our surroundings, SGI President Ikeda exclaims in an article from the *Living Buddhism* magazine, the 2010 January-February issue, page 17:

Let's work together to hold discussion meetings for *kosen-rufu*, for happiness and harmony, for honing our Buddhist practice and study, for creating unity, for refuting the erroneous and revealing the true, for expanding our ranks of youth, and for building friendship in our communities. And let's hold cheerful discussion meetings that resonate with the victory of mentor and disciple!

In support of these goals, this document contains a few ideas to enrich our gatherings. The material is organized as follows:

Section	Page
The Starting Point of Kosen-rufu	2
Meeting People is the Essence of Kosen-rufu	2
Key Points for Enriching Our Meetings	3
Ideas from Our Groups and Districts	
• Thoughtful Preparation	3
• Passionate Promotion and Confirmations	4
• Inspiring Program	5
• The Role of the MC or Moderator	6
• Prompt Follow-up	6
In this Defiled Age, You Should Always Talk Together	7

Please send feedback on this document to Chandan Bhugra (cbhugra@yahoo.com) and Allen Massiah (allenmassiah@gmail.com). Thank you!

The Starting Point of Kosen-rufu

***Discussion meetings are the starting point of kosen-rufu.
They are the Soka gardens of happiness and peace.
They are the origin of the unity of mentor and disciple.
They are the source of absolute victory.***

With these words of guidance, SGI President Ikeda begins his essay, titled **Discussion Meetings: A Source of Energy and Vitality**, carried in the **World Tribune** on 2006 October 13, page 7. Two additional excerpts from the same article are offered here as impetus for our ever-expanding dialogue movement.

“Life is only kindled by life,” observed 18th- and 19th-century German writer Jean Paul. I first encountered my mentor at a Soka Gakkai discussion meeting. Later, with discussion meetings as the spark, I ignited, together with my fellow members, a blazing Soka alliance committed to promoting the cause of good—a great movement for *kosen-rufu* that spread like wildfire.

...

Mr. Toda declared, “No matter how dark and desolate society is, make certain our discussion meetings are always bright and cheerful, filled with courage and conviction!”

The valiant act of attending a discussion meeting opens the way to fresh triumphs and a future filled with limitless hope.

We must not forget that the confident voices of members heard at discussion meetings, along with the victorious music of a new era, herald the dawn of a global civilization founded on dialogue.

Meeting People is the Essence of Kosen-rufu

Each day, SGI President Ikeda offers guidance on some aspect of faith, *kosen-rufu* and developing truly human qualities. The following points were taken from these daily words of encouragement. They are quite pertinent to our discussion meeting movement.

***Let's ensure that our discussion meetings
elicit from participants joy and satisfaction
and words such as "I'm glad I came."
With effective prayer and planning,
let's positively enrich our gatherings,
which can be considered "assemblies where the
Lotus Sutra is expounded by the Buddha"
in the present age.***

「来てよかった」と
皆が喜ぶ会合に。
万全の祈りと準備で
仏の会座を
荘厳しよう!

***Meeting people is the essence
of kosen-rufu.
Let's manifest courage from within
and engage in dialogue brimming with confidence.
Every encounter, every conversation is
an opportunity to help others
make a connection to Buddhism.***

人と会うことが
広宣流布!
勇気を出し
自信満々で語ろう
すべてが仏縁だ。

Above are translations of "To My Friends" that are based on President Ikeda's guidance and published in the **Seikyo Shimbum**.

Key Points for Enriching Our Meetings

Periodically our SGI publications carry articles with information and suggestions of significant value in enhancing our discussion meetings. Two such pieces are outlined here. Please note that the key points from the two articles mentioned here have been included in the next section below.

- The *World Tribune* issue of 2010 April 23 is dedicated to our districts on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of President Ikeda taking the helm of the worldwide kosen-rufu movement. There is a section with **Tips for Holding a Great Discussion Meeting**, which covers the main activities for victory, with suggested tasks to conduct before, during and after the meeting, as well as the role of the MC. There are two additional sections focused respectively on **What Members Learn in the District** and **Visiting Members**.
- An article that explains our kosen-rufu movement in very meaningful terms is one titled **Returning to the Essential Spirit of Soka** (*World Tribune*, 2006 November 3). This piece emphasizes the following points for conducting effective discussion meetings:

(a) Make a plan and set goals for attendance	(d) Conduct meetings overflowing with conviction in faith
(b) Chant for the success of the meeting	(e) Evaluate the meeting soon after
(c) Take action with communication and home visits	

Ideas from Our Groups and Districts

Over the years, we have accumulated many experiences of victory relating to our gatherings. Our groups, districts and chapters have offered these proven approaches. These best practices assist us in effectively preparing for and conducting our wonderful discussion meetings.

Thoughtful Preparation

1. **Pray deeply with a concentrated mind of faith.** Basing the success of the activity on daimoku is the way to generate a solid victory. This fuels the unity, wisdom and courage needed for success! In one of his poems, carried in the *World Tribune* on 1999 April 16, page 6, SGI President Ikeda exclaims:

***No one can beat a person
who has chanted daimoku
with all their might —
for daimoku is the very heart
of the Daishonin's Buddhism!***

2. **Involve youth in all aspects.** The young people in the district can receive training and show their gratitude by being involved in all of the discussion meeting activities. Pulling them into the process early on is vital. **You can even ask them to take full responsibility for the entire event**—while assisting and supporting them in all areas. By involving the young people—the youth divisions including Student Division, Junior / Senior High Division and Elementary School Division members—in all aspects, we tap into their fresh ideas and provide them with leadership-building opportunities to learn and grow as they contribute.
3. **Meet, set a target and plan effectively.** The group or district often holds a planning meeting toward each significant gathering. Please get together, set a healthy target and develop a creative meeting plan that can enrich each participant's life. Please let the chapter and area leaders know your targets, as well as the date, time and venue of your gathering.
4. **Choose an inspiring theme.** A central theme, motto or expression of a district's determination is a way to focus everyone's spirit and energy for the future. The suggestion here is to choose a theme that resonates and gives people hope. In this manner, the songs,

experiences, determinations, discussion and guidances can all be in harmony.

5. **Advance with a seeking mind.** Do not hesitate to seek from seniors in faith about ways to be successful. Review your plans and ask for honest feedback. Invite a respected senior leader to center the discussion meeting. In particular, many districts are sending reports to SGI President Ikeda, sometimes with invitations, determinations and a meeting plan! Your area and region leaders as well as the SGI Gajokai, Byakuren and security staff can assist in faxing memos to the SGI headquarters office.
6. **Check the *World Tribune* and *Living Buddhism* for special articles.** SGI President Ikeda has written a number of excellent articles to support our dialogue activities. These include:
 - **Kosen-rufu Starts with Discussion Meetings**
(*Living Buddhism*, 2010 January-February, pages 8-17)
 - **Discussion Meetings: A Source of Energy and Vitality**
(*World Tribune*, 2006 October 13, page 7)

In addition, the following pieces have been published by the *World Tribune* staff and contributors specifically to assist us in conducting excellent meetings:

50th Anniversary May 3rd Commemorative District Issue (*World Tribune*, 2010 April 23) **Sharing the Greatness of Buddhism**
(*World Tribune*, 2007 October 26, pages 1, 6)

Returning to the Essential Spirit of Soka
(*World Tribune*, 2006 November 3, page 6)

7. **Invite a leader, who is senior in faith, to center the meeting.** The central figure usually leads gongyo, answers questions and shares guidance in faith at the conclusion of a meeting. The mission of the central figure may be summarized in the following quote: **“In essence, guidance means leading people to the Gohonzon and to happiness.”** (*Buddhism in Action*, volume I, page 46)

Passionate Promotion and Confirmations

8. **Reach out to all members and guests.** With enthusiasm, get the word out as soon as possible about the date, time and venue. **Visiting members to understand their situations, to encourage them in faith and to invite them to the activities is so crucial.** In fact, ‘home visits = victory’ is an unchanging formula for creating eternal bonds that lead to mutual victory!
9. **Deliver or send invitations.** This often makes an impression of heartfelt sincerity with the recipients. Although this takes extra time and effort, it is a touching way to help focus prospective attendees on the importance of the gathering and the depth of one’s desire to have them participate.

“There is nothing more noble than inviting our friends to discussion meetings, gathering together to enable them to establish a connection to Buddhism, to talk about Buddhist teachings, and to deepen our faith. As the Lotus Sutra clearly indicates, through such steady, dedicated efforts to teach others about Buddhism, you are accumulating the good fortune and benefit to be reborn as great leaders and savor a state of unsurpassed freedom in lifetime after lifetime.” (**Faith into Action**, page 216, by Daisaku Ikeda)

10. **Sincerely encourage each person and be aware of his or her situation.** As we speak with the members and guests, please **keep track of those who are confirmed and those who are still trying to adjust their schedules** in order to attend. Let’s pray for and cherish each precious individual as we follow up thoughtfully.

Inspiring Program

11. **Conduct a vibrant gongyo with deep united prayer.** Where the venue and schedule permits, please conduct morning or evening prayers at the meeting. Allow all participants the opportunity to refresh their lives through the dignified and united recitation of the Lotus Sutra and the chanting of daimoku. The heightened life condition stimulated thereby enables each person to advance that much more sincerely, seriously and vigorously along the path of daily life.
12. **Explain the basic practice and introduce the SGI.** This is the perfect time to provide a crisp, thoughtful introduction of the faith, practice and study of Nichiren Buddhism as well as a brief overview of our movement for peace, based on culture and education. Be innovative!
13. **Welcome all members and guests, and hold Gohonzon conferrals.** What a great time this is for a person to join our SGI family! By all means, let all those who have been to previous meetings know of the opportunity to formally join our movement, to receive the Gohonzon and to begin their practice in earnest. Please always seek the guidelines for conferrals from the senior leaders in your SGI organization.
14. **Study the Goshō and guidances from SGI President Ikeda.** The *World Tribune* always carries articles that can serve as meaningful material for an inspiring dialogue. Also, please be on the look-out for messages of encouragement from SGI President Ikeda for all the members, which we receive periodically.
15. **Experiences in faith remain in our hearts.** Sincere experiences of our breakthroughs remain in people's hearts. In many ways, **this is the core of the meeting!** Powerful experiences encourage us to seek the benefits of faith with even greater sincerity.
16. **Nurture lively discussion in a family atmosphere.** When the lively dialogue includes many individuals, there is a shared feeling of heartfelt understanding and joy. Please enable all participants to engage fully and so benefit from the rich interchange of experiences and ideas. In some cases, it may be necessary to adjust the level of the meeting. For instance, instead of always holding meetings at the district level, a group meeting with a smaller number of people may provide a greater opportunity for the attendees to get involved and thereby benefit from this faith activity.
17. **Include music, songs, poems and performances.** These cultural activities lift everyone's spirits. Solo or group performances are fine. Extra preparation helps to ensure a high quality result, which leads to everyone being even more inspired. **"Discussion meetings take a great deal of time and effort, but that is precisely why they are extremely effective and produce the most powerful synergy."** (*World Tribune*, 2006 October 13, page 7)
18. **Reflect on the significance of key dates and events.** During each month, there are dates that commemorate historical events in the development of the SGI and the flow of Nichiren Buddhism. A well-researched, dynamic presentation on such a topic deepens our understanding. As participants seriously ponder what it means to create value, we gain appreciation for the importance of each individual human being and the mission of the SGI.
19. **Conduct unit and group leader appointments.** These are truly valuable and precious levels of responsibility for our organization. The discussion meeting is a fine time to appoint leaders who will take responsibility for the members' growth in the coming years.
20. **Provide mementos.** The attendees always appreciate a special remembrance of the event. Perhaps the chosen theme, a Goshō passage or an excerpt of guidance from SGI President Ikeda can be imprinted in some attractive manner.

The Role of the MC or Moderator

- 21. **Take full responsibility for the success of the meeting.** The role of the MC or moderator is crucial. This person must be well versed in the meeting plan and communicate the joy of our SGI Buddhist practice. The MC has a central responsibility for the successful execution of the meeting. Most of our districts ask members of the **youth divisions** to fulfill the role of MC. Being MC is a wonderful opportunity to seek out training.
- 22. **Ensure crisp and meaningful momentum.** The MC must strive to keep the meeting on track—ensuring that **the meeting starts on time** and that **each element of the meeting stays within the allotted time duration**. While never being discourteous, the MC must sometimes politely remind the participants of the meeting schedule in order to elicit their cooperation. The MC introduces each item on the meeting program. Sometimes he or she may offer short remarks of appreciation. However, the MC does not offer guidance or rambling commentary during the meeting.
- 23. **Preparation is the key.** Ideally, the MC is involved in the planning and promotion of the gathering. This includes visiting members and guests ahead of time and getting together with the district leaders to pray for total success and no accidents. Also, please send out the meeting program ahead of time.

Prompt Follow-up

- 24. **Hold sincere, informal dialogue after the meeting.** Members and guests may desire to pursue in more detail the topics that have been presented during the meeting. These heartfelt, individual discussions after the meeting are tremendously meaningful.
- 25. **Cherish each individual.** Please follow up with each member and guest, as well as those who were not able to attend. Take action to assist each person to advance—listen closely to the questions and suggestions of the guests, thank the members, and check in with those who could not attend to let them share in the success. Get feedback from attendees for continuous improvement!
- 26. **Be considerate of the hosts and the neighbors.** Please be careful not to over-stay the welcome that has been extended to us. In addition, let's really be appreciative and considerate of the neighbors, avoiding impolite parking or unnecessary noise.
- 27. **Communicate results right away.** Please report results to the chapter and area leaders immediately after the meeting, ideally that day. The **Discussion Meeting Report** usually contains the following information:

Meeting Attendance								
Members							Guests	Total Attendance
MD	WD	YMD	YWD	ESD (age 6-12)	Children (birth-5)	Total Members		

Membership Increase		
New Gohonzon Members	New Family Members	Total New Members

In this Defiled Age, You Should Always Talk Together

[This entire section that follows is made up of excerpts from an essay by SGI President Ikeda titled “**Kosen-rufu Starts with Discussion Meetings**” and carried in the *Living Buddhism* magazine, the 2010 January-February issue, pages 9-17.]

***In this existence
together with great friends
from time without beginning
engaging in cheerful discussion
and living with joy.***

...

It can be said that Buddhism began from a kind of discussion meeting. When Shakyamuni “began turning the wheel of the Law”—that is, when he first shared the content of his enlightenment with others—he did so not before a large assembly but in the form of a small meeting. He sat down with five old friends and talked with them in an intimate, informal way. They became Shakyamuni’s first five disciples. This discussion meeting, in which the ties of mentor and disciple were first forged, is really the start of Buddhism. It was a discussion meeting that marked the dawn of a spiritual revolution that would illuminate humanity—namely, *kosen-rufu*.

...

Nichiren Daishonin writes, “In this defiled age, you should always talk together” (“The Votary of the Lotus Sutra Will Meet Persecution,” *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, volume I, page 449). We are faithfully putting this teaching into practice through our monthly discussion meetings.

It is apparent from his writings that Nichiren, just like Shakyamuni, held the equivalent of discussion meetings in order to propagate his teachings.

...

This same spirit displayed by Nichiren Daishonin is evident in our Soka Gakkai members who are holding planning meetings in earnest preparation for their upcoming discussion meetings. Accordingly, they will enjoy great benefit and the protection of the positive functions of the universe. I am certain that the Daishonin would especially praise those who offer their homes for discussion meetings. They are assured of gaining boundless and immeasurable benefit.

Discussion meetings are noble gatherings that can be likened to the ceremony held on Eagle Peak described in the Lotus Sutra. Never forget to express utmost appreciation for those who make their homes available for meetings. Always be polite, show consideration for the neighbors, and take care not to make a mess.

***Citadels of Soka,
where Bodhisattvas of the Earth assemble
in accord with the Buddha’s decree,
will flourish forever.***

...

When dialogue is forgotten, self-righteousness and narrow-mindedness set in; this applies to both people and religions. Without honest dialogue, neither individuals nor organizations can expect to remain fresh and vital. This is clear from the fate of the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood, which has closed itself off to dialogue.

...

***The immense
power of the people,
their smiles an unstoppable force,
like a mighty wave,
can surmount any buttress of tyranny.***

...

***Build a majestic realm
fragrant with the scent of flowers,
resolved that it shall be
a land of human harmony
and happiness.***

Mr. Toda often said: “Now that you’ve all become leaders, you should resolve to really put the teachings of Buddhism into practice at discussion meetings. Make an all-out effort and become outstanding leaders of high character. Earn the praise of the Daishonin and the Gohonzon.”

Discussion meetings are venues at which we can train ourselves to the utmost. No one is a match for humanistic leaders who have cultivated their abilities through engaging with others at discussion meetings. The experiences gained at discussion meetings will be “the only memory of your present life in this human world” (“Questions and Answers about Embracing the Lotus Sutra,” ***The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin***, volume I, page 64), shining forever across the three existences.

The fond memories I have of all the people I have encountered at discussion meetings are engraved deep in my heart, and they will never fade.

...

When people gather, there is power. The rhythm for ongoing victory is created when members get together in high spirits for a discussion meeting and leave in high spirits when it’s over. Soka Gakkai discussion meetings have absolutely nothing in common with the meandering, disorganized, pointless lectures given by members of the arrogant and domineering priesthood, which are utterly lacking in joy, determination, hope and fulfillment.

The key to a successful discussion meeting hinges on the prayers, sincerity and careful forethought of those responsible for the activity as they consider which themes to cover, how to make the gathering inspiring, and how to enable everyone who attends to deepen their commitment to faith.

...

After World War II, in the first discussion meeting for reestablishing the Soka Gakkai, Mr. Toda referred to this passage from the Lotus Sutra: “Those persons who had heard the Law dwelled here and there in various buddha lands, constantly reborn in company with their teachers” (***The Lotus Sutra and Its Opening and Closing Sutras***, page 178). He commented: “Teachers and disciples, mentors and disciples, will always be born together. Mr. Makiguchi and I were mentor and disciple even in prison. We’ll be together in future existences, too. We are always and forever winning battles together!”

Let’s work together to hold discussion meetings for *kosen-rufu*, for happiness and harmony, for honing our Buddhist practice and study, for creating unity, for refuting the erroneous and revealing the true, for expanding our ranks of youth, and for building friendship in our communities. And let’s hold cheerful discussion meetings that resonate with the victory of mentor and disciple!

