

The Larger Concern

SGI President Ikeda gave the following speech at the 2nd Okinawa Executive Conference, at the Okinawa Training Center in Onnason, Feb. 27.

There is nothing more noble than the people. They are truly the most valuable treasure. Air is everywhere, but it is priceless; we can't live without it. Water and soil are all around us, too, but water is of far greater value than the finest wine, and soil, more precious than the rarest gems. We cannot do without them. Truly admirable are not the wealthy or famous few, but the multitudes of ordinary people found everywhere. They are the most respectable and precious of all. I have always put the people first and foremost, working by their side, with their happiness my sole objective. This is the fundamental Soka Gakkai spirit.

The members in Okinawa and the rest of Japan have again made wonderful strides in their February activities. I heard that one of our pioneer members, now a grand lady of more than 90, wholeheartedly continues to support and watch over her grandchildren's SGI activities. She still gets excited whenever February rolls around.¹ To enthusiastically devote ourselves to kosen-rufu, no matter what our age — this proves that the lifeblood of faith still flows vigorously in our veins. This is the invincible Soka spirit.

A Disciple of Shakyamuni

Among Shakyamuni's disciples was an elderly woman, Punnika. Before becoming a follower of the Buddha and joining the Buddhist community, she was a water bearer for the nobility. No matter how cold it was, she had to wade into the freezing river and draw bucket after bucket of water. If she tried to rest just a little, the noblewomen would scold and punish her.

But when she met Shakyamuni and embraced Buddhism, she began to have direction in life and be fulfilled. The hardships she had endured were transformed into deep compassion — a source of great wisdom — to care for and help others.

One day, Punnika saw a Brahman practicing austerities by sitting in a cold stream.² Approaching him, she was reminded of the pain and hardship she had undergone as a water bearer. She called energetically, "O Brahman, what are you so afraid of that you must sit in that freezing water, shaking and shivering?"

The Brahman replied, "I am sitting here because, whether young or old, one may wash away bad karma by sitting in this water." He probably said this with a haughty air, as if to infer, "Don't you know anything?!"

But Punnika was not intimidated. "If that were true," she responded, "then frogs, turtles and crocodiles, which are always in the water, would surely be born in heaven. And if the water washes away all your bad karma, it would certainly wash away your good karma as well — you would be nothing but a spectator of life with no relation to good or bad."

If one is driven by deep compassion to awaken someone to the True Law, boundless wisdom will well forth.

The woman then said in a gentle, compassionate voice filled with sincere concern for his health: "Please stop that foolish practice. Get out of the cold before you become ill!"

Buddhism is a teaching of reason and good sense. It exists so that we may lead healthier, happier, more productive lives.

Punnika's words suddenly brought home this truth to the Brahman. He vowed to become

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a follower of Shakyamuni and a member of the harmonious Buddhist order. In this way, an ordinary woman succeeded in awakening a Brahman, a member of the most educated class, to the True Law. How closely this wonderful story resembles activities of the women's division and pioneering members who comprise the Many Treasures Group.

Come As You Are

I fondly remember how happy Mr. Toda was when he heard, back in the early years of our organization, that a women's division member with little formal education had confidently introduced a university professor to the Daishonin's Buddhism. The SGI has developed through the noble efforts of just such ordinary men and women.

The same is true, of course, in Okinawa. A great network of Bodhisattvas of the Earth is growing surely and steadily — you are playing an active role in society, among the people, in daily life. This magnificent Okinawa International Peace Center is a proud testament to your victory. Congratulations! It is your center. I hope you will use it freely, in a most meaningful, valuable way.

There is no need for rigid formality in our activities. Let everyone come as they are and express themselves openly and joyfully.

Fresh, Exciting Possibilities

There is a beautiful passage in the Lotus Sutra that I'll share: "A fragrant wind blew away the withered flowers, / whereupon fresh and beautiful ones rained down" (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 137). All living things exist in an ever-flowing stream of change. That is why we must not look back but always face the future, constantly refreshing our lives with new vitality. Let us make each day and each year one of growth and fresh, exciting possibilities.

One important way to do this is by meeting with our fellow members, speaking with and encouraging as many people as we can. Our spirits are lifted when we do so; we are invigorated and rejuvenated. Limitless benefit and good fortune adorn those who cherish the members above all, who, rather than meeting the famous or powerful, would happily meet sincere members — you who have inherited the Buddha's will and decree and earnestly spread Buddhist ideals.

Like the aforementioned sutra passage, the presence of those who possess such fresh, unsullied faith is truly a fragrant breeze. This March, with spring just on the horizon, let us create a vibrant new momentum of happiness, joy and friendship.

The Spirit of Disciples

A World Peace Youth Culture Festival will be held in Okinawa in 2000. I hope that you will open the curtain on a brilliant new age of peace in this lovely tropical paradise. The time has come for Okinawa to channel its energies into raising and fostering youth.

Buddhism expounds that the mentor is the true effect and the disciples, the true cause. No one more than youth division members are the true cause for the future of kosen-rufu. Leaders mustn't order the youth about, but instead work and struggle alongside them, guiding them by showing a clear path to the future. This is the spirit of Buddhist leaders of true cause.

The Trials of Youth

During my recent visit to Hong Kong, someone asked about Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. This individual had received a copy of the book from a friend but hadn't read it and wondered if I might give him a short summary. I have spoken about

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this work in some detail in previous speeches, so I will be brief today.

I am reminded, incidentally, that the SGI of Germany's Villa Sachsen Culture Center is located in Bingen, which Goethe once declared offered "the most beautiful view of the Rhine." Also, among Soka University's important treasures is a rare 2nd edition [1775] German copy of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. The book, first published in 1774 when Goethe was only 25, is inspired in part by personal experience.

Around this time, Okinawa was experiencing a renaissance of sorts. It was a golden age of culture, with the compilation of histories; the establishment of a criminal code; the composition of poems in various forms, including Japanese, Chinese and Ryukyu [the islands of Okinawa are also known as the Ryukyu Islands]; and the establishment of educational institutions.

Anyway, to return to Goethe's novel, the hero of the story, Werther, was a sensitive, refined young man. He met a girl named Charlotte and fell passionately in love. Unfortunately, she was engaged to another, which caused Werther much agony. In addition, he found himself in constant conflict with his superiors at work, and endured social snubs and insults from the aristocracy in the highly stratified society of his day.

Werther was plunged into the depths of despair when Charlotte married. Unable to contain his feelings any longer, he visited her when her husband was away and confessed his love — but she would not accept his declaration. He bade her farewell forever, and the next day shot and killed himself.

This novel was immensely popular with young people throughout Europe and was translated into several languages. Napoleon Bonaparte is said to have read it seven times. Goethe once said in a discussion of *Young Werther*, "Obstructed fortune, restrained activity, unfulfilled wishes, are the calamities not of any particular time but of every individual man."³

The Strength To Triumph

At any age, life is a series of trials and tribulations. This is especially true of youth. But it is vital that each of us strive to overcome those difficulties, to triumph over them and live our lives to the fullest. Faith gives us the power to do this. The teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, which expound that earthly desires are enlightenment and the sufferings of birth and death are nirvana, are attracting more and more attention from thinking people around the world.

One such person is the Russian politician Dr. Alexander Yakovlev, who recently visited Okinawa and was overjoyed to meet with many members. One of the architects of perestroika, he has played an important role in history as an individual with the courage of his convictions. Dr. Yakovlev stated that Mahayana Buddhism enables people to transform the raging winds of suffering into driving winds of creation. This is crucial in the world today, he said, when people are torn apart by conflicting and contradictory desires and emotions.

Dr. Yakovlev also said that a great religion that expounds respect for humanity will go hand in hand with a movement of the people toward realizing an age of humanism. He added that the value-creating organization of the SGI, under the leadership of clear-sighted thinker and activist Daisaku Ikeda, is taking the lead in this initiative based on Buddhist ideals.

A youth, a life, dedicated to realizing the great wish of kosen-rufu means willingly taking on suffering for our friends' sake and society's peace and prosperity. It means

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asking oneself, “How can I help so-and-so get back on his or her feet?” “What can I do to encourage them?” “What can I do to help my local organization advance?” This is a bodhisattva’s spirit; it is identical to a Buddha’s heart.

When one lives this way, one’s small personal problems are completely subsumed in the larger concern of the welfare of others. We can only grow to the extent that we experience hardships. In the course of earnestly working to help others become happy, we will find the personal problems or worries that once plagued us have been resolved or overcome naturally.

Toward Life’s Final Victory

The SGI has always advanced in complete harmony with the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin. That is why, just as the Daishonin promised, the four bodhisattvas stand before, behind and on either side of us, protecting us from harm. I want you to be confident of the great benefit we receive through faith. Continue to carry out the noble mission of the Buddha.

Death is the final settlement of accounts of our lives in this world. We only die as we have lived. How we have lived, how full and rich we have made our internal lives — all this is revealed at our last moment. At that time, we will surely know in the depths of our beings how wonderful it is to have dedicated ourselves to the Mystic Law. I am confident that each of you will close your final chapter with victory, joy and glory.

I have the highest expectations for the Okinawa youth division. As Goethe wrote:

*Although in pain and torment yet you wander,
Youth’s happiness still lies along your way.
With bold and manly footsteps cross that threshold,
Approach the realm where friendship’s light holds sway.
There, in the midst of those who love you dearly,
Let waters from life’s fountain now flow clearly.⁴*

In closing, I pray that my beloved young friends in Okinawa will always have hope and enjoy lives of brilliant triumph and achievement.

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1. In February 1952, President Ikeda, then 24 and a newly appointed staff of Tokyo’s Kamata Chapter, paved the way toward an unprecedented achievement of 201 new families joining the Soka Gakkai in a single chapter in a single month. This was the start of what has come to be known as the February Tradition, the spirit to share Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism with others and promote greater understanding of the Soka Gakkai’s activities.
2. *The Elders’ Verses II: Therigatha*, trans. K.R. Norman (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1995), pp. 26–27.
3. Johann Peter Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, trans. John Oxenford (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1951), p. 34.
4. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister’s Journeyman Years; or The Renunciants*, trans. Krishna Winston (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 240.

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