

Art Vs. Arrogance — Part 2 Discussions on Youth

This is the 16th 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).

IGETA: I realize that being a person who appreciates art and culture will be very important in the upcoming century, but how does one go about it? I'm sure there are many who think: "I'm not a good singer," "I can't draw or paint," and feel insecure about their artistic abilities.

IKEDA: I was never any good at drawing myself, nor at calligraphy, but I made an effort to seek out and look at good paintings and fine calligraphy. That effort has paid off very well in my life. We must live our lives wisely and thoughtfully. Many people tend to give up on the way to reaching their goal, thinking they've hit a dead end. Though it may be long and difficult, however, there is always another route to follow.

KIMURA: I think people do the same with their studies. Some people give up on the subject they're studying, convinced that they'll never get it.

IKEDA: When in fact that's simply not the case. Such people find themselves at a dead end only because they decide they are. The greatest enemy of learning is fear. This is true of language, of art, of every area of study. When we're afraid of being laughed at, of being embarrassed, of being looked down upon by others for our mistakes, shortcomings or limitations, progress becomes very difficult. The important thing is to be brave. So what if someone laughs? The person who makes fun of others trying their best is the one who should be ashamed.

There's no need to compare ourselves with others. What's important is our own growth, even if it is just a little at a time. The better the teacher, the more at ease the students are made to feel. That's because the teacher understands that fear is the greatest hindrance to the development of a student's full potential.

IGETA: Intimidation certainly kills culture. The atmosphere in some museums and concert halls makes people feel tense and uncomfortable, when such places should actually make us feel relaxed and energized.

IKEDA: Culture and art should be shared and enjoyed by all. They do not discriminate. When we encounter beauty, we return to the essence of our humanity, where all people are equal. From that standpoint, there is no distinction between company president and employee. There are no teachers or students, no specialists or amateurs. Such distinctions exist in society, but we need a place where we can restore our humanity. That place is constructed by art, by culture. Creating that place is also one of the fundamental roles of religion.

The problem is how to foster a truly cultured mind in those who come into contact with art and culture. For example, a Japanese person who boasts that he or she is an expert on non-Japanese culture is really only using culture to gain personal prestige.

KIMURA: It is often said that the Japanese people are well-schooled but not cultured. This must be related to the problem of developing truly cultured minds.

IKEDA: Some people say Japan is a third-rate cultural power; others say it is fifth-rate. Japanese leaders, teachers and students are not yet cultured individuals. They don't appreciate the importance of culture. They don't even try. They don't make any

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real effort. Since all they care about are appearances — culture as a formality — they have no real experience of culture.

Up to now, Japan emphasized economic achievement. Culture was always just an “extra.” We Japanese have also tended to judge culture’s worth by its price, its monetary value, and this has become a national trait. Japan’s future is dark unless we change this.

KIMURA: Isn’t the idea that culture is somehow an extra still rather firmly rooted in Japan? We seem to think that now that we’ve achieved a strong economy, it’s time to turn our attention to culture, but that view treats culture as a mere decoration, something only for show.

IGETA: Most Japanese don’t seem to realize that culture is not an extra; it is a vital necessity for human beings.

IKEDA: The Meiji-period writer Natsume Soseki (1867–1916) wrote in *The Three-Cornered World*:

Approach everything rationally, and you become harsh. Pole along in the stream of emotions, and you will be swept away by the current. Give free rein to your desires, and you become uncomfortably confined. It is not a very agreeable place to live, this world of ours.

When the unpleasantness increases, you want to draw yourself up to some place where life is easier. It is just at the point when you first realize that life will be no more agreeable no matter what heights you may attain, that a poem may be given birth, or a picture created.

We have to live. We work, we eat our daily bread, and we grow old. Our lives are a constant repetition of little deeds. Against that backdrop, we progress, we seek a more fully human existence, we desire to make a flower bloom. From that feeling culture and art are born.

Life is painful. It has thorns, like the stem of a rose. Culture and art are the roses that bloom on that stem.

IGETA: A life without art is like nature without any flowers.

IKEDA: The flower is yourself, your humanity. Art is the liberation of the humanity inside yourself.

The institutions of human society treat us as parts in a machine. They assign us ranks and place considerable pressure upon us to fulfill our defined roles. We need something to help us restore our lost and distorted humanity. Each of us has feelings that have been suppressed and have built up inside. We have a voiceless cry resting in the depths of our souls, waiting for expression. Art gives those feelings voice and form.

We can also vent those feelings through pleasures and play, which may suffice for a while, but in the long run such distractions bring no true satisfaction or sense of fulfillment. Our lives will grow dull and lusterless, we will feel empty inside, because our true selves, our true heart’s desires, have not been set free at the deepest core. Art is the cry of the soul from the core of one’s being.

Creating and appreciating art set free the soul trapped deep within us. That is why art causes such joy. Art, quite aside from any questions of skill or its lack, is the emotion, the pleasure of expressing one’s life exactly as it is. Those who see such art are moved by its passion, its strength, its intensity and its beauty. That is why it is impossible to separate a fully human life from art.

The Buddhist concept of cherry, plum, peach and damson — that each person should live earnestly, true to his or her unique individuality — has much in common with culture and art. Culture is the flowering of each individual’s true humanity, which is why it transcends national boundaries, time periods and all other distinctions. Likewise, correct

Buddhist practice means cultivating oneself and serving as an inspiration for leading a truly cultured life.

IGETA: I can see now what a profound role culture plays in human existence. A society that regards culture as a mere extra is not a fully humanistic society.

IKEDA: A society that values culture is a society that values human happiness. The first Soka Gakkai president, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, said that happiness lies in the pursuit of beauty, benefit and virtue. Benefit is the pursuit of all that is rewarding, in the broadest sense. Virtue is the pursuit of justice and opposition to injustice. Beauty is the pursuit of art and culture. All three of these contribute to our happiness. When any one is lacking, there is imbalance. When people become unbalanced, society becomes unbalanced, and people cannot attain happiness.

Today's Japan is unbalanced in favor of political and economic interests and technology, which makes it all the more important to restore balance by emphasizing the importance of art and culture and supporting their development. Such efforts will make Japan a more humanistic nation, a nation that other nations of the world can safely trust, and consequently we will be able to contribute to world peace.

KIMURA: You have long been fighting to achieve just that. Despite your endeavors, unethical people with no understanding of the importance of art and culture have attacked you and tried to undermine your efforts. This makes us very angry.

IKEDA: From the time I met Josei Toda, the second Soka Gakkai president, when I was 19, I realized that the only route for Japan was to become a cultured nation. Only through culture and the arts would Japan rise spiritually from the ashes of war. This is true of any country.

I have stuck to this belief over the years, and that is why I, though an ordinary private citizen, could meet with so many people around the world and have earned their trust and support. It has all been due to the power of culture.

I held a dialogue with Dr. Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975), the great British historian, some 25 years ago [in 1972 and 1973]. We spoke about many topics, including the importance of culture. In the midst of our discussions, there was some exciting political news of a meeting between two world leaders. At that time, Dr. Toynbee said to me that though our discussions might not be attracting much attention at the moment, in 10 or 20 years people all around the world would agree with and laud what we had said. His prediction came true.

Today the dialogue between President Ikeda and Dr. Toynbee has been published in 21 languages.

The power of culture may be hard to detect at times, but it is a fundamental force, since it transforms the human heart. Political and economic developments may be flashier and make the news more often, but culture and education are the forces that actually shape any age. We must not make the mistake of looking only at the shallow waters that bubble noisily over the rocks; the deep currents are even more important in knowing the true nature of the river.

IGETA: To return to an earlier point, you said that whether one has skill makes no difference. Could you elaborate on that?

IKEDA: Yes. Whether or not one is skilled, the important thing is to come into contact with great art. The feeling of wonder and excitement one gets from experiencing great works is the heart of art. The essence of art is seeing, hearing, feeling and then discovering.

KIMURA: Though we know we should experience great art, many of us may not feel

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confident that we know what art is great and what isn't. We may not appreciate what others agree is a great work. How can we recognize great art?

IKEDA: A great work of art is one that truly moves and inspires you. You yourself must be moved. Don't look at art with others' eyes. Don't listen to music with others' ears. You must react to art with your own feelings, your own heart and mind. If you allow yourself to be swayed by the opinions of others — "It must be good, because everyone else likes it," "It must be bad, because no one else likes it" — your feelings, your sensibility, which should be the very core of the artistic experience, will wither and die.

To enjoy art to the fullest, you must abandon all preconceived notions, leaving a blank slate. Then confront the work directly, with your entire being. If you are deeply moved, then that work is, for you, a great work of art.

KIMURA: Then what is considered a great work of art is different from person to person?

IKEDA: Though one's subjective responses are very important, we mustn't lose sight of objectivity, either. It is necessary to nurture, through effort, the ability to appreciate truly great art. As you progress in your degree of understanding, art that you thought was good in the past may no longer seem so satisfying, and works that once left you cold suddenly have a tremendous power to move you.

For example, works of art that are recognized around the world and have moved many, many people over the centuries do possess qualities that merit their being identified as great, universal works of art. Art that lacks those qualities, though it may be popular for a time, tends not to last. There are certain experiences that almost all human beings are inclined to agree upon: When we look up at the clear blue sky, we all think it is marvelous; when we gaze at cherry blossoms, we all find them beautiful.

The great works of art also possess a universal quality. They possess a life force similar to that of nature itself. To instill that life in their work, the great artists suffer immensely, pouring their whole life energy into their art.

IGETA: How can we nurture the ability to recognize great art?

IKEDA: Probably the best way is to see and hear as many of the generally agreed-upon masterpieces of world art as you can, which will cultivate and refine your sensibilities. You will naturally learn to distinguish good from bad.

Looking at second- and third-rate art will not help you understand first-rate art, but once you know first-rate art, you will immediately apprehend what is second and third rate. Your critical eye will emerge. That is why you should make an effort to come into contact with the best from the very start.

You can see great art in books, of course, but seeing the real thing, when you have a chance, is an entirely different experience. I still remember how tremendously moved I was when I first saw the great paintings in the Louvre. It's the difference between seeing a photograph of a person and the person himself.

View good paintings. Listen to good music. Experiencing fine art will develop and nurture your mind.

IGETA: We are not all meant to be professional artists, so I guess the important thing is to foster a love of art and culture.

IKEDA: To enjoy painting or singing as a hobby can also be a way of participating in the movement to spread culture. Recently, we have even seen Japanese companies seeking to recruit employees who have some kind of talent. There are many reasons for this, but one is that they look for such people because they value the kind of personality that pursues art and culture. We should all develop the mind to rejoice in, praise and share in the gift of those who have artistic talents and a richness of heart, whether they achieve wide recognition or not. Cultivating such a beautiful mind is a very worthy effort.

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Culture and art are not just decorations. They are not accessories. What matters is whether culture enriches the essential substance of our lives.

IGETA: I understand that the important thing is to enrich our inner selves. The leader of the high school girl's division in Kyoto, Reiko Fujita, is working in a uniquely Japanese field of textile dyeing, in which complicated patterns are hand-painted or stenciled on silk. Ms. Fujita says: "My feelings find expression in the colors I use. For example, if I am thinking of the happiness of others, that will appear in the designs and the colors. That's why I need to continue developing myself."

She also said: "I hope to look out to the larger world and breathe the fresh air of change, infuse my craft with that inspiration, and then share it with the world as an example of Japanese culture. My aim is to create beautiful art for the world, for others."

IKEDA: That's wonderful. I hope we can inspire many others who also respect culture and love art. When many such individuals come together, and when nations are linked in that spirit, our world will be ideal, and the century of true humanity will dawn.

KIMURA: That will surely be the century of peace.

IKEDA: Peace and culture are one. A genuinely cultured nation is a peaceful nation, and vice versa. When conflicts multiply, culture wanes and nations fall into a hellish existence. The history of the human race is a contest between culture and barbarity. As we leave the tensions of the Cold War behind, the pressing question becomes "What will the coming century be like?" Only culture is a force strong enough to put an end to conflict and lead humanity in the direction of peace.

KIMURA: You had enormous foresight in establishing so many cultural institutions, such as the Min-On Concert Association, the Fuji Art Museum [in both Tokyo and Shizuoka], Soka University and many others. You have contributed greatly to that cultural force you speak of.

IKEDA: At the time, everyone opposed those projects! No one understood what I was doing.

IGETA: To pursue such a vision on your own, against the opposition of others, and to actually carry it out reflects a great artistry in its own right.

In culture and other fields as well, people often say that the Japanese are good imitators but poor innovators. How do we learn to innovate?

IKEDA: The pursuit of beauty, like most other human activities, often starts with imitation. All learning begins as imitating; one can't innovate without first learning the basics. Someone plunking around on the piano without having first mastered the keyboard is not what we call an innovator. Imitation is the first step toward the creation of new art.

But one can't remain an imitator forever. In Japan, most artists never get beyond imitation, never reach the stage in which they are creating something of their own. We are a nation of imitators; in technology and many other fields, we have used our ability to imitate to make money and created the Japan we see today. But though we are clever imitators, we don't seem to have the ability to take the next step, to break through the wall. The only way to surmount this restrictive tradition is human revolution.

KIMURA: What is essential for advancing from imitation to innovation?

IKEDA: If we only repeat what we have seen and heard, we will never advance beyond imitation. The mind is crucial. We have to experience with the mind and express with the mind in order to innovate. That requires blood, sweat and tears, it requires relentless searching and continual effort. Only then do we gradually acquire the ability to express ourselves fully and naturally.

Effort is key. Leonardo Da Vinci (1452–1519) wrote in his manuscript notes: "Poor

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Leonardo! Look how much you suffer!” [Translated from Japanese *Reonarudo da Binchi no Shuki* (The Notebook of Leonardo da Vinci), trans. Mimpei Sugiura (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1977), vol. 1, p. 31]. And Beethoven, on his deathbed, while eagerly continuing to study the music of George Frederic Handel (1685– 1759), is said to have declared that he still had much to learn.

KIMURA: Beethoven said that? I always thought Beethoven was a very proud man who regarded himself as a genius who could learn from no one.

IKEDA: He was a proud man, but all great people are also humble, in the truest sense. They know what it is to respect and look up to others. The pettier the individual, the more prone he is to envy.

Beethoven once wrote to a young girl:

The true artist has no pride; unhappily he sees that Art has no bounds. Obscurely he feels how far away he is from his aim, and even while others may be admiring him, he mourns his failure to attain that end which his better genius illumines like a distant sun. [Michael Hamburger, *Beethoven — Letters, Journals and Conversations* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1951), p. 115]

IGETA: This profound humility must be what allowed Beethoven to create the great works he did.

IKEDA: In the same letter, I believe, Beethoven wrote: “I know of no other advantages of human beings than those which place them in the ranks of the good and the superior; wherever I find these, there is my home” [Ibid.].

KIMURA: It’s who we are as people that is important. There have been, certainly, famous artists who were not especially good human beings.

IKEDA: Yes. Appreciating an artist’s music or painting is quite different from respecting the artist as a human being. We must be careful not to confuse the issues of artistic skill and talent with respect for the artist as a person. It is not at all rare to find “cultured” people who have lived degenerate lives or have committed atrocities. It may be an extreme case, but Hitler regarded himself as an artist. Many of his paintings survive, and though opinions vary, it is probably fair to say that they are not inferior from the standpoint of technique. Yet Hitler can never be regarded as a civilized, cultured person. He was a barbarian, an incarnation of the evil nature of corrupt power.

An example of an artist who was very good-natured was the French painter Jean Baptiste Camille Corot (1796–1875), a precursor of the Impressionists. After achieving some success as a painter, he was always kind to those around him. When one of his models married a poor man, he gave her a dowry. When a painter friend was about to be driven from the house he was renting, Corot bought the house and gave it to him.

A woman who knew Corot is said to have remarked, “I don’t know if his paintings are masterpieces, but he himself is a masterpiece created by God.”

KIMURA: Even artists must examine themselves as human beings. They can’t allow themselves to become self-centered.

IKEDA: Being creative is very different from being self-centered, just as genuine individuality and an invented, eccentric persona are different. In fact, it may well be that truly unique individuals express their uniqueness without even trying. They seek and accept nature, life and truth and try to convey them exactly as they are. In the process, their individuality naturally shines through. That is true creativity, true innovation.

I think the French sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) meant the same thing when he said that life is more important than individuality in the creation of art.

IGETA: Real creativity is important for all of us, not just for artists. In the future, Japan cannot get by with mere imitation.

IKEDA: That's probably true. We will face a "creativity competition." But it's far easier to talk about creativity than to actually be creative. Being creative is a fierce struggle. Creative people always face opposition from conservatives, and they must endure the loneliness and isolation of the misunderstood. They need courage. They need tenacity. They need to have faith in their endeavor that isn't swayed by petty considerations of gain and loss.

KIMURA: When people say the Japanese are not creative, they may be pointing to the fact that many Japanese lack such faith and courage.

IKEDA: I would like you, our young people, to make Japan and the world into a creative, culturally rich society. The 20th century killed far too many, beginning with its two world wars. Though it is spoken of as the century in which civilization made its greatest advances, it has also been the century of the most barbaric massacres. Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, the Nanking massacre, and the Stalinist purges are all symbols of that barbarism. They are lessons to us all: Even an apparently civilized society will never have peace without truly cultured individuals who love humanity. Without that, the products of modern civilization become the tools of demons.

Mr. Makiguchi taught that education is the highest of all arts, the art of creating the values of fine character. His words are golden. Art does not belong to a select few. Nurturing people, cultivating the self is also art. Art is displayed in a beautiful life, beautiful actions, beautiful prayer.

The wonderful art of peace is devoting ourselves entirely to linking one beautiful human heart to another. When such cultivated lives and culture itself are joined, the truly humane culture of the 21st century will be born. When fully realized humanity and art come together, a truly humane art will be born. It is your mission to forge that spectacular and creative future.

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