

## Discussions on Youth The Meaning of Being Considerate

*This is the 11th 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 high school division members.*

**Kimura:** Today's topic concerns what it means to be considerate.

When asked in surveys what qualities they look for most in a person, many people, male and female alike, are found to respond, "Someone who is considerate." And when questioned as to what kind of person they themselves hope to become, a large proportion give the same response.

**Igeta:** However, many people have no idea what being considerate is; they think it's keeping a safe degree of distance from others so as not to hurt them or be hurt.

The other day a friend told me about a mutual friend who was moping around at home by herself, thinking about quitting her job. My friend suggested that the best thing we could do right now would be to leave her alone. I was shocked and told her she was wrong — that if we didn't offer her support when she needed it most, we weren't being good friends.

**Ikeda:** I see. It seems that, on the one hand, people treasure consideration in others and want to be considerate, but at the same time don't want to get too involved. Many of our readers may share such conflicting emotions.

Being considerate is a matter of the heart. The heart is not something we can easily comprehend; it is subtle, complex. Therefore, it would be difficult for anyone to describe what it means to be considerate in a few words. It is a profound question, tantamount to "What does it mean to be human?"

Someone said that the Chinese character used to depict the word *consideration* in Japanese is made up of the pictographs for *person* and *concern*. Thus, to be considerate is to have concern for others. It is to empathize with the sadness, pain and loneliness of other people. This Chinese character can also mean *excellent*. A genuinely considerate person, someone who understands others' hearts, is an exceptional human being, an honors student in life. To possess such concern for others is living the most humanistic way. It is a sign of outstanding character.

When I was about 12 or 13, I delivered newspapers. I wanted to build up my strength and do whatever I could to help my family since my brothers had gone off to fight in World War II. Our family business was farming seaweed, so there were many chores to do, starting early in the morning. Afterward, I would go on my paper route while the rest of the town still slept soundly. In winter, riding my bike in the bitter-cold wind, my fingers froze and my breath came out in white puffs.

There were many families on my paper route. I rarely saw their faces, but on the odd occasion I did, they weren't friendly. Dogs also gave me a hard time.

It was difficult, but I will never forget the warmth and consideration shown to me by one young couple. They lived in a single-story apartment building, home to 20 families. One day, as I entered the building, the young wife was bringing a charcoal stove into the corridor to cook rice. You are probably too young to know what a charcoal stove is, but it's like a portable earthenware cooking range. Anyway, I said good morning and handed her the paper. Greeting me with a warm smile, she said thank you, and commented that I was

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always in high spirits.

As I turned to leave, she asked me to wait and handed me a bundle of thick slices of dried sweet potatoes, which we called *imokachi* in those days.

Explaining that they had been sent from her hometown in Akita Prefecture in northern Japan the previous day, she said, “I hope you’ll enjoy these.” Then she offered her regards to my parents. Her husband, a tall man as I recall, also said: “It must be tough delivering papers in this cold weather. Study hard and you will achieve great things.”

On another occasion, after I finished my evening paper route, the couple invited me to stay for dinner. They asked me many questions about my family. I told them about my father, who had fallen seriously ill and was bedridden. The husband then began to encourage me, sharing an anecdote about the American inventor Thomas Edison (1847–1931): When Edison was a boy, he sold newspapers, while at the same time keeping up with his studies. The husband said, “People who struggle when they’re young are truly fortunate.” The young couple moved away not long after that.

Though these things took place more than 50 years ago, the great kindness and concern this couple showed me remain etched in my heart to this day. There was nothing arrogant or pretentious about them.

Buddhism teaches that “calmness is [the world] of Humanity” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 52). It is a state of tranquillity where one embraces all people warmly, without discrimination. The flip side of humanity is arrogance — arrogant people cause others to suffer. They flatter those stronger than them and intimidate those weaker. Such people live in the lower worlds of Hunger and Animality. Their behavior is despicable.

I understand that in British public schools, there is a tradition of evaluating a student’s character by giving him or her some position of authority or leadership. They say a student’s character is revealed by how he or she behaves toward juniors.

**Kimura:** That’s a good point. A friend of mine who works at a publishing company and has a lot of interaction with influential people like professors and celebrities said that such people are often full of themselves. He said it’s amazing how many times he’s seen them fly off the handle over the slightest mistake, and that one even threatened him, saying, “Do you know who you’re dealing with?!”

**Igeta:** That’s hardly the behavior one would expect from people in their position!

**Kimura:** Of course, there are many humble professors, too.

**Ikeda:** Being considerate means valuing and respecting each person’s dignity.

An acquaintance told me about an educator who taught for 38 years in Kumamoto Prefecture in Kyushu [the southernmost of Japan’s four main islands]. He was a warmhearted teacher who was deeply loved by all his students. What was the decisive turning point in his life? When he was in the second grade, one cold day during winter vacation, a woman and her daughter, who made their livings as street performers, came to his house. The mother played the *shamisen*, a traditional stringed instrument, and sang, while the daughter danced. A light snow was falling and the young boy sat eating pastries while he watched them. When the song finished, he handed the girl his half-eaten pastry.

Seeing this, his father, who had been close by getting his ox ready for work, ran over angrily and smacked him. The father turned to the performers, who were a bit surprised by this, bowed deeply and apologized for his son’s bad manners. He also made his son bow

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and apologize. In addition to giving the mother and daughter some grain, he seized the bag of pastries from which his son had been eating and handed it to the girl. Then, without even looking at the boy sitting on the ground crying, he took his ox and went into the mountains to work.

The father wanted to drive home that all people are equal and worthy of respect. When the boy grew up, he was always grateful for this lesson. In Japan, it is rare these days to find fathers who are actively involved in raising their children.

It's important never to judge people by appearances. As a young man of 20, Josei Toda, who later became the Soka Gakkai's second president, left his home in Hokkaido and came to Tokyo to pursue his dream. However, carving his niche in Tokyo was harder than he had anticipated.

One summer day, having reached his wits' end, Toda visited the home of one of his mother's distant relatives, an army general. He arrived at the doorstep wearing a dark blue-and-white padded jacket over a threadbare *hakama*, a traditional pleated garment for men. Though he was shown into the living room, it soon became apparent that the general was patronizing him, only pretending to be interested. Far from empathizing with the young man's hopes and dreams, he did everything possible to keep his distance.

Toda was at first oblivious to this. Having been received courteously, he began talking enthusiastically about his goals. But when he realized his relative was only being polite, he made to leave. As he did so, the general's wife wrapped in white paper some cakes that were sitting on the table and handed them to Toda, but he refused them, saying, "I didn't come here for your charity!"

Toda never forgot that humiliation as long as he lived. Whenever he recalled the incident, he would admonish his wife: "One must never judge people by what's on the surface! It's impossible to make a decision about a person's future or know what their mission is based on their appearance. Evaluating others at first glance is forbidden in our house!" Toda had great inner strength and his generosity knew no bounds. He never scorned people because they were poor. His compassion was indiscriminate.

Soka Gakkai founding president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, whom Toda chose as his mentor, was also a strong, warmhearted person. As an elementary school teacher in Hokkaido, he would go out to meet students walking to school when it was snowing, and would walk them home after school. When he did so, he tried to make sure that students in poor health didn't fall behind the others, carrying them on his back or leading them by the hand if necessary. He would also always have hot water ready to gently soak the children's frozen hands. He would ask them: "How's that? Does it feel better?" And the students would say, "Uh-huh, it just stings a little." What a beautiful scene!

Later, Makiguchi became a noted school principal in Tokyo, but the education authorities kept close tabs on him because he refused to ingratiate himself with them. He was constantly being moved around and sent to schools where no one else wanted to go.

At one point, Makiguchi was transferred to Mikasa Elementary School. All the students came from poor families. Some were so destitute that they didn't even have umbrellas to shield them from rain. Out of his own pocket, Makiguchi would prepare lunch for the children who came to school without one. This was more than 10 years before lunches were supplied in Japan's schools. There were eight members in his own family to feed, so you can imagine how difficult it must have been. He was also so considerate that he would place the prepared lunches in the janitor's room, where the needy children could get them easily without having to feel ashamed or embarrassed.

**Kimura:** If he had placed the lunches in the staff room or in the classroom in front of the

other kids, those students would probably have been embarrassed and hesitant to take them. How thoughtful of him!

**Ikeda:** Makiguchi would have done absolutely anything for his students' happiness. That's how kind he was. He once wrote that when he thought of the Japanese system of teaching by rote learning, which only stifled the children's individuality, he wanted so desperately to free them that it nearly drove him insane.

For the sake of his students, Makiguchi would readily confront and indignantly challenge any authority. Once, he even declared to the school inspectors, who wielded immense power over education at that time, that the inspection of classes was unnecessary since it only led to the undesirable standardization of education. That's why he was on the authorities' blacklist.

That's also why everyone else loved and respected him. Whenever Makiguchi was transferred, the students at the school where he'd been principal would burst into tears. Even the parents and teachers would break down.

Makiguchi later defied Japanese militarism and subsequently died in prison, a martyr for his convictions. No matter what might happen to him, he couldn't look on while oppressive government authorities inflicted suffering on the people. Nor would he accept an incorrect philosophy.

People with concern for others stand firm when faced with injustice. Buddhism teaches that anger can be constructive or destructive. When justice or good is imperiled, anger becomes necessary. On the other hand, anger that arises from emotionalism is a manifestation of Animality. The greater the person, the more all-encompassing his or her love for others. This love is the source of strength and compassion.

**Igeta:** Precisely because one cares for others, one should never betray one's beliefs — even if imprisoned. That is noble! This is a little different from our usual understanding of what it means to be considerate.

**Ikeda:** Being kindhearted doesn't mean being considerate. Not to fight injustice or take action at a crucial moment is weakness.

**Kimura:** The other day someone pointed out that human relations today seem to be pervaded by the desire to not make waves or keep the status quo. Many feel that opening up too much to others puts one at risk of being hurt. In a recent public opinion poll in Tokyo, approximately 70 percent of the respondents said they didn't want to get too close to others. More than 50 percent said that they were reluctant to help others because getting involved could produce unforeseen problems; they could be held responsible in some way [according to a survey by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government on Jan. 16].

**Ikeda:** It's certainly a tough world we live in. I can see why one might want to shut oneself up in one's shell. But those who do so are deluding themselves if they think they can live without other people. They have forgotten that they have been, and continue to be, surrounded and supported by the kindness and generosity of many people.

We would never have come into this world, or grown into what we are, without the love and concern of our mothers. And what about our fathers, brothers and sisters, grandparents, relatives, friends, school teachers and seniors in faith? Haven't there been countless people who have embraced us with their warmth and consideration throughout our lives?

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**Igeta:** Yes. One student shared with me her feeling of deep gratitude when she found, a month before her high school entrance examination, that her mother was getting up early to chant for her to do well. She said that this was the most thoughtful thing anyone had ever done for her.

Another student said: “I can see how much my mom loves me. From when I was a little girl, she was always telling me to be considerate of others’ feelings. We’ve been on our own since I was in the third grade, but my mom’s love gives me courage because she’s always concerned and takes good care of me.”

**Ikeda:** That’s heartwarming. Mothers are the strongest, most caring people!

**Igeta:** Another young woman told me that when she was in her first year of high school, she hated school because she couldn’t make friends. She decided to drop out at the beginning of the second semester because she was miserable, but then one of her classmates called to cheer her up and invite her to have lunch together at school. Touched and encouraged by her classmate’s kindness — not wanting to let her down — she went to school every day from then on. Now, she says, they are best friends who talk to each other about everything.

**Ikeda:** True concern for others manifests itself as unconditional friendship. To be considerate means that the more someone is suffering, the more love you show them. It gives you the courage to help another stand up. And it means recognizing another person’s unhappiness for what it is, trying to understand and share his or her suffering. This will enable you to grow and at the same time help the other person become strong. Consideration is training ourselves in the art of encouraging others.

The important thing is not just sympathizing with or pitying others, but understanding what they’re going through. Empathy is crucial. Sometimes having someone who understands can give us the strength to go on.

**Kimura:** Concern for others is not tangible. For that reason, we can’t show someone that we’re considerate unless we do something considerate. However, either people can’t muster the courage or are afraid of being rejected if they do extend a helping hand.

**Igeta:** One student told me she had hesitated to offer her seat to an elderly person on the train because she feared that person would be offended by being treated like an old person. She was afraid of being thought a do-gooder.

**Ikeda:** Certainly, there’s no knowing how another person is going to respond. There may be occasions when your sincere intentions are completely rejected, or you may be laughed at or even ridiculed. But turning around and getting mad at the person you’re trying to help does nobody good. Letting fear paralyze you is foolish, too.

The thing that matters is what you want to do. You must have the courage to follow your instincts when it comes to helping people. Your life will expand only as much as you take action on behalf of others, regardless of how they may react toward your kindness. Consideration equals strength, so the more considerate of others you are, the stronger you will become.

Makiguchi had no time for people who had no guts — who just stood by and did nothing. The good but fainthearted, in failing to fight evil, are ultimately defeated by it. Makiguchi often said:

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Not doing good is effectively the same as doing bad. Let's say someone places a huge boulder in the middle of the road. This is malicious, as it will cause trouble for those who pass by later. Then, someone comes along and sees the large obstruction, but, while knowing that it will cause serious problems, leaves it there with the attitude "Well, I didn't put it there." This may seem like simply not doing a good thing, but, actually, not moving the boulder is causing the same inconvenience for the future passersby as putting it there in the first place.

Most people have a spark of warmth or human kindness somewhere in their heart. I really don't think that anyone is born completely coldhearted. But if, as time passes, people bury their warmth deeper and deeper in their hearts for fear of being hurt, they will become cold and hard. Similarly, those who are self-centered and think everyone is against them gird themselves with the armor of authority, fame, status, callousness or conceit. Such behavior is devoid of humanity — it is a sign of Animality.

Shakyamuni always initiated dialogue with people. He didn't wait arrogantly for others to speak to him first, nor did it ever occur to him to worry about what they might think of him. He addressed people warmly and with ease.

**Kimura:** To be concerned about others' welfare requires courage, doesn't it?

**Ikeda:** Exactly. Cowardice begets cruelty. Courage begets kindness.

I want to share with you something that happened to the famous Austrian writer Stefan Zweig (1881–1942), when a high school student.<sup>1</sup> One of his classmates was an excellent student and very popular. One day, this classmate's father, who was the president of a large company, was arrested for some incident. The media got hold of the story and printed sensational reports about the father, going so far as to print photos of the family in the newspaper.

The classmate was absent from school for more than two weeks. Then, one day, he unexpectedly showed up and sat down at his desk. He buried his face in his textbooks and didn't look up. Even during the break, he sat by himself and stared out the window, avoiding eye contact with everyone.

Not wanting to embarrass or hurt their classmate's feelings, Zweig and his friends kept their distance. Zweig could see that his friend could use a kind word, but while he stood there wondering what he should do the bell rang, ending the break. The classmate didn't show up for the next class. And he never returned to school.

This must have weighed heavily on Zweig. He must have regretted that he didn't act on his instincts when he had the chance.

Japanese often take slanderous rumors about people as truth and spread them around without checking the facts. This is the opposite of being considerate. To be considerate also means being fair. It means being open-minded enough to find out the truth for oneself.

**Kimura:** It seems the way we show or express our consideration for others takes different forms depending on the situation.

**Ikeda:** Yes. The most important thing is the sincere wish to see others become happy. Makiguchi talked about the idea of small, medium and great good. This can be applied to consideration as well: small, medium and great consideration.

Mr. Makiguchi once said: "Friendship can be divided into three levels. Say you have a friend who needs •10,000 (about U.S. \$100). Giving your friend the money needed is an act of small good, whereas helping him or her find a job is an act of medium good.

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However, if your friend is suffering because of a basic tendency to be lazy, then a gift of money or a job will only cater to and perpetuate his or her negative habits. True friendship is helping that person uproot the indolent nature that is the source of all his or her suffering — in other words, teaching a correct belief system.” In this sense, sharing Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism with as many people as we can is the most considerate, most humanistic thing we can do.

Often, attempts to do great good are misunderstood. One example is how children are sometimes unable to appreciate the way their parents try to discipline them. No doubt, you, too, will run into resentment when you try to help someone with your great consideration.

But, surely, the ultimate act of consideration for others is chanting for their happiness and doing everything you can for them. Though your efforts may not be valued now, as long as you act with utmost sincerity, people will come to trust and rely on you. They will in time be truly grateful for the love and kindness you have shown them.

**Igeta:** It seems from what you’re saying that a person is only as great as they are considerate of others. I think it’s important that we strive to become people who don’t just wear generosity on the surface, but who can really touch people’s lives.

**Ikeda:** The noble side of a person is manifested in kindness and consideration to others. Kindness and consideration for others resonate with both the Buddhist concept of compassion and the core Christian concept of love. I said earlier that every person has grown up supported by the warmth and kindness of many people. Actually, when viewed from a larger perspective, we exist here thanks to the support not only of the people around us, but of everything on this earth and in the entire universe.

Every single living thing — the flowers, the birds, the sun, the soil — supports one other in a beautiful symphony of life. Since the birth of this planet more than 4 billion years ago, life form after life form has been conceived and nourished. And human life is a part of that chain. If at any point a link were missing from this chain of life, none of us would be alive today.

**Kimura:** I guess we are all proof that the chain hasn’t been broken!

**Ikeda:** Life produces new life — surely this is consideration in its most basic form. Delving deeper into this idea, I think we can say that the Earth itself is a giant living organism and is great consideration incarnate. President Toda once said that the activity of the entire universe is essentially a function of compassion.

**Igeta:** There is the popular catchphrase “Be kind to our planet,” but in reality, the planet has been kind to us.

**Ikeda:** Behind each of us stands not just 4 billion years of kindness from the Earth, but the compassion of the entire universe since time without beginning. Therefore, you mustn’t slander or devalue your life. Life is the most precious of all treasures. Each of you has been given this invaluable gift and each of you is irreplaceable. Those bearers of life — the universe, the Earth and mothers — cherish their children. The most important thing for the 21st century is that we expand throughout society that absolute, fundamental consideration, that profound compassion toward life.

**Kimura:** If we do so, war and the oppression of human rights will disappear.

**Igeta:** It will also put a stop to the destruction of the environment.

**Ikeda:** That's why the first thing we must do is develop ourselves. A truly commendable person is one who possesses the spirit to improve and grow, and this is in itself true consideration for others. In contrast, to be completely self-absorbed and utterly indifferent to other people's happiness shows arrogance and a mean-spirited nature that is ruled by the world of Anger.

I hope that all of you, the protagonists of the 21st century, will work diligently to become people of great strength and genuine consideration.

**WT**

1. This episode appears in: Masataro Miyake, *Saiban no Sho* (The Book on Trials) (Tokyo: Makino Shoten, 1942), pp. 184–85.