

## What Does It Really Mean To Be Youthful?

*SGI President Ikeda gave the following speech at the 18th Headquarters Leaders Meeting, held in conjunction with the 6th Women's Division Leaders Meeting and the 6th Chiba Prefecture General Meeting, at the Tokyo Makiguchi Memorial Hall in Hachioji, Jan. 8.*

What a memorable way to start the year by holding our first leaders meeting on such a snowy day! Congratulations to everyone. Allow me also to warmly welcome our friends from Spain, Taiwan, South Korea and elsewhere, who have braved the cold to join us here. My congratulations, too, to our admirable women's division on the holding of their leaders meeting and to the members of Chiba, that champion of the Kanto region, on their prefecture general meeting today.

Nichiren Daishonin says of his age, "We live today in a time of trouble, where the power of the people has grown weak" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 6, p. 281). The same can probably be said of Japan today. In fact, the Japanese people are perhaps even more spiritually weak now than then.

The Daishonin's decree, I firmly believe, is to strengthen the power of the people, to inspire their enthusiasm, to support their activities and to put them in command of their own destiny. This is the only way to achieve social prosperity and kosen-rufu.

### **Japan's First Environmental Disaster**

Modern Japan's first major environmental disaster was the Ashio Copper Mine Incident that occurred just before the turn of the century.

*The disaster occurred as a result of arsenic and other toxins dumped into the Watarase River basin by the Ashio Copper Mine in Tochigi Prefecture, with serious repercussions on some 300,000 local residents.*

The Soka Gakkai's second president, Josei Toda, often spoke about this incident. He always instructed and informed us with his deeply insightful perspectives. He was truly a great teacher.

When the disaster occurred, the noted politician and activist Shozo Tanaka (1841–1913) sprang to action.

*Shozo Tanaka was a thinker and human rights activist who lived during the late 19th and early 20th centuries and who saw Japan's rapid transformation into an industrial society. He was born in 1841 to a farm family in Shimotsuke (the present city of Sano in Tochigi Prefecture). As a young village headman, he protested the actions of a corrupt domain official. Though imprisoned and tortured, he was not daunted. In the end, he was released from prison and the corrupt official was dismissed in disgrace.*

*Later, while working as a prefectural official, Tanaka was imprisoned on false charges, spending approximately three years in jail. During that time he devoted himself to reading books and studying political science and economics.*

*In 1890, when he was 49, Tanaka was elected to the Diet in the first parliamentary elections held under the country's new constitution. For 10 years, Tanaka was an outspoken critic of the government for its failure to act to curtail the pollution caused by the Ashio Copper Mine. Disgusted by the stubborn refusal of those in power to heed his*

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*pleas, Tanaka finally abandoned politics and went to live among the villagers who had suffered from the disaster. In 1913, he died while still carrying on his work among the people.*

Shozo Tanaka said of the Japanese leaders in his day, “None of them cares a straw about the people.” He angrily condemned their callous indifference. It was an outrage to him that government and business should actively collude to oppress the people and inflict suffering and misery upon them. It was as if the government were trying to wage war on the people, he declared.

In a far cry from the ideal of government as the people’s servant, most of Japan’s leaders privately believed that the government was far more important than the people. Many of them had nationalist leanings and felt little compunction in using government authority to subvert justice and truth to promote their ends. Tanaka battled such leaders head on with a furious resolve to protect the people at all cost.

Similarly, in my own struggles, I have been motivated by the sole desire to protect my precious fellow SGI members.

Tanaka eventually resigned as a member of the Diet. Leaving his family to go and live in a modest dwelling among the villagers, he fought to the end of his life together with the victims of the copper mine disaster. He was a great humanist.

What was the root cause of this Japanese tragedy? According to Shozo Tanaka, it was that the country’s leaders lacked spiritual fiber. They had neither religious faith nor spirituality, he asserted. This is a profound insight.

Tanaka lamented, too, that the Japanese people meekly allowed themselves to be herded about and treated like so much livestock. They just grumbled and complained, he said, but lacked the energy and courage of their convictions to vent their anger and rise up to change the situation. He deplored this tendency of his compatriots.

What could be done to change it? He was firmly convinced that the only thing that could save the Japanese people from their apathy and resignation was a fresh and vibrant religion, calling for a break with decadent, enervated religions and their corrupt, degenerate clergies.

*At the time, Tanaka had found inspiration in Christian writings.*

### **The Only Way To Revitalize Society**

Tanaka ultimately concluded that political action, speech and practical efforts alone are ineffective in changing the way people think and behave. Only through religious reformation, he believed, could people’s hearts and minds be revitalized. It was while striving to realize this aspiration that his life ended.

Today, Tanaka is regarded as one of Japan’s greatest thinkers of the Meiji period (1868–1912). He is also remarkable for the fact that, long before anyone else, he predicted that ruin lay in store for Japan. As early as 1912, he prophesied in his diary: “Japan will meet destruction, and from its ashes a sage will be born.” Tanaka’s prime objective was to develop new strength in the people.

I am confident that today the SGI’s movement for religious reformation is actively invigorating and revitalizing the power of the people from within, at the most fundamental level.

In the years after Tanaka’s death, Japanese nationalism intensified and countless people lost their lives in successive campaigns of military aggression, culminating in World War II. The victims of nationalism were the ordinary citizens.

Many today are worried that Japan is once again showing signs of embarking down a

nationalistic path. The great tragedy of earlier decades must never be allowed to repeat. And it is our duty to ensure that it doesn't.

Let us advance with pride and confidence in our mission.

## **Acquiring Youthfulness**

What is youth? The French philosopher Roger Garaudy suggests that while most people believe a person is born young and then ages and dies, in reality acquiring youth in the deepest sense is a very long and challenging process.

The youth of which he speaks is the spiritual strength not to stagnate or grow resistant to change but to stay ever open to new possibilities. It is the power of the spirit that refuses to succumb to complacency and strives to keep moving forward.

In this sense, babies and children do not possess true youth and spiritual strength. They yet lack the tempering of life experience so vital for the development of those traits. The same applies even to young adults — if their characters remain unforged, then they are actually old. Only a person whose spirit has been tempered and enlightened through long and varied struggles in the course of daily life can be said to possess real youthfulness and inner fortitude.

The German author Hermann Hesse (1877–1962) writes that the more one matures, the younger one grows. And certainly there are many people who, as they age, become increasingly vigorous and energetic, more broad-minded and tolerant, living with a great sense of freedom and assurance. It is important to remember that aging and growing old are not necessarily the same thing.

From its February issue on, the Japanese monthly journal *Ushio* will carry the serialization of a dialogue I am conducting with Dr. René Simard, rector of Canada's University of Montreal and an internationally renowned cancer researcher, on the subject of birth, aging, sickness and death. Dr. Simard and I recently had another opportunity for a wide-ranging discussion [Jan. 6] during his visit to Japan.

Through my continued dialogues with outstanding specialists in various fields, I hope to pass on precious jewels of wisdom for posterity. It is with this spirit that I have published nearly 30 dialogues. And I hope to continue these efforts.

While the people I talk with come from all different specialties, I can have deep conversations with them because I uphold the universal teaching of Buddhism. The purpose of these discussions is not simply to inform but to provide a substantive discussion of fundamental issues and principles. It is my wish to leave behind dialogues that shine with valuable insights on life and the world.

## **Grow Younger With Each Passing Year**

Dr. Guy Bourgeault, professor of bioethics of the University of Montreal, is also participating in later installments of the *Ushio* dialogue. In one part, he describes his views on the meaning of true youth as follows:

I have often said that I felt “younger” at 30 years of age than at 20, younger at 40 than at 30.... I felt a greater freedom. I felt more than before “in possession of my faculties,” more “in control” as we sometimes say. Richer experiences, themselves being more numerous and undoubtedly more diverse. More assured, taking into account this richness, and more open, more available for new encounters, new friendships, new confrontations, etc.

It seems awkward to me that we place openness and flexibility on the side of youth and closed rigidity and sclerosis under the seal of old age. In the concrete experience of life, which varies surely from one person to another, things are more nuanced. It seems

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to me that the same goes for institutions, societies and persons: the intransigence of youth impedes a lot of learning. In any case, openness and the welcome of the new seem to me easier at 40 years of age than at 20.

From my own experience, I would have to agree with Dr. Bourgeault's view. With age, he says, he has expanded the scope of his activities and his circle of friends and acquaintances.

In the Soka Gakkai, we find that it is by and large those members advanced in years who prove themselves to be masters in the art of Buddhist dialogue. Many young people are no match for them, because they may lack the depth and length of life experience.

By virtue of having thoroughly tempered their lives over many years, these masters of dialogue have a knack for interacting with new acquaintances in a very flexible and easy way. They also have wisdom and the ability to reach out and embrace everyone. I heartily congratulate all members who have achieved such profound character through many years of practice.

Nichiren Daishonin says of those who embrace the Mystic Law, "You will grow younger, and your good fortune will accumulate" (MW-5, 158). The Daishonin's teaching is absolutely free of any falsehood. The Lotus Sutra also promises perennial youth and eternal life, declaring that its practitioners "will know neither old age nor death" (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 288). Surely this refers to a life that has been tempered and forged through unflagging Buddhist practice.

Shakyamuni proclaims, "People who are vigilant do not die; people who are negligent are as if dead." This is definitely true. Unremitting diligence in our Buddhist practice — brave and vigorous exertion — infuses our lives with the great life force of the eternal Buddha. In contrast, people who try to get by in life through cunning and deception enact a living death.

One perceptive observer said to me: "There are countless ageless people who have thoroughly forged their lives in the Soka Gakkai.... The life force that many of them exude gives one a palpable sense of life's eternal nature."

In addition to the young at heart, the SGI also has millions of admirable youth among its number. Nothing can shake our lively enthusiasm in the least.

With genuine youth and boundless life force, let us realize great victory in society, in activities for kosen-rufu and in our own lives again this year.

## **Success Depends on Our Resolve**

The efforts made by a single individual can be immensely important. Nichiren Daishonin repeatedly states that victory depends not on numbers but on a group or individual's attitude or resolve.

The Daishonin's words have profound meaning. He often speaks of his solitary struggle. In one passage, he writes: "Everyone in Japan, from the sovereign on down to the common people, all without exception tried to do me harm, but I have survived until this day. This is because, although I am alone, I have firm faith [in the Lotus Sutra]" (MW-3, 198). In other words, his strong faith enabled him to emerge triumphant, with his life intact, despite the harsh opposition and attacks of the entire country. I find this passage deeply moving.

We must not be swayed by our environment. Even if we should be alone against many enemies, we should fight for what is right. That is living as a true disciple of the Daishonin. And when we do so, the Daishonin will protect us without fail. Crucial to this is our strong resolve, firm faith and the invincible Soka Gakkai spirit.

In the organization, too, if we let our numbers make us complacent and develop the lazy attitude that someone else will take care of it instead of taking responsibility ourselves, then

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we have already let ourselves be defeated, let decay begin to set in.

On the other hand, a person who says “I’ll do it,” who is willing to take on a challenge even if he or she is the only one, is a true winner. The determination, the commitment to take action yourself, is the force that leads to victory. As Buddhism teaches with the principle of 3,000 realms in a life-moment, our mind or attitude can change everything.

Please remember that a leader is not someone who takes it easy while getting others to do the work. Being a leader does not give one the right to shout at others and behave arrogantly. A genuine leader employs sound judgment and wisdom to create an environment where everyone can practice and conduct their SGI activities in a way that creates the greatest possible value for all.

### **‘I Am Merely the Son of a Commoner’**

Nichiren Daishonin says of himself, “I was born in a remote land, and, moreover, a person of low station” (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 94). Whereas Shakyamuni was born in a royal palace, the Daishonin was born in a remote village and had no particular standing in society.

The Daishonin also says: “I, Nichiren, am neither a resident of the capital, the center of the country, nor the son of a general on the frontiers. I am merely the son of a commoner and come from a remote province” (MW-5, 293).

Nichiren Daishonin is the original Buddha, the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law. Shakyamuni and all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas throughout time and space are his followers. Yet the Daishonin proudly declares that he was born as a commoner in Awa Province [present-day Chiba Prefecture]. What a noble declaration this is! It is the quintessence of humanism.

Prestigious family background and social standing are ephemeral. One’s worth as a human being is all that ultimately matters, not status, wealth or academic credentials.

Many friends have gathered here today from Chiba, the birthplace of Nichiren Daishonin, to hold their sixth general meeting. Once again, my heartfelt congratulations to you all.

The original Buddha, Nichiren Daishonin, was born as a person of the most lowly status. Why do you suppose that was?

The 26th high priest, Nichikan (1665–1726), offers two explanations. First, he says, it was “to clarify that [the Daishonin] was the votary of the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Day of the Law by calling forth the three powerful enemies.” He elaborates: “Had the Daishonin been born to a powerful noble family, then even if he had exerted himself in propagation activities, it is unlikely that the three powerful enemies would have vied to attack him. Under such circumstances, how could he have revealed his true identity as the votary of the Lotus Sutra?” [*Nichikan Shonin Mondanshu* (Collected Commentaries of Nichikan)].

Shakyamuni predicted that the three powerful enemies would all descend upon the votary of the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Day. Had the Daishonin been on the side of the powerful, he would likely not have been severely persecuted. Thus, precisely because he was on the side of the people, he could actualize Shakyamuni’s prophecies.

Calling forth the three powerful enemies and defeating them makes one a votary of the Lotus Sutra. It is only natural, then, when we advance upon the correct path of mentor and disciple originating with the Daishonin, we will encounter many obstacles. By battling the three powerful enemies, we become genuine disciples of the Daishonin. In that respect, the authenticity of the path of mentor and disciple followed by the first three presidents of the Soka Gakkai has been proven beyond doubt.

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## **An Expression of Great Compassion**

The second reason Nichikan gives for the Daishonin's being born of low status is "as the ultimate expression of compassion whose highest ideal is to save people from the lowest status." The Daishonin was born not only as a commoner but of the lowest and most despised class of society so he could lead all people to enlightenment. This was a manifestation of his immense compassion.

It is often the case that people of very humble stations in life who are experiencing hardships and difficulties are more compassionate than people who enjoy privilege and high social status. Those who do not need to fight and struggle in life tend to grow cold-hearted and indifferent to the sufferings of others.

A Buddha is one who dauntlessly takes action for the people's happiness, who resolutely fights for the welfare of humanity, while enduring a storm of obstacles and persecution. The Daishonin's Buddhism fosters such individuals. In that sense, the adherents of the Nikken sect are definitely not disciples of the Daishonin.

How supremely noble and respectable is the true identity of Nichiren Daishonin, born an ordinary person. As an indication of this, Nichikan identifies six virtues, or six areas, in which the Daishonin excels in nobility. These are his wisdom, his compassion, his vow to practice without begrudging his life, his conduct as a practitioner in battling the three powerful enemies, his true identity or state of life, and his possessing the three virtues. The three virtues are the attributes of sovereign, teacher and parent, which the Daishonin embodies and which could be described as the virtues of protecting, guiding and caring for the people.

In short, nobility is not a matter of status or position. Fundamentally, it is determined by our sincerity, our spiritual state, and the inner essence of life itself. This is Nichiren Daishonin's true spirit and Nichikan's teaching. Therefore, the notion that priests are categorically superior to lay people is absolutely foreign to the Daishonin's Buddhism.

Those who spread the Law are most noble. We must not allow ourselves to be swayed by such things as social standing or wealth. We must not be defeated by the eight winds of life's changing fortunes [prosperity, decline, disgrace, honor, praise, censure, suffering and pleasure]. Those who succumb to them are not disciples of the Daishonin.

## **The Significance of Priests' Robes**

It is a well-established tenet in the Daishonin's Buddhism that priests wear coarse robes. One of the reasons that High Priest Nichikan cites for this is that "it represents the lowest status in the Latter Day of the Law" [Fuji Shugaku Yoshu (*The Selected Works of the Fuji School*), vol. 3, p. 222]. This refers to the fact that Nichiren Daishonin deliberately chose to be born a member of the lowest social class in Japanese society of the day so that he might teach the supreme teaching of the Latter Day, that is, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, to all people. The robes of priests were therefore by necessity extremely plain and simple, Nichikan said. They had to be if one truly wished to embody the Daishonin's all-encompassing spirit to lead others to happiness as an ordinary common mortal of the most humble station in life.

The purpose of priestly robes is not to enhance one's personal prestige or authority. To use robes as a symbol of authority goes completely against the spirit of the Daishonin and High Priest Nichikan.

High Priest Nichikan describes priests' robes as "work clothes" — that is, practical attire for carrying out propagation.

*High Priest Nichikan says: "Since they are suited for carrying out the practice of*

*propagation in the Latter Day,...they are called 'work clothes for practicing the way.' Are they not ideal for traveling far and wide and carrying out the practice of propagation?" [Ibid., pp. 222–23].*

Priests' robes are work clothes that should become drenched with sweat from efforts to widely spread the Daishonin's teachings. They are definitely not garments designed for show or self-aggrandizement or for brandishing priestly authority. Priests who view their robes in such a fashion commit great slander by betraying the spirit of the Daishonin.

### **Treasuring Devoted Practitioners**

In January 1280, amid the bitter winter cold of Minobu, Nichiren Daishonin writes, "I no longer shave my head, so I look like a quail, and my robe gets so stiff with ice that it resembles the icy wings of the mandarin duck" (MW-7, 208). While the original Buddha, he led an incredibly austere and humble existence. When I think of the circumstances he was forced to endure, my heart aches.

Despite his own privations, the Daishonin sent a light-gray surplice to his follower Sennichi-ama, who was exerting herself for kosen-rufu on distant Sado Island. Nichiren Daishonin always treasured most highly his followers who were bravely propagating the Law.

The priests of the Nikken sect, decking themselves out in expensive robes and indulging in decadent, extravagant lifestyles, demonstrate a spirit that is the complete antithesis of the founder's.

We must take the enemies of the Buddha to task. We absolutely cannot remain silent when we see people distorting and corrupting the Daishonin's teaching. To speak out resolutely and clarify what is correct and what is erroneous is the Soka Gakkai spirit. If we simply try to be amiable and avoid making waves, then we will play right into the hands of people of malicious intent. Therefore, let us courageously speak out for justice as we did during the Soka Gakkai's early days.

Almost as if he were predicting his school's future degeneration into a body of priests like today's Nikken sect, High Priest Nichikan issued the following admonition: "Priests [neglectful of their Buddhist practice] who wear expensive robes and are fond of gorging themselves are as numerous as the particles of dirt in the earth. My disciples, I urge you to reflect on yourselves three times each day" [*The Selected Works of the Fuji School*, p. 237]. He left these strict words behind for his fellow priests of later ages.

Today we also have a number of friends from the United States present. Welcome.

The year before last when I visited the United States, I attended an outdoor graduation ceremony beneath sunny blue skies at the University of Denver [June 1996]. On that occasion, as the recipient of an honorary doctorate in education, I wore the university's academic gown. I was impressed to learn then that this gown symbolizes the egalitarian spirit of learning. The gown covers all outward signs of social status and the like, indicating how, in the world of education, all people are equal. It isn't worn as a sign of status or honor but of equality.

The fundamental spirit of Buddhism, too, is that all people are equal. A person is not great simply because of his or her social standing, fame, academic background or position in the organization. In the world of faith, the truly great are those who spread the Mystic Law and strive for kosen-rufu, who actively work for the sake of Buddhism and the happiness of others. Supremely respectable are those who champion the cause of kosen-rufu.

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## **Victory Through Perseverance!**

To exert ourselves in accord with the Buddha's teachings is true Buddhist practice. This is the Soka Gakkai spirit. Only the members of the SGI are faithfully carrying out the Daishonin's teachings to the letter.

In the Gosho "On Practicing the Buddha's Teachings," the Daishonin speaks of "donning the armor of endurance" (MW-1, 101). A struggle is won through endurance and tenacity. Those who gird themselves in the "armor of endurance" and struggle tenaciously are certain to triumph in the end. True victors in life are those who gain ultimate victory.

Let's be determined to win without fail in all our challenges this year, demonstrating outstanding courage, confidence and wisdom as champions of widespread propagation, directly connected to Nichiren Daishonin. With solid unity of purpose and the Soka Gakkai spirit, let's once again give it our all.

I wish each of you a most meaningful year. Please take care of your health. All the very best!

**WT**