

This month we are studying excerpts from Volume 8 of The New Human Revolution, Chapter 4 'Raging Rapids'

[...] From January 15, a party that included Soka Gakkai director Minoru Suzumoto and four other leaders was set to visit seven cities in the Republic of South Korea [...] to meet with members there. At the time, there were more than 1,000 families practicing the Daishonin's Buddhism in South Korea. [...] Japanese members felt especially strong ties to their Korean comrades in faith. Some of them had been stationed in Korea during World War II, and there were many members of Korean descent living in Japan who were practicing in local organizations in various parts of the country. Soka Gakkai members in Japan considered the visit of Minoru Suzumoto and other Gakkai leaders to South Korea to be a fresh step in the advancement of kosen-rufu in Asia. This prospect excited them and gave them hope. Korea had been the victim of Japanese aggression in the past. The Japanese members therefore felt a responsibility to work for the happiness of the Korean people. [...]

Japan was the beneficiary of countless cultural treasures from the kingdoms of the Korean peninsula. In ancient times, rice cultivation and the creation of bronze and ironware were all transmitted to Japan from these Asian "neighbours." The same was true of civil engineering, irrigation technology, a system of writing, medicine, pharmacology, and the lunar calendar. Also, the cultivation of the Kyoto Basin*1 the ancient capital of Kyoto, which endured for some 1,000 years, owed much to Korean immigrants. The most significant treasure of all that Japan received from Korea, however, was Buddhism. Buddhism originated in India and passed through Central Asia into China and Korea, finally making its way to Japan, the terminal point of its eastern transmission, in the middle of the sixth century. [...]

Many centuries later, in the late 16th century, Japan invaded the Korean peninsula. Toyotomi Hideyoshi*2 engineered the attack, first sending a large force to Korea in 1592. [...] Then, in the second half of the 19th century, Japan began a new period of modernization, adopting the slogan "Enrich the Country and Strengthen the Military." Wanting to separate from Asia and ally itself with the Western powers, Japan initiated a program of invasion against its Asian neighbours. The basic idea was to become strong and then impose upon Asian countries the unfair treatment it had received from the West in the past.*3 Korea was to suffer the most under this Japanese policy. [...]

In August 1910, a treaty annexing Korea to Japan was signed. This shift from "protection" to "annexation" secured Japan's control of Korea. "Annexation" was nothing more than a euphemism for the destruction of Korea as an independent state and its establishment as a Japanese colony. [...] Thus began nearly four decades of Japan's appalling rule over Korea. [...]

Japan's colonial rule of Korea was a long, bleak chapter in history. [...]

But the hardship continued. At the end of World War II, Japan's presence in Korea was replaced by Soviet and U.S. forces moving into the country from the north and south. Korea was divided at the 38th parallel into two occupied zones under separate policies. Soon the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union surfaced and, against the fervent wishes of its own people, the division of Korea into north and south was secured. [...]

The Cold War tensions between East and West that arose after World War II brought about a fierce and savage conflict that resulted in bloodshed between a once united people. Though Korea had been liberated from Japanese rule, the spring of peace was still far away. [...]

Shoji Tajima was born in Ulsan, Kyongyongnam Province, South Korea, and moved to Japan with his family when he was six years old. His family had lost its farmland under the Japanese colonial administration and was forced to emigrate. His wife Mie was a second-generation Korean born in Tokyo whose family was originally from Taegu in Kyongsangbuk Province. They got married in 1944. When World War II ended the following year, Shoji's family decided to return to Korea. Shoji, however, was working at a medical university while studying to enter the affiliated medical school, so he remained in Japan. [...]

Many of the Koreans returning from Japan had a difficult time adjusting to life in Korea, and some were looked down upon as useless by their compatriots. Children born in Japan sometimes couldn't speak Korean, and they were called derogatory names and picked on by other Korean children. Mie wanted to be trusted in her new homeland, so she worked hard as a farmhand, despite her inexperience. She spent each day working in the fields from dawn until dusk, finally washing the mud from her feet under the twinkling stars. Still, she could barely manage to feed her family. Then the Korean War broke out. Mie went to visit her own family in Taegu and while she was there, the fighting drew near. This made her realize the possibility of her own death and that she had to be ready. During that time, her father passed away from illness. Her homeland was filled with pain and sorrow, and she began to wish she could return to Japan to be with her husband.

In 1952, Mie heard about a boat going to Japan. She made up her mind to go. [...]

The family thus began a new life in Yokohama. Shoji was running a small hotel, and things were going well. They soon gave birth to a daughter, but at one year of age she contracted tuberculosis and had to be hospitalized. It was at this time that Mie learned of the Daishonin's Buddhism, through a woman who helped her with the housework. She joined the Soka Gakkai in the hope that her daughter would be cured. The year was 1954. [...]

When her family's financial difficulties hit rock bottom, Mie received some encouragement from fellow Soka Gakkai members. This made her deeply aware of her personal karma and she decided to turn it around through faith. Shoji, too, motivated by their dire circumstances, began to practice sincerely. The couple started making regular visits to Soka Gakkai Headquarters to chant daimoku. [...]

They had nothing to rely on but their faith. They acutely understood that they had no choice but to trudge through each day with patience and fortitude. At one point, they were able to receive guidance from Josei Toda. Inspired by his strong conviction in faith, they vowed to change their karma and began to actively share the Daishonin's Buddhism with others. Every day they would leave the house at the crack of dawn, pulling the heavy cart to the unemployment office. After setting up, Shoji would go off to work as a manual laborer. They spent their evenings together, joyfully participating in Gakkai activities. unfair attitudes directed at Korean residents by Japanese society. But they found in the Soka Gakkai a realm of warm acceptance. They were always moved by The New Human Revolution the kind encouragement and support of their fellow members, who treated them better than family. Shoji eventually started a trading company with a friend and then went into business on his own. He later became active in finance and before long was able to lift his family completely out of poverty. "This Buddhism is amazing!"

he thought. "It will absolutely bring happiness to anyone. I must do whatever I can to share this wonderful faith with my compatriots in South Korea!" Firmly determined to fulfill that desire, the Tajimas took a trip to their homeland in the autumn of 1959 and began to talk to friends and relatives about Buddhism. While they were there, Mie's mother started practicing. Shoji's parents and Mie's sister-in-law later followed suit. Then in 1961, Mie was appointed women's division leader of Waseda Chapter in Tokyo. During the interview for the position, she said to Shin'ichi Yamamoto with tears in her eyes, "I don't have the ability to fulfill the huge responsibility of being a women's division chapter leader." But Shin'ichi replied reassuringly, "You'll do just fine! I'll support you. Just be confident and do your best!" President Shin'ichi Yamamoto's words gave Mie Tajima great courage. Two years later, she became a general chapter women's division leader, and her husband Shoji was appointed vice chapter chief. They began visiting South Korea regularly, making trips to Ulsan, Taegu, and Pusan to share Buddhism with their friends. [...]

Choi Jeong Yeol was a young man in his 30s who ran a dyeing business. He lived in Taegu, Kyongsangbuk Province, the third largest city in South Korea. He had joined the Soka Gakkai about two years earlier and was very active, playing a central role among the members in Taegu. When Choi read in the newspapers about the new policies the government had adopted toward the Soka Gakkai, he knew that he had to do something. Wanting his country to have a correct understanding of the Soka Gakkai, he wrote up a report explaining just what kind of religious group it was, and sent it to the Ministry of Home Affairs. After about 10 days, in early February, Choi received a letter sent by contents-certified mail dated January 31. It was an official reply from the minister of home affairs that read: "I hereby inform you that the Soka Gakkai to which you belong is a Japanese imperialist religion with strong leanings toward exclusionism and ultranationalism. Therefore, at present, The New Human Revolution the government has deemed the Soka Gakkai an anti-national, anti Korean organization. "Consequently, any meetings, correspondence, or announcements with the aim of propagation, as well as the import of publications that support such activities, and their distribution, acquisition, or perusal, are all in violation of national policy. I ask that you fulfill your patriotic duty and cooperate with the government in this matter." [...]

He chanted daimoku, thinking about what he should do next. As he chanted, he realized that this was the appearance of the three obstacles and four devils that function to impede the progress of kosen-rufu, just as Buddhism taught. A fierce determination to win this struggle thus began to surge inside his heart. Soon after Choi had received the government's official response, he and six or seven other core members of the Taegu region met in one of their homes. Choi began by reading the letter to everyone. [...]

Choi started to speak, as if to encourage himself: "This document labels the Soka Gakkai as an anti-Korean, unpatriotic organization. It outlaws any meeting or correspondence for purposes of propagation, as well as any attempt to import, distribute, or obtain Soka Gakkai publications that may promote our beliefs. But the South Korean constitution guarantees the freedom of religion. We haven't done anything to violate the law, have we? I believe that this problem has arisen simply from our government's mistaken perceptions of the Soka Gakkai. We really have nothing to be afraid of."

Choi's voice grew stronger as he spoke. "If we look at this situation in light of the Gosho, we are clearly being confronted by the three obstacles and four devils that try to prevent people from practicing. In other words, our faith is being tested. Given the circumstances, we must of course

take into consideration the social implications of our actions. But I also feel that now is the time for us to speak out boldly on behalf of the Daishonin's Buddhism and the Soka Gakkai, without retreating a single step. What will happen if we allow ourselves to be defeated by this obstacle and let the flame of our faith die out? We will never be able to show our compatriots, who have already suffered terribly, the way to genuine happiness. I'm determined to stand up and carry out my faith until the very end, no matter what happens. Please stand up with me! Let's vow to allow no one to stop practicing and to do everything we can to support our fellow members and give them courage."

The members were all still relatively new in their faith. But as they listened to Choi's sincere plea, their eyes gradually began to shine with resolve. [...]

After careful deliberation, Choi met with the central members in Taegu and shared his thoughts: "The response from the Ministry of Home Affairs is presented as a request for cooperation with the government's policies, but clearly its aim is to prohibit the Soka Gakkai's activities. If we sit back and allow this to happen, the constitutional principle of religious freedom will be compromised, and we will be robbed of one of our basic rights as citizens of this country. Since the letter is a governmental order, however, I am thinking of demanding that it be retracted." In the latter part of February, Choi sent a petition to the home affairs minister asking him to revoke the ministry's request on the grounds that it was in violation of the constitution. At the beginning of March, the minister rejected Choi's petition. Choi then took his case to the Seoul High Court. [...]

Choi was under serious pressure, both direct and indirect, and the situation eventually worsened to the point that he was unable to keep his dyeing business afloat. Nevertheless, the flame of his faith continued to burn brightly. He also received tremendous support from his brother-in-law and other Gakkai members. [...]

A year later, in February 1965, the Seoul High Court handed down its verdict [...] in Choi's favor. [...]

The Supreme Court reached a verdict in October of the following year, 1966, overturning the decision of the Seoul High Court. The verdict stated that Choi's case was based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the letter from the Ministry of Home Affairs. Legally, the letter was no more than a "notification of opinion," and not an administrative measure by the governmental authority. The court therefore deemed Choi's demand that the government rescind its order unnecessary and dismissed his claim altogether. In other words, the ministry's reply was merely a statement of the government's opinion of Nichiren Shoshu and the Soka Gakkai, and not an act of executive power against religion. [...]

Still, there was no change in the attitude that the Soka Gakkai was acting against the interests of South Korea and its people, nor did the government alter its line that the organization's religious activities were a violation of national policy. Even if the members could hold activities, it would have been very difficult for Soka Gakkai Headquarters in Japan to The New Human Revolution send leaders to the country to encourage the members there. Under the circumstances, the only alternative for the South Korean members was to band together and uphold the torch of faith on their own. There was still no sign of an end to their winter of hardship. [...]

Nothing can stop strong determination. Filled with love for their country, these courageous members fought onward, never giving in to frustration or despair. It is said that the tree with the deepest roots withstands the drought. The passionate commitment of the South Korean

members to bring happiness to their compatriots triumphed over their harsh circumstances, and gradually the circle of members in South Korea grew. By 1969, there were some 30,000 member households, and flowers of benefit and joy blossomed across the land. [...]

A strong determination can move the universe. Therefore, no matter how difficult the social circumstances may be, they can definitely change. Soka Gakkai members in South Korea firmly believed that the day would come when they could hold their heads high in society and freely carry out their activities, in both name and reality. Each member worked hard at becoming a model citizen and continued steadily to pursue his or her faith. [...]

Nichiren Daishonin writes: "A person of wisdom is not one who practices Buddhism apart from worldly affairs but, rather, one who thoroughly understands the principles by which the world is governed" (WND, 1121 [MW-6, 142]). In other words, to practice Buddhism means to value society; it means to contribute to and work actively for society's benefit. One who does so is a "person of wisdom." The members in South Korea were determined to demonstrate the truth and validity of Nichiren Buddhism and the Soka Gakkai. If they allowed misunderstanding to pass unchallenged, the truth would be lost. Failing to correct mistaken ideas spells the death of truth and justice. "Everything depends on how great a difference we can make in society," the members thought. "That is how we can show the integrity of the Soka Gakkai." With this in mind, members all over the country began voluntarily working for the betterment of their communities. [...]

Based on Buddhist humanism, these practical, grass-roots endeavors gained trust for the organization in society. In December 1979, it was highly praised for contributing to an increase in food production and crop damage prevention, and the members received a commendation from the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. This was the first time for the group to be honored by South Korea. In January 1984, South Korean president Chun Doo Hwan recognized the organization for its contributions to boosting the income of farming and fishing communities. And in June 1996, the director of the Office of Environmental Control hailed the group for its work in the cause of environmental protection. It also received numerous citations from regional government agencies across the nation. All of this was proof that the Korean Buddhist Association had become an "organization of hope" indispensable to society. The members' tenacious efforts had broken through the thick wall of misunderstanding that had once prevailed. [...]

*1 Kyoto Basin: Located in southern Kyoto Prefecture, central Honshu, Japan's main island. At the basin's north end lays the city of Kyoto.

*2 Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–98): Warlord who in 1590 completed the work of national reunification.

*3 In the 1850s and 60s Japan was forced into a number of so-called unequal treaties with the Western powers that granted the West a number of privileges, including extraterritoriality, and deprived Japan of tariff autonomy.