Discussions on Youth
What Is a World Citizen?

This is the 9th installment in a series of discussions on youth among 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, SGI English interpreter Yumiko Tomioka joins the discussion.

Ikeda: Let's continue our discussion. Today's topic is what it means to be a world citizen, right?

Kimura: Yes. We've invited Ms. Yumiko Tomioka, an official SGI English interpreter, to join us.

Tomioka: I'm glad to be here. I was once a member of the high school division myself.

Ikeda: Welcome, Ms. Tom ioka. Let me start by asking what everyone thinks a world citizen is.

Igeta: I asked some high school division members about this, and by far the most common reply was a person fluent in a foreign language. Other answers included a person who can easily make friends with people from other countries, a person who doesn't assume that the values of his or her own nation apply everywhere else in the world, and someone who can adopt a global perspective, looking beyond the boundaries of their ethnicity.

Kimura: Some students also identified a person as international if the work he or she does is directly linked to other nations, or if they are confident, self-assertive and can view things fairly and objectively.

Ikeda: Those are excellent responses, indeed. I agree with all of them. But I'd like to add that all those working for kosen-rufu, people like your parents, are also truly world citizens. They are praying earnestly for the happiness of all humanity and selflessly working for the sake of others.

In spite of their busy day-to-day schedules, they are studying Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, a great universal philosophy. Even if they never leave their countries, such people are respected around the globe. Such a way of life is an inspiration to people everywhere. The international praise and recognition bestowed on the SGI demonstrate my point.

Kimura: The many awards and honorary degrees you have received are certainly proof of that, aren't they?

Ikeda: I accept those awards and honors as a representative of your mothers and fathers. When I receive such awards, it is just as if they were being conferred on them. In effect, people all around the world are applauding their efforts and achievements.

Tomioka: I have traveled to many countries, and I'm always astonished at the high expectations people have for the SGI. In 1996, I went to India as a member of an SGI youth

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delegation. When we visited the president of the West Bengal Federation of the U.N. Association, one of the officials said, out of the blue: “I always read SGI President Ikeda’s annual peace proposals regarding the United Nations with great interest. Why don’t we discuss them today?” He asked us to tell him more about President Ikeda’s philosophy. I was surprised at this because it was not part of the agenda.

Igeta: I think people who feel a sense of responsibility toward the world’s future can understand those who are earnestly taking action based on the same concern.

Ikeda: Your parents and seniors in the SGI never sought fame or honors, nor did they seek ease or comfort. They simply remained true to the principles they believed in, devoting their energy to working for the happiness of themselves and others. This is the most noble life a person can live. The foremost requirement to be a true world citizen is outstanding character.

Kimura: People deficient in such human qualities, even if they are proficient in a foreign language, can never hope to win respect or admiration, no matter where they go in the world. People are more likely to dismiss such people.

Ikeda: Of course language ability is important, but remember language is only a means not an ends. What matters is the use you put this ability to.

I have heard the opinion many times that Japanese people lack altruism. This must change. Not only will other nations not trust us, but we will isolate ourselves from others and become spiritually impoverished.

To work for the welfare of people and society is the most basic path of humanism. Yet this is something that today’s Japanese educational system fails to teach. Your fathers and mothers in the SGI, however, are doing just that. They are truly noble.

Igeta: So, essentially, to become a world citizen, you must develop your character and humanity.

Ikeda: When I visited the United Kingdom, someone made the offhand remark, “When a bomb drops the British rush to the scene to see if anyone is hurt, but the Japanese run away from the scene.” Another person commented, “The Japanese believe everything they hear, but people from other countries think seeing is believing.”

Many Japanese people seem to lack independence and a solid sense of self. They accept things at face value without thinking for themselves or acting on their convictions. They appear to be more worried about how they will look, what others will think and how it will affect their standing.

Tomioka: A diplomat who was posted in Japan once said to me that he really disliked the way Japanese people changed their attitude toward him when they learned of his position. Apparently on weekends he would dress casually, go fishing or eat out at small local restaurants with the desire to get to know the Japanese. Of course, he never mentioned to anyone he met on these excursions that he was a diplomat.

One day at a restaurant, he had a long, interesting talk with a fellow diner. After the meal, the Japanese man insisted on exchanging business cards. Reluctantly the diplomat agreed. When the Japanese man saw that he was a high-ranking diplomat, he began apologizing so vehemently that it seemed he might drop to the floor and begin to grovel

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right there. The diplomat was both surprised and saddened to discover how far Japanese education still has to go.

Kimura: That's a telling story.

Ikeda: It is time that Japan become a country of more broad-minded, open people.

There is a famous story about Chiune Sugihara (1900–86), who helped Jewish refugees escape the Holocaust during World War II. In 1940 when the Nazis were proceeding with the extermination of European Jews, Sugihara was acting consul at the Japanese consulate in Lithuania. A wave of Jewish refugees from Poland, where Jews were being massacred, came to Sugihara to apply for transit visas to pass through Japan to a third country.

Sugihara asked the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs three times to give him the green light to issue the visas, but each time the ministry refused. He was deeply troubled, but finally came to a decision: "I couldn't abandon those who have come to me for help. If I did, I would be turning my back on God."1 So he ignored the ministry's orders and issued the visas, saving nearly 6,000 lives.

After the war, Sugihara was forced to resign from the ministry for disobeying orders. In 1991, the ministry posthumously restored his good name.

His wife, Sachiko, said: "The lives of all people are precious, irrespective of race. My husband believed it was not right for a human being to refuse to help those in need, especially when in a position to do something.... Today Japan is wealthy and at peace. But I hope people will not grow complacent and forget to think about the rest of the world. If young people only think of their own enjoyment, Japan is bound to go downhill."2

Igeta: That is so true. Why is it that so many Japanese refuse to open their hearts and minds to the world around them?

Kimura: I think problems within the Japanese educational system have a lot to do with it. Also, since the Meiji Restoration [1868], the Japanese have had a very warped, unbalanced view of the rest of the world, having suffered from an inferiority complex toward Westerners while feeling superior to other Asians and Africans. As a result, we have failed to interact with the people of other nations as equals.

Ikeda: There are many different viewpoints on this subject. Without going into detail, I will share something that the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy said: "The religion of those who do not recognize religion is to follow everything the powerful majority does. Simply put, it is the religion of submission to those currently in power."3 By religion, I believe Tolstoy means philosophy in the broadest sense.

Kimura: Sugihara refused to obey those in authority in Japan because he felt that by failing to help those who came to him, he would be betraying his faith and most cherished beliefs.

Igeta: He had the courage to act in accord with his conscience, with what he believed was right, no matter how severely he was pressured. That kind of courage comes from deep conviction, from the philosophy or religious beliefs one holds dear.

Ikeda: The term *philosophy* might seem difficult, but what we're really talking about is an intrinsic belief that cannot be compromised.

My mentor, Josei Toda, the second Soka Gakkai president, had a well-known definition

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of the word:

Philosophy isn't something complicated and hard to understand, like Descartes or Kant. Some may say they don't know anything about philosophy because they didn't go to university, but to philosophize is simply to think.

One of the most basic examples of philosophy can be found in the travel diary of Mito Mitsukuni [a feudal-period lord who traveled throughout Japan in disguise, righting wrongs and defending the helpless]. During his travels, he once asked an old peasant woman for some water and then sat down on a bale of rice. The woman, not recognizing who he was, flew into a rage, saying that he was sitting on a bale of rice that was to go to Lord Mito. Abashed, Lord Mito bowed his head and apologized.

It was an ironic situation, of course, but for the old peasant woman, proudly offering this rice she had carefully harvested to the lord of her domain was her philosophy.

Philosophy comes down to standing up for the principles you believe in, no matter what.

Though thrown into prison by the military authorities, Mr. Toda refused to compromise his beliefs, holding fast to his commitment to peace. The same is true of the founding Soka Gakkai president, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi. Today their life-and-death struggles have earned them respect worldwide. Neither of them ever left Japan, but more than 90 years ago Mr. Makiguchi declared himself a world citizen. And in the 1950s, Mr. Toda, focusing on the future of Asia and the entire world, spoke of humanity as a "global family."

The bottom line is that it makes no difference what a person's nationality is. The true world citizen can share, as a fellow human being, the sufferings and sadness as well as the happiness and joy of others. This person can unite with others to promote common human interests.

Igeta: I feel like I'm getting a clearer picture of what it means to be a world citizen. Before I shared the shallow interpretation of many people in Japan — that being a world citizen means being fluent in a foreign language, outgoing, fashionable and sophisticated.

Kimura: When you think about it, there's not much value in knowing a foreign language if one only uses it to hurt people.

Ikeda: Keeping one's word is an important responsibility of a world citizen. Japanese politicians have a reputation for making promises when they visit other countries, then forgetting them as soon as they step back on Japanese soil. That's certainly no way to earn others' trust.

Kimura: I'm sure that the absolute trust and friendship that people outside Japan feel toward you, President Ikeda, is because you have always kept the promises you have made.

Ikeda: Friendship is the key. I have found that people in other countries treasure friendship much more deeply than most Japanese are aware. It is a core part of their lives. To never betray one's friendship, to nurture and develop strong, amicable ties — these are the qualities required of a world citizen.

Perhaps there are some among you thinking, "I hate studying foreign languages" or "What's being a world citizen got to do with me?" But the fact is, like it or not, in the coming century when you take your place in society the world is going to become even more integrated.

When I met Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, he shared the following observation by Poland's president: A single country today can't even produce a box of matches by itself.

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The match stick comes from one nation, the sulfur from another, the box from another and the glue from yet another. Many, many countries must cooperate to produce even a single box of matches.

The globalization of goods and production is taking place incredibly swiftly, as is the globalization of information, especially with the growth of the Internet. For these reasons, the globalization of heart-to-heart, grass-roots exchange is absolutely critical in guiding these rapid changes in the direction of peace. That is why the SGI is working to promote peace, culture and education around the world.

Kimura: I think it's precisely because such efforts are needed that the SGI is praised across the globe. The way in which many Japanese, on the other hand, unjustly criticize our movement — without even trying to understand it — is evidence of just how far behind Japan is in the process of internationalization.

Ikeda: This is where the importance of language ability comes in. Proficiency in a foreign language is necessary so that all of you, who embrace a global philosophy, can play an active role on the international stage.

I have visited more than 50 nations and made friends in all of them. If you were to ask me what I regret the most, I would probably have to say not being able to converse with the leading figures of those various countries in their languages. In fact, when I was a young man I realized the importance of gaining proficiency in a foreign language and made an effort to study English. But being wartime, English was the language of the "enemy." We weren't allowed to speak it in Japan.

After the war, I was still suffering from tuberculosis. I started working for Mr. Toda, whose business was failing. In those days, I never seemed to have enough to eat. In fact, I was so thin that my ribs were sticking out and I often coughed up blood. Even so, I poured all my energy into working for Mr. Toda, taking only a little time to sleep.

Under such circumstances, it was impossible for me to go to university. So Mr. Toda decided to teach me. And for 10 years, every morning, he instructed me in a variety of subjects. He had an excellent grasp of the basics of many areas of learning, including mathematics. Genius though he was, he was not very strong in English. When he was a young man in the early part of this century, it was not a required subject.

I hired a private instructor, but all he was interested in was money and wasn't a good teacher. In the end, I was so busy with other duties that I finally had to content myself with using interpreters.

All of you, on the other hand, are fortunate to be in an environment that allows you, if you wish, to study foreign languages to your heart's content. It's all up to you.

Tomioka: I am often invited to speak at junior high and high school meetings. When I ask, "Who likes English?" only a few students raise their hands. But when I ask, "Who doesn't like English?" almost the entire room replies, "Me!"

Ikeda: You graduated from Soka University and also studied at the University of Arizona, didn't you?

Tomioka: Yes, that's right.

Ikeda: Could you please share with us a few of your "secrets" for learning English?

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Tomioka: Certainly. But as an interpreter, I'm still in training. I have a lot more to learn.

Ikeda: How did you come to like English?

Tomioka: Actually, it was through music. I used to listen to Beatles albums over and over and to FEN (Far East Network) radio broadcasts in English — though I could hardly understand a word of either!

After a while, I began to notice that the pronunciation on records and the radio was different from what I was learning in school. I also used to sing along with my records, following the lyrics in the liner notes.

I read my school textbooks over and over, too, until I memorized them. Reading aloud is very useful, I think. We also had weekly vocabulary tests in school, which helped me build my vocabulary. It's a gradual, accumulative process. Keeping at it is important.

After going to university, I used to listen to the brief news broadcasts on FEN and use them as dictation exercises. A friend whom I respected told me that I shouldn't give up trying to understand a broadcast until I had listened to it at least 100 times.

I also watched a lot of movies in English. I used to go to the first showing and sit through a film as many as three times. By the third time, I generally had the feeling that I understood most of the dialogue without the subtitles. It's a lot easier now that there are VCRs and videotapes.

Igeta: Even so, English is a foreign language, so we don't use it every day. Is there some trick to mastering it?

Tomioka: I think the secret is to study intensively for a certain period. You have to keep trying, keep working at it, until it suddenly clicks. Learning a language is not a passive activity. Casual efforts will get you nowhere.

You can find a book you are already familiar with in your language, like *The Little Prince* or a well-known fairy tale, and read it in the foreign language you're studying. Videos are good learning material, too — anything that you're interested in and care about is a good starting point.

Igeta: How much time do you recommend should be set aside for such concentrated study?

Tomioka: It's different from person to person, but I can say that there will definitely be a point when you unexpectedly make a breakthrough. You have to keep up with your intensive efforts patiently until that moment. It happens much the same way a baby starts forming words all of a sudden, after months of only making sounds.

There are all sorts of textbooks and learning materials, but it is important not to skip from one to another. Follow through with one until you've really mastered it.

Kimura: I have heard that completely memorizing a junior high–level language textbook can really help discouraged high school students who feel they just can't keep up with the rest of the class.

Ikeda: You mustn't let your aversion to a subject get the better of you. No special talent is needed to learn a language. You're all fluent in your native language, aren't you? You have to decide, first, that you can do it. And then just challenge yourself, one step at a time.

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Kimura: More and more students are thinking they have a better chance to learn a foreign language if they go overseas and as a result enter a study abroad program. I have also been asked by a lot by students recently if it's a good idea to study overseas while still in high school.

Ikeda: Living in another country can be meaningful — it can widen your horizons. I don't by any means oppose studying abroad. But it's all too easy to be swept away by your environment if you don't have a clearly defined purpose and objective you wish to achieve.

If you are going to a school or university overseas just because everyone else is, you probably won't stick to your studies and won't gain anything to make you outstanding in your field in the future. You should always give the matter of studying abroad careful thought. There is no need to rush going abroad either. There is plenty of time to do so later if you wish.

Kimura: Many people complain that the English taught in Japanese schools today is useless.

Tomioka: I thought that before I went abroad. But I later found that I was seriously mistaken. Unless you've got the basics under your belt, including grammar, you won't learn any foreign language properly when you go abroad. Of course study in a foreign country will help you gain proficiency in everyday conversation. But without a strong foundation, it's difficult to progress beyond that level. And if conversational ability in a foreign language is all you're aiming for, you can easily accomplish that without leaving your home country.

Igeta: What should we do about our friends who, in spite of everything we have said today, insist that foreign language is the one subject they just can't learn to like?

Ikeda: That's a tough question. We can't expect people who don't speak our language to understand us through some kind of telepathy. They won't. One has to say what one wants to clearly and correctly to get one's point across.

But for those who really dislike learning languages, there are other ways of communicating with people around the world. Music and other forms of art are nonverbal forms of communication. So are sports. Mathematics is a universal language. You can master some art or science and gain respect for achievement in that field. The important thing is to acquire some skill, some means to enable you to hold your own on the world stage.

My dream is for all of you to be active and successful in every corner of the globe. But everything has a proper order. A novel must be read page by page or you won't understand the story. In the same way, this is the time in your lives for building a solid foundation. I hope all of you can open your minds and challenge yourselves to develop ability in a foreign language.

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1. Sachiko Sugihara, *Rokusen-nin no Inochi no Biza* (Visas That Saved 6,000 Lives) (Tokyo: Asahi Sonorama, 1990), p. 204.
2. "Sunday Interview," Dec. 15, 1991, *Seikyo Shimbun*.
3. Translated from Japanese: *Torusutoi Zenshu* (Complete Works of Tolstoy), trans. Toru Nakamura (Tokyo: Kawade Shobo Shinsha, 1974), vol. 15, pp. 135–36.

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