Opening and Welcome

Good morning everyone and thank you very much for being here today.

Some of you may be here for the first time, some of you may have joined us before, and some of you may simply be here to listen and reflect quietly. However you arrived this morning, you are very welcome.

This hour is designed as an introduction to Buddhism for people who are interested to know more about it. It will include some experiences from local members of our organisation and an opportunity to ask questions at the end. After that, there will be refreshments outside here, and in the room continuous chanting until just before three o'clock. You are welcome to stay to listen to any of this or join in or have dialogue with people in the area outside this hall.

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What Is SGI and What Is This Practice?

This meeting is connected with the Soka Gakkai International, often called SGI. SGI is a global lay Buddhist organisation made up of ordinary people. There are no monks, no priests, and no hierarchy of spiritual status. It is practised by people with jobs, families, doubts, health concerns, ambitions, and challenges - in other words, by people living ordinary lives.

Maybe you have an idea that practising Buddhism involves retreating to a mountain top and meditating away from other people. SGI, on the contrary, is very much socially engaged and members are encouraged to throw themselves into daily life and use their daily Buddhist chanting to draw out the wisdom from their own lives to understand life, face things and find a way forward.

The original, historical Buddha, Prince Shakyamuni, did indeed leave his palatial family home and meditate to solve the four sufferings of human beings, sufferings he identified as birth, sickness, old age and death. He taught his insights for forty years, finally expounding the teaching, or 'sutra' of the Lotus.

Our branch of Buddhism was founded by a Japanese monk in the 13c who devoted himself to studying all the Buddhist teachings from the age of 12 onwards. His name is

Nichiren. He came to the conclusion that the essential points Shakyamuni Buddha was making were to be found in this Lotus sutra, the culmination of his teaching and that the total meaning of the sutra could be distilled into the phrase Nam myoho renge kyo. This is the phrase that we chant morning and evening.
This was what he had been searching for, a revolutionary teaching that would enable every person to reveal their limitless potential and become happy.
Various high priests since then have reinvigorated Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and then, after the second world war, with the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan, the lay movement of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism really took off, largely thanks to the efforts of the first three presidents of the lay movement which was formed separate from the Nichiren priesthood and became a global lay peace movement in the second half of the 20th century.

So the startling basis for our Buddhism is that by simply chanting this phrase out loud, we are correctly reading the entire wisdom of Shakyamuni Buddha. What happens then is we connect with our enlightened wisdom lodged deep in our own lives and bring that wisdom out to give us the courage and compassion to create lives of tremendous vitality and optimism.

People chant Nam myoho renge kyo as a way of focusing their mind and strengthening their inner state. It's not a request to something outside ourselves, but a way of working with our own life.

You may also have seen something at the front of the room during chanting, which is called the Gohonzon. This means object of supreme worship. In addition to formulating the phrase Nam myoho renge kyo, Nichiren inscribed the Gohonzon in the form of a scroll. This also has Nam Myoho Renge Kyo written down the centre. Rather than being something to worship, it's better understood as a kind of mirror - something that represents the potential within our own lives. It's there to provide a focus to our chanting, rather than a statue of a god to be believed in or relied on externally.

Some people also use prayer beads, which you might have noticed. These are simply a traditional tool to help people stay focused while chanting. They don't hold any power in

themselves, and it's completely fine not to use them.

All of these things are there to support the practice, but none of them are required. The most important thing in Buddhism is always the person - their life, their effort, and their experience.

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I'm going to read two quotations now, one from Daisaku Ikeda, the late president of our worldwide movement of Soka Gakkai International, and one from Nichiren Daishonin, about whom I talked earlier.

Community and support

It is through our relationships with others that we develop and grow; learn from one another; help and support one another and cultivate genuine humanity. Therefore, we cannot enjoy happiness for ourselves alone. True happiness is happiness that is shared with others.

That quotation was from Daisaku Ikeda, the third president of the Soka Gakkai and the late president of Soka Gakkai International. He more than anyone else worked hard for over 70 years, first helping to establish this Buddhism in Japan and then bringing it as an international organisation, to the rest of the world. Members follow his writings and guidance as well as Nichiren Daishonin's letters to his followers which have been translated into many languages. Here is an example from one of Nichiren's letters to his followers, entitled "The Three Kinds of Treasure." It refers to the time when Nichiren was nearly beheaded by the ruling authorities who were scared of the revolutionary nature of his teaching and frightened that they would lose power and control over ordinary people. One of Nichiren's most loyal disciples had rushed to his side when he heard that his mentor was about to be executed, and here is Nichiren remembering the scene:

Over and over I recall the moment, unforgettable even now, when I was about to be beheaded and you accompanied me, holding the reins of my horse and weeping tears of grief.[7] Nor could I ever forget it in any lifetime to come. If you should fall

into hell for some grave offence, no matter how Shakyamuni Buddha might urge me to become a Buddha, I would refuse; I would rather go to hell with you. For if you and I should fall into hell together, we would find Shakyamuni Buddha and the Lotus Sutra there. It would be as if the moon were illuminating the darkness, as if cold water were pouring into hot, as if fire were melting ice, or as if the sun were dispelling the darkness.

Buddhism's emphasis on the importance of the human being is total – respect for ourselves and others, our behaviour as human beings. Tolerance, equality, care, connection. We chant to bring out our ability to live harmoniously with others and we recognise that every living being is connected to every other living being and the natural world.

What makes this Buddhist practice different, however, is that we believe that by chanting Nam myoho renge kyo to the Gohonzon we are able to tap in to our own incredible Buddha nature or Buddhahood. These qualities of compassion, wisdom and courage are powerful enough to change those tendencies in our life which habitually cause us to suffer. This is a beautiful and natural result of our daily chanting and it is available to everyone and it's how we unlock this extraordinary power.

In this context, meeting together and supporting each other is crucial. While a person can often feel isolated, particularly in our world today, we grow by interacting with others and SGI around the world is organised to help us support each other in our personal growth and encourage each other in our faith when we hit difficult times.

We don't have temples or churches and we meet once a month for a regular discussion meeting in the district where we live, usually in a member's house. This is where the beating heart of our movement for peace lies.

When people gather regularly to chant, reflect, and share experiences, they create an environment where effort is valued and acknowledged, suffering is shared and positive change is applauded.

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Introducing the experiences

I’m going to hand over to a small group of local members to show you how we function together in our monthly discussion meetings. It will also throw more light on what happens when you chant.

Moderator: Introduces the theme – “Community and support in SGI Buddhism.” (Steph)

Experience 1: One member (Dawn) gives experience of feeling lonely and meeting the practice and the difference it has made (5 minutes)

Experience 2: One member talks about the day’s struggles (Phil?)

Experience 3: One member gives their experience of how they used the practice to change something causing them to suffer, emphasising how fellow Buddhists have supported and helped them in their journey (7 minutes – Misato)

Questions

Throw open the discussion to the audience to ask questions. Then announce refreshments.