

## What Is Love? Discussions on Youth

*This is the seventh installment of a series of discussions on youth between SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai high school division chiefs Hidenobu Kimura (young men's chief) and Kazue Igeta (young women's chief), representing the members of the high school division. In this installment, Kansai High School Division Young Women's Chief Miki Katanosaka joins the discussion.*

**Kimura:** Along with having questions about friendship, many students are asking about love and relationships.

**Igeta:** The other day, one young women's high school division member asked: "My mother forbids me from dating anyone. Is it really best to avoid relationships while I'm in high school?"

**Ikeda:** Your high school years coincide with adolescence. It's as natural to feel attracted to, be interested in, and fall in love with members of the opposite sex during your youth as it is for flowers to bloom in the spring or snow to fall in winter. This is just one of many phases you'll go through. Like a brilliant new sun rising at dawn, adolescence marks your entry into a new stage of life.

The agonies of love, too, are many and varied. Each person has his or her own character and personality, background and circumstances. So there is no set rule that applies equally to everyone. In addition, everyone is perfectly free to fall in love or be attracted to someone. Whom a person dates is also a matter of personal choice. Essentially, no one has any right to meddle in your private affairs.

As one who has many years of experience, however, I want to stress at the outset how important it is not to lose sight of pursuing your personal development.

The true purpose of your studies and participation in club or team activities is to build a foundation for a strong self. Your problems, too — be they a lack of self-confidence or a strained relationship with a friend — enable you to construct a solid core.

The same can be said about love. It should be a force that helps you expand your life and bring forth your innate potential with fresh and dynamic vitality. That is the ideal but, as the saying "love is blind" illustrates, people often lose all objectivity when they fall in love.

If the relationship you're in is causing your parents to worry or making you neglect your studies or engage in destructive behavior, then you and the person you're seeing are only being a negative influence and hindrance to each other. Neither of you will be happy if you both end up hurting each other.

I'm sure the mother of the student you mentioned earlier had such concerns. This is the heart of a parent, and it is all the more so when it comes to parents of daughters.

**Igeta:** The bottom line, then, is that we don't lose sight of the fundamental goal of developing truly valuable and meaningful lives.

**Katanosaka:** One student told me: "Having a crush on someone makes each day so much more exciting. I think liking someone is wonderful, and if that person inspires you to grow, it's even better."

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**Ikeda:** The question is: Does that person inspire you to work harder at your studies or distract you from them? Does his or her presence make you more determined to devote greater energies to school activities, be a better friend, a more thoughtful son or daughter? Does he or she inspire you to realize your future goals and work to achieve them? Or is that person your central focus, overshadowing all else — your school activities, your friends and family and even your goals?

If you are neglecting the things you should be doing, forgetting your purpose in life because of the relationship you're in, then you're on the wrong path. A healthy relationship is one in which two people encourage each other to reach their respective goals while sharing each other's hopes and dreams. A relationship should be a source of inspiration, invigoration and hope.

Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), one of the greatest poets of the West, had as his source of inspiration a young woman named Beatrice, whom he loved from afar since childhood. One day, after years spent apart, the 18-year-old Dante ran into her again on the street. He later composed a poem about his joy at that encounter, titled “Revitalization.” In his struggle to convey his feelings for the young woman, he created a new poetic form. Without a doubt, Beatrice unlocked Dante's artistic potential.

She would remain, however, an unrequited love, for she married another man and then died at an early age. But Dante never ceased loving her. Ultimately, that love enabled him to strengthen, elevate and deepen the capacity of his heart into something truly noble and sublime. In his masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*, Dante depicts Beatrice as a gentle, benevolent being who guides him to Heaven.

Of course, Dante lived in a different age and perhaps a different country from you. But I think there are many things to be learned from this great poet who stayed true to his feelings, whether they were reciprocated or not, and transformed them into his guiding inspiration in life. I truly believe that love must be a positive impetus for our lives, the driving force that rouses us to live courageously.

**Katanosaka:** One high school student sent a letter to *Koko Shimpo* [the high school division newspaper in Japan] in which she wrote: “There's an older student in a class above me that I like and respect very much. One of my girlfriends told me I should stick to respect and forget about love. I don't agree with her, but I don't know what I should do.”

**Ikeda:** There is no set answer. There are as many views on love as there are people! So I don't think we can find any one blanket policy on love that will win everyone's consensus. Love is a complex matter that reflects each person's attitude and philosophy toward life. That is why I believe people shouldn't get involved in relationships lightly. It is like the Japanese saying, “Do not treat love like a game.”

Nevertheless, I understand how this student feels, not being satisfied with merely respecting the young man on whom she has a crush. If love could be explained logically, all the agonizing it causes would vanish from the world. Nonetheless, the bottom line is that, without respect, no relationship will last for very long nor can two people bring out the best in each other.

The late Chinese premier Zhou Enlai and his wife, Madame Deng Yingchao, were admired far and wide as a model couple. Though sadly both have now died, they always treated my wife and me warmly.

When her husband died, Madame Deng placed the words “Zhou Enlai, comrade-in-arms” next to his coffin. “Comrade-in-arms” — what profound feelings were infused in this term. It speaks volumes about their mutual commitment, the respect they had for each

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other as comrades, and their shared struggle side by side for the realization of a great goal. Perhaps their example will offer those of you who are contemplating love something to think about.

Rather than becoming so love-struck that you create a world where only the two of you exist, it is much healthier to learn from those aspects of your partner that you respect and admire and continue to make efforts to improve and develop yourself. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the author of *The Little Prince*, once wrote, “Love is not two people gazing at each other, but two people looking ahead together in the same direction.”<sup>1</sup> It follows then that relationships last longer when both partners share similar values and beliefs.

Men, too, must respect women as individuals. Doing so is a sign of maturity.

I once heard that a female student from a neighboring Asian country remarked: “Japanese men merely regard women as playthings. They lack the maturity to respect women as human beings.”

**Kimura:** On television and in magazines, love is frequently depicted as the ultimate goal in life or, to the other extreme, as some kind of game or casual diversion. The media treats women as sex objects — products to be packaged and sold. And they single out the most extreme stories to sensationalize. For example, there are never articles on such topics as “High School Girls Study Hard,” but the mass media goes crazy for a story like “High School Girls Patronize Telephone-Dating Clubs!”

**Katanosaka:** Swayed by the media and peer pressure, many young people seem to be in a hurry to start dating. They must feel that they are missing out if they don’t have a boyfriend or girlfriend when everyone else around them does.

**Ikeda:** There’s no need to be influenced by such superficial trends. Please don’t get caught up in doing something just because everyone else is.

The behavior of the mass media and other negative influences that prey on youth reflects a warped adult society that exploits young people for profit without a thought for young people’s happiness.

It is so important that you see these things for what they are and not be deceived by them. Your youth is precious. Each of you is valuable beyond measure. It is foolish to become a puppet of media manipulation. I hope you will resolutely follow your own path in life.

Furthermore, please don’t succumb to the view that love is the be-all and end-all, deluding yourself that as long as you are in love, nothing else matters. Nor, I hope, will you buy into the misguided notion that sinking ever deeper into a painful and destructive relationship is somehow cool.

When asked what was most important in this world, a well-known philosopher responded that it is “normality, common sense and reason.”

There is a time for everything in life — a time to be young, a time to enter the adult world, a time to get married and so on. Moving forward step by step into each different phase accords with reason.

All too often, when a relationship ends, the great passion it once inspired seems nothing more than an illusion. The things you learn through studying, on the other hand, are much more permanent. It is important, therefore, that you never extinguish the flame of your intellectual curiosity.

Please don’t live without direction but, rather, pursue a life of meaning and purpose. Just as a house will be uninhabitable if its foundations are laid carelessly, or as certain types of rice won’t cook properly if they haven’t been washed, it’s clear what kind of results you

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can expect if you take shortcuts or neglect to make proper efforts. In that respect, it is certainly not wise to try to act like an adult before you can properly look after yourself.

The most important thing is for you to do your very best in the endeavors you have to concentrate on now. Through such efforts, you will grow into individuals who have truly wonderful futures ahead of you. I hope you will not sell yourselves short and stifle your vast and limitless potential before it even has a chance to bloom. Far too many people nip their brilliant promise in the bud because of their blind pursuit of love.

**Igeta:** Some people start out with a clear idea of what they want to do in the future, the kind of work they want to pursue, but then get swept away by the excitement of love. Finally, when they come to their senses, they realize they've missed their chance to achieve their goal and are totally lost as to what to do.

**Ikeda:** Much of daily life tends to be ordinary and unexciting. Making steady efforts day to day can be trying. It's not always going to be fun. But, when you fall in love, life seems filled with drama and excitement; you feel like the leading character in a novel.

If you lose yourself in love just because you're bored, though, and consequently veer from the path you should be following, then love is nothing more than escapism. What you are doing is retreating into a dream world, believing that what is only an illusion is actually real.

If you try to use love as an escape, the euphoria is unlikely to last for long. If anything, you may only find yourself with even more problems — along with a great deal of pain and sadness. However much you may try, you can never run away from yourself. If you remain weak, suffering will follow you wherever you go. You will never find happiness if you don't change yourself from within.

Happiness is not something that someone else, like a lover, can give to you. You have to achieve it for yourself. And the only way to do so is by developing your character and capacity as a human being; by fully maximizing your potential. If you sacrifice your growth and talent for love, you will absolutely not find happiness. True happiness is obtained through fully realizing your potential.

While in your teens, your scope of experience is still quite limited, and you may not yet have found which area your talents are best suited. It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that nothing could be more desirable than love. But there is more to life than love. Particularly in the case of women, I feel, real happiness is determined after they enter their 40s and onward.

I also want to add that to embark on a relationship as an escape is extremely disrespectful to both your partner and yourself.

In any event, the point is not to be in a hurry. You are young. The important thing now is to work hard at developing yourself into a truly wonderful human being.

Each of you has a precious mission that only you can fulfill. Suffering people around the world are waiting for your brave endeavors. To neglect your mission and seek only personal pleasure is a sign of selfishness. It is impossible for an egotistic, self-centered individual to truly love another person.

On the other hand, if you genuinely love someone, then through your relationship with him or her, you can develop into a person whose love extends to all humanity. Such a relationship serves to strengthen, elevate and enrich the inner realm of your life. Ultimately, the relationships you form are a reflection of your own state of life.

The same is true of friendship. Only to the extent that you polish yourself now can you hope to develop wonderful bonds of the heart in the future.

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**Katanosaka:** Some members are concerned about friends who are only hurting themselves by living for momentary thrills. There is a growing attitude among young people that as long as two people like each other, anything goes.

**Kimura:** One student told me that she thinks boys are selfish and deceitful. The fact is that some boys are only out to use girls. They have to be on their guard and cultivate their powers of wisdom and judgment so that they can see through such people.

**Igeta:** Although this doesn't apply to all cases, some people worry when they see female high school students dating older men, like college students; they are concerned that such relationships are not in the young women's best interests. And indeed, all too often such relationships do end up with the young women being hurt mentally and, perhaps, even physically.

**Ikeda:** Many young women prove extremely vulnerable to the insistent advances of the opposite sex. They act as though stunned and lose their ability to make calm, rational decisions. It is precisely for this reason that young women must develop inner strength and self-respect. Since they are the ones who most often get hurt, they have every right to assert their dignity and look after their welfare. And if the young man in question does not respect this right, then he isn't worth being with.

With some people, however, once they have gotten into a relationship, they have a hard time saying "no" to the other person for fear of losing them. In that case love is like riding in a car with no brakes. Sometimes, even if you want to get out, you can't; even if you regret having gotten in, the car won't stop. Many times, people get involved in a relationship thinking they are free and independent, but at some point find they have become captive to the relationship.

Each of you is infinitely precious. Therefore, I hope you will treat yourself with utmost respect. Please don't follow a path that will cause you suffering but take the road that is best for your well-being.

The truth is, ideal love is fostered only between two sincere, mature and independent people. It is essential, therefore, that you work on polishing yourself first.

**Katanosaka:** In a relationship, it sometimes happens that one person tries to become whatever, or do whatever, the other wants in order to avoid losing him or her.

**Ikeda:** It is demeaning to be constantly seeking your partner's approval. Such a relationship is bereft of real caring, depth or even love. If you find yourself in a relationship where you are not treated the way your heart says you should be, I hope you will have the courage and dignity to decide that you are better off risking the scorn of your partner than enduring an unhappy relationship.

Real love is not two people clinging to each other; it can only be fostered between two strong people secure in their individuality. A shallow person will have only shallow relationships. If you want to experience real love, it is important to first sincerely develop a strong self-identity.

True love is not about doing whatever the other person wants you to do or pretending you are something you're not. If someone genuinely loves you, he or she will not force you to do anything against your will nor embroil you in some dangerous activity.

Furthermore, I personally want to see men being extremely courteous and caring toward women. Men should always remember to respect women, doing their utmost to support them. Rather than depending on women like children, men should become strong enough,

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compassionate enough and adult enough to care about their partners' lifelong happiness. This is the quality men must strive to cultivate; it is also an expression of true love.

To the young men I say: Please think when the time comes for you to become a parent and have a daughter of your own. If she were to fall in love, how would you like to see her treated? If you can't imagine this kind of scenario, then you are not yet qualified for love.

As for those people who are concerned about their friends' well-being, the best thing is to chant daimoku and be there for them. I think it's important for everyone to have at least one person with whom they can talk about anything. In matters concerning love, it is to your benefit to accept that you are not necessarily the best judge of your situation and have the wisdom to turn to others for their objective opinions and advice.

It's fine to keep some things to yourself, but please remember that sometimes secrets may hurt you. I am especially concerned about those who have closed themselves off from their friends.

No matter how much you may appear to be enjoying yourself now, or how serious you think you are about the relationship, if you allow your love life to consume all your time and energy to the detriment of your growth, then you're just playing a game. And if you're always playing games, then your life will be just that, a game.

Regardless of how large a number is, if multiplied by zero, it will inevitably come to zero. To have a relationship that wipes out the value in your life is truly sad.

**Kimura:** There are some people who are plunged into deep despair and lose all meaning in life when a relationship ends or their hearts are broken. Some take the rejection as a personal negation of everything they stand for and feel as if they have no value or worth left as a human being.

**Ikeda:** Many people can probably relate to such feelings. But you're only letting yourself down if you succumb to unhealthy obsessions in your youth or are so blinded by love that you can't see anything else. No matter what, you must always do your best to live courageously. You mustn't be weak-hearted. Youth is a time for advancing bravely into the future. You mustn't veer off course or fall behind or hide in the shadows.

Youth is not a time for pessimism or self-pity and sadness. Such a mind-set is for losers. Please have the confidence and fortitude to think to yourself when you face rejection: "It's their loss if they can't appreciate how wonderful I am!" This is the kind of resilient spirit you must strive to cultivate.

John D. Rockefeller (1839– 1937), the American industrialist and philanthropist who built an unprecedented fortune, was such a person. In his younger days, when he was poor, he proposed marriage to his first love, but she turned him down. The reason, in retrospect, is most amusing: The young woman's mother wouldn't allow her daughter to marry someone whose prospects did not seem very bright. This is another case in point of how difficult it is to correctly evaluate the potential of others. But rather than feeling depressed, this rejection seems to have been just the thing to inspire young Rockefeller.

Please don't let a broken heart discourage you. Tell yourself that you're not so weak or fragile as to let such a minor thing bring you down. You may think there is no one who could possibly compare to that person, but how will they compare to the next 100, the next 1,000, the next 10,000 people you will meet? You cannot declare with certainty that there will not be others who far surpass him or her. As you yourself grow, the way you look at people will change as well.

I'm sure quite a few among you have had your hearts broken or been badly hurt and perhaps feel unable to go on, your self-esteem in tatters. But you must never believe that

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you are worthless. There is no substitute for you who are more precious than all the treasures in the universe gathered together. No matter what your present circumstances, I think of all of you as my irreplaceable sons and daughters, and I have the greatest expectation that you will overcome all obstacles and rise out of any suffering and despair.

It is important for you to become strong. If you are strong, even your sadness will become a source of nourishment, and the things that make you suffer will purify your life.

Only when you experience the crushing, painful depths of suffering can you begin to understand the true meaning of life. Precisely because you have experienced great suffering, it is imperative that you go on living. The important thing is to keep moving forward. If you use your sadness as a source of growth, you will become a person of greater depth and breadth — an even more wonderful you. This is the harvest of your pain and suffering.

Hold your head high. Because you have lived with all your might, you are a victor. You must not sink into depression or take a path that leads to self-destruction.

**Kimura:** I have heard the saying: “If you are sad, cry. Cry until your tears have washed away all the pain.” It’s like crossing a river of suffering. The person who has done so has a depth and a radiance unknown to those who are strangers to such experience. The thing is not to drown in the river.

**Ikeda:** Whether you are happy, sad or suffering, if you chant honestly to the Gohonzon with the feelings in your heart, your life will naturally proceed in the best direction.

**Katanosaka:** One member told me she was worried about a friend who is so desperately afraid of being on her own that when she breaks up with one boyfriend, she immediately goes out and finds a new one.

**Ikeda:** Every person has the freedom to live his or her way, and each person’s character is different. Nevertheless, I think it’s a shame to spend one’s youth constantly chasing after the opposite sex.

If you’re going to fall in love, wouldn’t it be wonderful to have one great love that lasts a lifetime? And how much more wonderful would it be if that love led to marriage? Of course, this isn’t always going to happen. Nevertheless, it is unfair to both you and the other person if you enter a relationship having already decided that it is just for fun — putting casual relationships in one box and serious relationships or even marriage in another, completely separate one.

I’m sure you still have many questions, but the fact is that a future of unlimited possibilities lies before you. There is no need to rush into anything; you don’t need to be in a hurry to grow up. If there is someone you like, what’s wrong with holding onto that feeling inside your heart for a while and resolving to polish yourself so that you can become the kind of person he or she, or anyone, would be proud to be with? Such a spirit of self-development is most admirable, I feel.

Whether or not that person ever learns how you feel in your heart, with time those feelings will grow and mature like a fine wine. When you become an adult, the memories of your youth will envelop you like a beautiful fragrance.

I truly feel that these experiences are the means by which you will all become people of great depth and character.

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1. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Wind, Sand and Stars*, trans. Lewis Galantière (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1939), p. 215.

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