The conversation turned to the lectures on Nichiren’s writings that Shin’ichi had given in his youth in Saitama’s Kawagoe District of Shiki Chapter. One leader asked: “The members who participated say that they vividly recall the lectures and are still inspired by them today, and that your lectures always brimmed with a lionlike conviction. What was your attitude in giving these lectures?”

Shin’ichi replied without a moment’s hesitation: “I may have seemed calm and composed, but I approached those lectures with an absolute determination to give my all and make them a success.

“At that time, Shiki Chapter was quite small and falling behind most Tokyo chapters in terms of activities. President Toda decided to create a new groundswell for kosen-rufu from Saitama by rousing one of the districts, and he assigned me to give lectures at that district on his behalf. I was just 23 years old.”

Shin’ichi Yamamoto first went to Kawagoe District to lecture on Nichiren Daishonin’s writings on September 25, 1951, about five months after Josei Toda was inaugurated as the second president of the Soka Gakkai.

For the next 18 months or so, Shin’ichi continued to visit Kawagoe, where he lectured on such writings as “The Treatment of Illness,” “Letter from Sado,” “Reply to the Lay Nun Nichigon,” “On

Fondly reflecting on that time, Shin’ichi said: “During his inauguration ceremony, President Toda announced his lifetime goal of achieving a Soka Gakkai membership of 750,000 households. He also appointed a group of lecturers who would be the pivot of a new major study movement, and I was one of those appointed.

“Though leaders at that time were delighted at President Toda’s inauguration and were actively engaged in sharing Buddhism with others, they still lacked the wholehearted commitment to truly accomplish his goal and work purposefully alongside him to lay the foundations for kosen-rufu.

“That year, as the end of August approached, President Toda said to me: ‘At this rate, it will take decades or centuries to achieve a membership of 750,000 households. Saitama in particular is lagging behind. I want you to give a study lecture in Kawagoe District and, through studying the Daishonin’s writings, awaken the members to their mission of carrying out kosen-rufu so that they can take action on their own initiative. Building chapters starts with reinforcing the districts.’ ”

At that time, in 1951, a single chapter consisted of anywhere from a handful to more than a dozen districts, with the district serving as the frontline unit of the organization. While there were some larger districts that had been divided into several groups, it was only in January 1952 that the chapter, district, group and unit structure was formally put in place.

Mr. Toda then said to Shin’ichi: “Even from the small unit of the district, the flame of faith can burn and spread throughout the entire Soka Gakkai. If you can build a model district in Kawagoe, Saitama, it will be a source of inspiration and an energizing force for Tokyo.”

Looking intently at Shin’ichi Yamamoto, Josei Toda said: “In addition to supporting Kawagoe District, I would like to have you take on many other critical responsibilities in activities. You’re going to be very busy from now on, but Saitama is important. So please put your all into solidifying Kawagoe District.

“Help the members there deepen their faith and grow as individuals through studying Nichiren Daishonin’s writings together with them. The only way to strengthen the organization is to foster capable people. Such efforts are not glamorous, but they are a crucial key to reaching the membership goal of 750,000 households. Can you do it?”
Shin’ichi replied without the slightest hesitation: “Yes! I will direct all my energies to the development of Kawagoe District!” Mr. Toda nodded, looking pleased. Shin’ichi felt that an extremely important responsibility for realizing his mentor’s vision rested with him.

“These study lectures,” he thought, “are a struggle to open the way to realizing my mentor’s cherished wish! If I can’t succeed in this, President Toda’s vision for kosen-rufu will be set back from the start. As his disciple, I cannot allow that to happen!”

In between work and Soka Gakkai activities, Shin’ichi made time to study the writings that he would be lecturing on. He read them dozens of times, thoroughly studying any passages he didn’t understand and deeply contemplating their meaning.

When he thought about the fact that he was going to give a lecture on behalf of President Toda, his nerves ran high, spurring him to study and chant Nam-myoho-reng-kyo even more intensely.

September 25, 1951, was the date of the first study lecture for Kawagoe District. That evening at the office of Daito Commerce—the company founded by Mr. Toda—as Shin’ichi was getting ready to leave, Mr. Toda said to him: “Each lecture is decisive. Thinking to yourself that you may not have another chance to go to Kawagoe again, treasure each opportunity as a unique encounter.

“Lectures on Nichiren’s writings should be serious, full of conviction, and clear and logical. Your challenge is whether or not you can awaken in your listeners the joy of having encountered Nichiren Buddhism and of being able to dedicate their lives to kosen-rufu.”

Josei Toda briefly explained to Shin’ichi the essence of giving study lectures: “Lectures on Nichiren Daishonin’s writings should be profound. By ‘profound’ I don’t mean using difficult terms and complex reasoning. Rather, your lectures need to be easy to understand, giving your listeners a fresh eye-opening perspective, helping them grasp the significance of the writing as well as deepening their conviction in faith.
“In other words, a truly profound lecture is one that deepens the listeners’ understanding and awakens them to their mission for kosen-rufu. Lecture in such a way that in a year or two, Kawagoe District will have grown into the size of a chapter.”

With Toda’s guidance in mind, Shin’ichi spiritedly set out into the light rain to give his lecture. He departed from Daito Commerce in Ichigaya and took the train to Ikebukuro Station, where he transferred to the Tobu Tojo Line for Kawagoe. After the train left Narimasu Station, though night was falling, he could faintly make out the farming fields of Saitama Prefecture through the window.

Shin’ichi continued chanting intensely in his heart, as if to permeate the land with daimoku as he called for the Bodhisattvas of the Earth to emerge from Saitama.

About 50 minutes after leaving Ikebukuro, he arrived at Kawagoe Station. Kawagoe, which once flourished as a castle town, was known as “Little Edo.” It had a calm and serene atmosphere.

The home where the lecture would be held was only a minute or two by foot from the station. Shin’ichi arrived there just before 7 p.m., greeting those waiting with a bright “Good evening!”

Eight or nine members had gathered for the lecture, but only one replied with a small voice. Everyone looked at Shin’ichi dubiously. Most of them did not know him, and they couldn’t believe that he was the lecturer because he was so young. But after Shin’ichi sat in front of the Gohonzon and chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo three times in a strong, confident voice, they could feel the powerful determination he exuded and naturally straightened up a little.

The Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) once wrote, “The battlefield is here; here the fight will be fought and here I shall triumph!”

At 7 p.m., Shin’ichi Yamamoto began his lecture by introducing himself: “I am Shin’ichi Yamamoto, and I have been appointed to deliver lectures on Nichiren Daishonin’s writings here in Kawagoe District on behalf of President Toda.

“I will give my all to delivering these lectures in the hope of conveying to you the great spirit of President Toda, who has read the Daishonin’s writings with his life and is taking leadership in kosen-rufu.

“Each participant will receive completion certificates signed by President Toda after completing the lectures. “I know I am young but, through Buddhist study, I am determined to build the foundation for great growth and development here in Kawagoe together with all of you.” So saying, he bowed his head deeply. “Because of time limitations, in these lectures I will focus on
selected key passages from each writing. After each lecture, I would like to devote whatever time is left to questions, so please ask me about anything you don’t understand.”

This was before the publication of the Soka Gakkai edition of the Nichiren Daishonin Gosho Zenshu (Collected Writings of Nichiren Daishonin), so the passages they would be studying had been published in the monthly study magazine, Daibyakurenge. However, some of them were those published several months before, so a few of the participants had no printed materials in hand.

Participants in the lecture series had been specially selected, but when reading aloud, many had difficulty with the old Japanese pronunciations of the characters. When Shin’ichi asked them about the meaning of various terms, it was clear that they lacked a basic knowledge of Buddhist study, and in their responses, he could sense no enthusiasm for sharing Buddhism with others. Most of them said they had only joined the Soka Gakkai, because they had been told that chanting would bring them benefit.

They were all struggling with something, whether it was financial, health or other problems. Most of them were more concerned with where their next meal was coming from than with lofty ideals. The Soka Gakkai was an organization of such ordinary citizens who had stood up to take action for the great ideal of kosen-rufu, while struggling with the reality of their daily lives. This was the strength of the grassroots Soka Gakkai organization.

In his first lecture at Kawagoe District, Shin’ichi Yamamoto lectured on passages from four writings, including “Letter from Sado” and “On Persecutions Befalling the Sage.”

In “Letter from Sado,” Nichiren Daishonin writes: “They give their lives for shallow, worldly matters but rarely for the Buddha’s precious teachings. Small wonder they do not attain Buddhahood” (WND-1, 301).

Commenting on this passage, Shin’ichi said: “Nichiren explains that many people will give their lives for trivial
worldly things, but are not willing to give their lives for Buddhism. That’s what prevents them from attaining Buddhahood. In other words, what matters is how we use our precious lives. The Daishonin is encouraging us to use our lives for Buddhism, for kosen-rufu.

“Giving our lives for Buddhism doesn’t mean dying for Buddhism. Giving our lives for Buddhism means making kosen-rufu our purpose in life, and working for and dedicating ourselves to Buddhism as long as we live. In so doing, we can transform our life condition, carry out our human revolution and attain Buddhahood in this lifetime, enabling us to lead happy lives of unsurpassed fulfillment that overflow with joy.

“In the spirit of ‘not begrudging one’s life’ that we find in the Lotus Sutra, there is no sense of self-sacrifice. It means possessing a life state in which we brim with courage and determination, fear no hardship and in which just being alive is a sheer joy. This is the path of fulfilling our highest potential, by breaking free from the shell of our lesser self that is dominated by egoism and bringing forth our greater self that is in accord with the supreme teaching of Buddhism. Those who are prepared for death are strong. In the same way, when we decide to dedicate our lives to kosen-rufu, we can realize our full potential and allow our true brilliance to shine forth.

“We are all originally Bodhisattvas of the Earth who were born to carry out the mission of kosen-rufu. That’s why we are able to bring forth our true capability when we energetically engage in sharing the Mystic Law with others.”

Notes: