

Discussion on Youth The Contest of Human Rights

This is the 12th installment of 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).

Ikeda: Spring is near. The plum trees have bloomed, the peach trees have flowered, and soon it will be time for the cherry blossoms. The famous English Romantic poet Shelley said, "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"¹ No matter how long and bitter the winter may be, spring always follows. This is the law of the universe, the law of life.

The same applies to us. If we seem to be weathering an endless winter, we mustn't abandon hope. As long as we have hope, spring will come without fail.

Spring is a time of blossoming. Buddhism, as I have mentioned many times, teaches the principle of cherry, plum, peach and apricot — that all things have a unique beauty and mission. The cherry has its distinct beauty, the plum its delicate fragrance. The peach blossom has its lovely color, and the apricot has its special flavor. Every person has a singular mission, his or her individuality and way of living. It's important to recognize that truth and respect it. That is the natural order of things. That is how it works in the world of flowers: Myriad flowers bloom harmoniously in beautiful profusion.

Unfortunately, in the human world things do not always work this way. Some find it impossible to respect those who are different, so they discriminate against them or pick on them. They violate their rights as individuals. This is the source of much unhappiness in the world.

Everyone has a right to flower, to reveal his or her full potential as a human being, to fulfill his or her mission in this world. You have this right, and so does everyone else. This is the meaning of human rights.

To scorn and violate people's human rights destroy the natural order of things. We must become people who prize human rights and respect others.

Kimura: We may see discrimination and bullying in our immediate surroundings. These can take extreme forms, such as war and oppression. Do you think these are basically the same thing?

Ikeda: Yes. Some people have said that bullying is just war in miniature. I remember something that happened during World War II, when I was about your age or maybe a little younger. They were selling hard-boiled eggs in front of Kamata's Otorii Station [in Tokyo's Ota Ward]. I wanted one very badly, but I didn't have any money.

A soldier came walking by with a woman. It just happened that an officer was there, too. When the soldier walked past him, the officer shouted, "You didn't salute properly!" and began kicking and beating the soldier viciously.

The soldier had saluted correctly, but the officer was jealous that the soldier had a female companion, and he took it out on the poor man. That's why he beat the soldier in front of his girlfriend and a large crowd of people.

The soldier, of course, dared not resist. I will never forget the face of the woman, who was in tears. I remember thinking how much I disliked Japanese people. I knew even then that the military was vicious and wrong.

Pettiness, arrogance, jealousy and self-centeredness — all those base and destructive

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emotions violate human rights. On a larger scale, they manifest as war and crime.

Igeta: I understand that in most European countries discrimination is a crime. Japan is still an underdeveloped country as far as human rights are concerned.

Ikeda: Many, many people have said as much. Our distorted society is responsible in no small part for the bullying that plagues our schools.

Kimura: Can I read a few passages written by students about the problem of schoolyard bullying?

One writes: "There's a boy in our class who only picks on those who he thinks are weaker than he is. Whenever he's with someone who he thinks is stronger than him, he flatters and plays up to them. I think people like that are despicable."

Another says: "I have experienced being bullied, but I had friends — that made a world of difference. Because of them, I didn't lose hope. The advice I can offer to students being victimized is to fight back against those doing the bullying. If you have the courage to stand up to them, they'll stop picking on you after a while. It's also important, I think, not to wallow in self-pity. I decided I wouldn't let them beat me! I wouldn't let them ruin my life!"

There's also a student who writes: "I have been bullied, but I have a friend I can talk to about everything. And my parents have been really supportive with their encouragement and advice, too. Above all, I have the Gohonzon. Many times I found myself crying before the Gohonzon as I chanted to change the situation. Fortunately, I did change it, and I'm determined never to forget that experience. I want to become a strong, broadminded and compassionate person, who can make a difference in preventing bullying."

Another person writes: "I used to bully others, but I realized what a terrible thing I was doing, and I apologized. Now we get along very well."

Ikeda: Whatever the reason, bullying is wrong. Maybe those who bully others have their excuses — maybe they want to take out their pain on others. But whatever the reason or motive, bullying and discrimination are impossible to justify.

We all need to come to an agreement that bullying is a crime against humanity. Part of the fight for human rights is standing up to those doing bad things. Another part of that fight is protecting good people.

Igeta: I've heard students say that when they try to put a stop to bullying, they end up being bullied themselves. Fear immobilizes them, and then they get really depressed and down on themselves because they can't change things.

Ikeda: When you can't get the bullies to stop picking on others through your own efforts, talk to your principal, your homeroom teacher, older students whom you trust or your parents. Think of some way to improve the situation.

If that doesn't work, pray to the Gohonzon. But whatever happens, you mustn't get down on yourself if you can't solve the problem. Even if you find yourself unable to do or say anything right now, it's important to recognize that bullying is wrong.

Rather than deciding that you're useless, concentrate on developing yourself so that you can effect a positive change in the future. If you leap into the fray and only get beaten up yourself, it won't solve anything. You have to find a long-term solution.

Basically, unless we cultivate an awareness of human rights in society, we cannot hope to prevent abuse. I hope that each of you will be aware of your own and others' rights, so

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that Japan can become an ideal nation in its respect for human rights.

Igeta: Why do people discriminate against each other? In a book I read, a student from Laos, who is now living in Japan and studying at a Japanese junior high school, said: “When I was in the fifth grade, some of the Japanese newspapers and TV stations did stories on me, because I was from Laos. I remember a Japanese student coming up to me and saying: ‘It’s stupid for you to be on television. You’re not a star or anything.’ I didn’t know what she was talking about, so I asked why she said that. ‘You’re lucky we let you stay here in Japan,’ she said, ‘so you shouldn’t show off.’ I felt so bad.”²

Ikeda: Those unable to see people of other countries as human beings the same as themselves are spiritually impoverished. They have no sound life philosophy. They do not ponder life’s more profound questions.

They care only for their own petty concerns. Our society is filled with people who are consumed by Hunger — at the mercy of unrestrained greed — and Animality — picking on the weak and fawning on the strong. These negative tendencies are what make our society discriminate against and ignore human rights.

We are all human beings. That is what matters. But most Japanese think of themselves as Japanese first and members of the human family second. Such is the narrow-minded, island-nation mentality of Japan. There is a tendency to reject and attack anything the least bit different. That same closed-mindedness isolates Japan in the international community.

For example, there is a large Korean minority living in Japan. The only way that second- and third-generation Koreans can learn their parents’ language and Korean history and culture is to attend private Korean schools. But the Japanese government treats those schools as special schools. For the longest time Korean school students could not participate in interschool sports competitions with Japanese high schools.

Korean school students also weren’t eligible for discount student passes for public transportation. Even today, with the exception of a few private and public universities, those students are not permitted to sit for university entrance examinations because the Japanese Ministry of Education does not recognize their high schools. This is just one example.

Kimura: The constitution guarantees respect for basic human rights, but there is still a deeply entrenched, structural discrimination that violates those rights.

Ikeda: We must teach all Japanese to see both themselves and others first and foremost as human beings. We have to raise people’s awareness of human rights through education. Our schools must teach human rights, our religions must teach human rights, and our government must respect human rights.

Unless we can build a society that regards human beings not as a means to a goal but as the goal itself, we will remain forever a society of discrimination, unhappiness and inequality — a world of Animality where the strong prey upon the weak. We will simply repeat the same patterns.

You may have heard of Minamata disease,³ one of the worst pollution-related diseases to appear in postwar Japan. People afflicted with Minamata disease died in agony, their arms and legs stretching pitifully toward the heavens. They lost the ability to speak, and many lapsed into comas from which they never awoke. Many were babies who had been exposed to mercury poisoning — from the industrial waste-polluted waters of Minamata Bay — while still in the womb.

A group of Minamata disease victims went to Tokyo, to the headquarters of the Chisso

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Corporation, which was responsible for the deadly pollution. They made the long trip from Kumamoto, Kyushu, in spite of being severely disabled by the disease. Their purpose was to discuss a compensation settlement with Chisso executives.

One of the victims asked them: “As human beings, how do you feel about what happened? You are human and so am I. You may have graduated from Tokyo University, but if our skin is cut, we bleed the same way.”⁴

The executives, many of them indeed graduates of Japan’s most prestigious national university, answered: “Yes, that’s true. But we’re just here today to discuss the settlement.”

They didn’t get it. Not only did they not get it, they had the nerve to tell the victims not to make a fuss, because it would shut Chisso down and have serious social repercussions. They began to threaten the very people whose lives they had ruined!

“As human beings, how do you feel about what happened?” The executives wouldn’t answer that question, wouldn’t even entertain it. They were incapable of feeling the pain and suffering of real flesh-and-blood people. If that is the product of Japan’s elite course of education...well, then we really are in trouble.

Kimura: I agree. There is a terrible problem with the Japanese educational system. Control and order are valued above all, creating an environment where it’s difficult for students to voice their opinions.

In addition, too much emphasis is placed on grades. Students are treated as inferior if their test scores aren’t good. Some teachers even take the attitude that students who can’t keep up have forfeited their rights. But the truth is that test scores measure only a tiny part of our worth as human beings.

Ikeda: Studying is important, of course, but the real purpose of study is to enrich oneself as a human being, to make valuable contributions that will benefit many people. Grades are just one way of measuring progress toward that goal. And if study ends up robbing people of their humanity, its purpose is completely destroyed.

Remember, test scores never tell us anything about what a person is really like.

The classic tale *The Little Prince* has been called one of the masterpieces of the 20th century. There is a passage in that lovely story that I’ll share with you:

When you tell them [adults] that you have made a new friend, they never ask you any questions about essential matters. They never say to you, “What does his voice sound like? What games does he love best? Does he collect butterflies?” Instead, they demand: “How old is he? How many brothers has he? How much does he weigh? How much money does his father make?” Only from these figures do they think they have learned anything about him.⁵

This depicts the foolishness of adults, who try to understand a person in terms of numbers. In the process, the person completely disappears!

The heart of a child does not discriminate. If parents don’t teach children to discriminate, babies of all races play happily together.

And little children aren’t the least bit interested in how well-off their playmates’ families are or what kind of work their parents do. They know that all human beings are equal.

Igeta: I think that the purpose of education is to nurture and solidify this spirit in young people. But the actual effect is just the opposite, isn’t it?

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Ikeda: That's where you, the high school division youth, come in. You mustn't give up. You are going to change the country and the world in the coming century.

First Soka Gakkai president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi argued that the times would evolve from military competition to political competition, and from there to economic competition, until finally we would arrive at humanistic competition. I think that is true. If that doesn't happen, the future of the human race is very dark indeed.

Many of the world's leading thinkers lament that there is no country that can serve as an ideal for human rights. Today, Japan is an underdeveloped nation in terms of human rights, but with our peace constitution, we are in a unique position to win that humanistic competition — the contest for human rights — and serve as a world model. I hope our political leaders and educators will work toward that goal.

In the long history of humanity, there has been no true happiness, no true peace. Both leaders and great thinkers have pursued these, but they have not attained them. Unless things change, the future promises to be an endless repetition of the present dilemma. One of the main reasons for this lamentable state of affairs is our failure to securely establish human rights.

It is true that many organizations have talked about the importance of guaranteeing human rights. But all too often, support for human rights stops at words, remaining nothing more than rhetorical flourish to brighten up speeches — it is not accompanied by a serious awareness or knowledge of what safeguarding human rights really implies.

Kimura: Unless our commitment to human rights has a basis in a profound philosophy and view of humanity, our words ring hollow.

Ikeda: Yes. To study human rights, we must study philosophy. We must study Buddhism. And just as important as studying philosophy is the willingness to stand up for our beliefs and take action. Human rights will never be won unless we speak out, unless we fight to secure them.

Even if human rights are protected and guaranteed by law and government policy, ceaseless efforts are necessary to ensure that they are indeed upheld. Otherwise those rights will become empty, real in theory only.

Why is this? Power is a demonic force that despises human rights, whether it be power of national governments or any other institutions or organizations. Securing human rights protects the individual, based on the awareness that each person is precious, irreplaceable. The purpose of upholding human rights is enabling all people to live with dignity and realize their potential.

Power, instead, looks on people as a mass, not as individuals. It treats them as objects, numbers, statistics.

The SGI fundamentally seeks to transform this thinking. Ours is a struggle for human rights that values each individual.

What was the turning point in second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda's life? Mr. Makiguchi's death in prison. Whenever he spoke of it, tears welled up in his eyes. He would clench his fists in rage. Why did his mentor have to die? Why did such a good, just person have to be persecuted? Why had such a foolish, destructive war not been prevented? His pain and grief knew no bounds.

Mr. Makiguchi left prison dead. Mr. Toda left prison alive. President Toda's resulting awareness of his mission was sharp — he would vanquish the demonic powers that caused Mr. Makiguchi's death. Changing Japan's social system and form of government would not be enough to achieve that. Change would have to start from the people. They would

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have to become stronger, wiser. And all the world's people would have to reach out to one another and forge solid bonds of friendship.

The Soka Gakkai's movement is a human rights struggle — by the people, for the people. Our movement's history is one of extending a helping hand to those suffering, those lost and forgotten. To people exhausted by sickness and poverty; people devastated by destructive relationships; people alienated and forlorn as a result of family discord or broken homes. We have shared people's sufferings and risen together with them.

Many of your parents have devoted their lives to this struggle for humanity. Desiring neither fame nor status, they continue to strive with a selfless love for humanity, for the benefit of all. They live in the muddy pond of this perverse society, but they hold a beautiful, pristine ideal above it. They are noble men and women.

I hope you will inherit their commitment and continue to send a great tide of love for humanity across the globe.

Kimura: Valuing the individual is the basis of democracy, in my opinion. And without respect for human rights, democracy will crumble.

Ikeda: When there is little respect for human rights, the way is paved for the lawlessness of dictatorship and mob rule. Society will not prosper. That is why in Japan we must fight for human rights, defending freedom of thought and religion and raising people's awareness.

Human rights, democracy and peace are a single entity. When one disintegrates, they all disintegrate. Leaders in all spheres of society must engrave this truth in their minds.

In a society where there is no fundamental respect for human rights, reputation and standing are nothing.

The most important thing is whether we have genuine love and compassion for others.

More than three decades ago, in 1962, a delegation from Japan's Buraku Liberation League visited China.

The Buraku Liberation League is a grass-roots organization formed by descendants of Japan's old untouchable caste, which was comprised of those engaged in such so-called unclean occupations as being butchers and tanners and who were known as burakumin. For centuries, contact with burakumin was shunned. They were forced to live in segregated ghettos (Jpn buraku). Discrimination and prejudice against descendants of this group remain deeply ingrained in Japan even today, despite a number of government measures to promote equality and integration into the mainstream of Japanese society.

When its members met with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, the delegation head expressed his gratitude that the premier had made time in his busy schedule to see them. Zhou Enlai replied: "What are you saying?! Any premier who would not meet with the most oppressed and suffering of all the Japanese people, when they've come all the way to China, would not deserve to be China's premier!"⁶

Premier Zhou cared as much about the Japanese people as he did about the Chinese. He strove to build a new China by reaching out to form alliances with suffering and oppressed peoples the world over.

Buddhism expounds a great, undifferentiating wisdom — the recognition and insight that all living beings are equal, that the Buddha and living beings are one. The highest state of being, Buddhahood, resides in all people. That is why our every effort must be for people and why everything depends on people. Human rights are the distillation of this essential truth.

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Every sphere of human endeavor — education, culture, science, government, business and economics — will either guarantee and foster human rights or come to a dead end. In education, for example, schools should exist for the sake of the students. Yet today it is as if the students exist for the sake of the schools.

We need to refocus on the importance of benefiting humanity and make a fresh departure from there. That is how human rights will be established.

Igeta: A high school student has a question: “I suffer a physical disability. People in school and in the streets make fun of me. I don’t know what to do. Could you give me some advice?”

Ikeda: Essentially, you have to become stronger. That, too, is part of the struggle for human rights. Having your rights as a human recognized by others is not just having people behave sympathetically toward you. Be proud of yourself as an individual, regardless of your disability. You must be proud of your mission.

Those who laugh at you and make fun of you are cruel and wrong. They are creating a terrible burden of negative karma for themselves by ignoring your right to be treated as a human being.

Letting their taunts get to you is a defeat for human rights. Your strength, however, is a victory for human rights.

Igeta: The last time we talked (Aug. 15 *World Tribune*), you taught us that to be considerate we need to be strong. So we also need to be strong to defend human rights, our own and those of others.

Ikeda: I have spoken with champions of human rights the world over: Linus Pauling of the United States, Austregésilo de Athayde of Brazil, Adolfo Pérez Esquivel of Argentina, B.N. Pande of India. I can’t count how many I have spoken with. All of them were gentle people, and all of them were strong. They had the strength to endure the hardships of persecution or imprisonment, yet just by meeting them you sensed a warm responsiveness and sensitivity to others’ feelings.

Rosa Parks fought against racial discrimination in the United States. She is another of these gentle yet strong people I have met. Even at the height of discrimination against African Americans, she refused to ride in the elevators marked *Colored*. Unable to compromise with such discrimination, she took the stairs. She disliked riding on the buses where the seating was segregated and often chose to walk long distances instead.

One hot summer day, although her throat was parched, she went thirsty rather than drink from the *Colored* water fountain. Mrs. Parks writes: “I have never allowed myself to be treated as a second-class citizen. You must respect yourself before others can respect you.”⁷

One must live with dignity. Character is the foundation of human rights. It is far more valuable than money. No true peace can be achieved as long as we seek only material wealth.

We must make the 21st century a century of human rights. We must build a society that has more than short-term profit as a goal. To do that, the first step is respecting ourselves, living with dignity, self-confidence and pride. Such a person can then treat others with respect.

A great river begins with a tiny drop of water and, from that humble beginning, flows into the sea. The current toward a century of human rights has just begun.

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Kimura: How do I become the kind of person you're talking about?

Ikeda: You can start by reading good literature. You will find many human rights issues explored in the pages of such works.

You can also learn to recognize the positive qualities in others. One of the first steps in achieving human rights is appreciating and embracing individuality.

It's also important to develop a solid perspective about humanity, realizing that though others may be different from you, we are all members of the same human family. According to one scientist, our ability to differentiate operates at a very shallow level of the brain, while our ability to find commonalities involves highly sophisticated information-processing — a much deeper level of the brain.

Those who can get along with all kinds of people, seeing them as equals, as fellow human beings, manifest the true excellence of their character. They are people of genuine culture and education.

The richer our hearts, our humanity, the more we can recognize and value others' humanity. Those who bully and belittle others only diminish their humanity.

Let me share a poem, "Light," by Francis William Bourdillon:

*The night has a thousand eyes,
And the day but one;
Yet the light of the bright world dies,
With the dying sun.
The mind has a thousand eyes,
And the heart but one;
Yet the light of a whole life dies,
When love is done.*

Human rights are the sun illuminating the world. So, too, are love of humanity, kindness and consideration. All these things light our world. Their light brings cherry, plum, peach and apricot into glorious bloom in society, enabling everyone to reveal their unique potential.

Your mission is to make the sun of human rights rise over the 21st century. To do that, you must make the courageous sun of love for humanity rise first in your own hearts.

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1. "Ode to the West Wind," *Shelley—Poems*, selected by Isabel Quigly (London: Penguin Books, 1956), p. 162.
2. Akito Kita, *Watashitachi no Dokuritsu Sengen* (Our Declaration of Independence) (Tokyo: Popurasha, 1992), p. 153.
3. A crippling disease of the central nervous system that affected thousands of people in the 1950s and '60s in and around Minamata, a city in Kyushu. The waters off Minamata were polluted by highly toxic industrial discharges from a local carbide plant owned by Chisso Corporation. The disease resulted from consumption of seafood contaminated with high concentrations of mercury. Many children were born with terrible birth defects for years afterward. A final settlement in lawsuits by the victims and their families against Chisso Corporation was only concluded last year.
4. Quotes here and below from Michiko Ishimure, *Hi no Kanashimi* (Sorrow of the Sun) (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbunsha, 1991), pp. 89–91.

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5. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, trans. Katherine Woods (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1971), pp. 12–13.
6. Saichiro Uesugi, *Jinken wa Sekai o Ugokasu* (Human Rights Move the World) (Osaka: Kaiho Shuppansha, 1991), pp. 127–28.
7. Rosa Parks with Gregory J. Reed, *Quiet Strength: The Faith, the Hope, and the Heart of a Woman Who Changed a Nation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), p. 72.

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