Shin’ichi Yamamoto strove wherever possible to open the floor for questions. This was to ensure that the meetings weren’t always just one-sided affairs with the leaders doing all the talking. He would then give detailed guidance in response to the members’ actual problems and concerns.

In such exchanges, the character and substance of the person answering are truly put to the test. If the leader isn’t trusted by the participants or has an authoritarian air, people won’t even want to raise their hands. The unpredictability of the questions also demands that the leader study Nichiren Daishonin’s teachings thoroughly and be able to give appropriate guidance in response to any question.

Equally essential is the ability to provide clear answers in a limited amount of time. If the leader cannot give a clear response to every question asked, instead trying to palm people off with vague, unsatisfactory answers, it will only sow distrust in their hearts.

Of course, that doesn’t mean that leaders have to have all the answers. It’s only natural that there will be things that they don’t know. But in those cases, it is important that they later consult with an appropriate person about it or, if it’s a study point, go research it and then get back to the questioner and sincerely try to answer the question.

There may be questions that aren’t to the point. When fielding such a question, a leader should try to help clarify and organize the questioner’s points, aiming to identify exactly what he or she is trying to say and wishes to know.

There may also, on occasion, be someone who asks questions specifically designed to embarrass the leader or put him or her on the spot. Or someone who asks questions out of the desire to criticize and attack the Soka Gakkai and the Daishonin’s Buddhism. Such situations sometimes call for the leader to boldly refute the questioner’s claims.

Another crucial challenge of a question-and-answer session is to ensure that one’s answers not only satisfy those who ask questions but are also understood and accepted by everyone gathered, serving to inspire everyone to stand up in faith. Leading a question-and-answer session therefore requires qualities like strong conviction in the power of faith; clear, logical thinking; and the flexibility to respond to all sorts of situations.

Leaders must never forget that if they do nothing but issue activity directives or give one-sided guidance, they will end up alienating people.

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Question-and-answer sessions have been a tradition in the Soka Gakkai since the time of the first president, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi. In his day, Makiguchi
invariably led discussion meetings and answered questions from guests and members.

Josei Toda, his successor, also devoted as much time as possible to fielding questions from the audience at meetings or while giving lectures. He often remarked that the Buddhist sutras—except for the Lotus Sutra’s “Expedient Means” chapter, which is termed an “unsolicited and spontaneous teaching”—are all essentially records of question-and-answer sessions.

Mr. Toda drew a parallel between the four kinds of people present in the assemblies where the Buddha preached and the participants of Soka Gakkai question-and-answer sessions, using a question about illness to make his point:

The first kind of people present are those who ask the Buddha to expound the teaching. They are the people at Soka Gakkai question-and-answer sessions who ask questions on behalf of everyone. The second kind are those who praise the Buddha’s teaching. They correspond to people who, after hearing guidance in response to a question and even certain in the knowledge that they too can recover from illness through faith. The fourth kind are those who attain no immediate benefit but nevertheless form a bond with the Buddha’s teaching and benefit from it at a later time. These are like people who, after hearing guidance at a question-and-answer session, decide to take faith and to deepen their understanding of Buddhism.

Of these four kinds of people, Mr. Toda stressed that the first—those who ask questions—play the most important role. To ask a question in front of a large number of people requires courage and a strong seeking spirit. A question-and-answer session cannot proceed, nor can guidance be given in response to people’s questions, unless someone speaks up and asks. That is why Mr. Toda was unstinting in his praise and appreciation of those who asked questions. Whenever someone asked a pertinent question of interest to everyone or a question that provided an opportunity to explain a profound Buddhist principle, he would say: “That’s a very good question! Thank you!”

Josei Toda was a virtuoso of the question-and-answer session, a master of the discussion meeting. He would explain difficult Buddhist concepts using simple, everyday examples. He would inject humor and wit into his guidance, evoking laughter from his audience and opening their hearts, so that the precious wisdom of his words would penetrate their lives.

Shin’ichi Yamamoto also highly valued such question-and-answer sessions, regarding them as a wonderful Soka Gakkai tradition. Question-and-answer sessions consist of dialogue, and dialogue produces understanding, which fuels dynamic faith and inspires fresh progress.