

BRIGHT IDEAS

SGI President Ikeda gave the following speech at the 19th Headquarters Leaders Meeting, held concurrently with the 4th Kanagawa Prefecture General Meeting, at the Soka International Friendship Hall in Sendagaya, Tokyo, Feb. 3.

Thank you all for gathering here today in this cold weather. I commend each of you on your tremendous efforts in January. The joint effort of the youth division members in particular signals the start of colossal development in the year ahead. The 21st century belongs to the youth division. A new age led by the youth has already begun, and I rejoice in this with you with all my heart.

Also, to all my friends from Kanagawa, congratulations on holding your fourth general meeting! My warmest welcome to you all.

Don't Ever Give Up

Whatever the endeavor, it is important not to give up until you succeed. This is the theme I will discuss today.

February is the month of second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda's birth. Born in 1900, the last year of the 19th century, he went on to carry out a great struggle for human happiness on the stage of the 20th century.

Today I am engaged in building a bridge of victory from the 20th century into the 21st. This is a work in progress.

As we approach the turn of the century, many are looking back over this century and pondering its events and developments. There is one notable figure who has been described as having "invented the 20th century," and that is Thomas Edison (1847–1931).

The American inventor and entrepreneur was involved in an extraordinary number of inventions: incandescent light, the phonograph, motion pictures, film, the telephone and telegraph, the typewriter, batteries, electric railroads, cement manufacturing, X-ray machine apparatus and microphones, as well as components of power supply systems, including sockets, switches, fuses and meters.

The above list includes some items that Edison did not invent, but is credited with having improved or made workable.

Edison's inventions transformed the world. Were it not for him, our lives today would be completely different.

President Toda put it well when he said: "We are now seeing absolutely unprecedented development in communication and transportation systems. The arrival of such an age is a sign that the widespread propagation of the Daishonin's Buddhism can now be accomplished." Today it is possible to contact and communicate with people immediately anywhere in your country and, indeed, anywhere in the world.

Scientific advances, too, in that they increasingly confirm and support Buddhist principles and perspectives of life and the universe, are making it easier for people to accept and relate to Buddhism. They also create a need for a spiritual foundation that is compatible with the technological age we live in.

Thomas Edison was one of the key players in creating an environment that has been conducive to the global spread of the Daishonin's Buddhism — to the ushering in of the

age of kosen-rufu of which President Toda spoke.

Edison, incidentally, shares the same birthday as President Toda — Feb. 11. Born in 1847, he was exactly 53 years older than my mentor. As a matter of interest, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Edison — three of America's most venerated historical figures — were all born in February.

Academic Background Has Nothing To Do With It

Edison has been called the Napoleon of invention. He was a giant in his field, standing head and shoulders above his contemporaries. Yet his formal schooling was next to nil. He attended elementary school for only three months — a fact that is significant in light of his later achievements. Edison triumphantly showed the world that academic background has nothing to do with victory in life.

Academic background has even less relevance in the world of faith. Whether a person has received any higher education has absolutely no relation to faith. All that matters is whether one has strong faith.

Edison was almost deaf. But he regarded himself as fortunate in his affliction, once saying that because he did not hear most of what was going on around him, he could think without being distracted, and could always find a quiet place to take a nap. He was philosophical about it. This was a sign of his strength. He was confident and positive; there was nothing weak or fainthearted about him.

In his later years, President Toda often told his disciples: “Be courageous in faith!” “No matter what other people may say, advance boldly!” “Lead confident lives!” “Make courage the Gakkai's eternal emblem!” This was the spirit that he commended to us before he passed away.

Faith is the source of true strength and courage. Without courage and confidence, we cannot be said to have genuine faith.

More Than 1,000 Inventions

Edison held a record-breaking 1,093 patents for his inventions over his lifetime. (Some sources indicate that he held even more.)

I, meanwhile, hold the record for leading the greatest propagation campaign in our movement's history, which resulted in a total of 11,111 households in the Kansai area joining the Soka Gakkai in a single month [May 1956].

Granted, technological innovations are important. But spreading the Daishonin's teaching is an achievement of a much higher order, one that brings people happiness and illuminates their lives. It is a noble activity, and I take pride in what I have accomplished in this area. I am sure each of you shares this feeling as well, as a result of your own efforts.

What was the secret to Edison's success? He explained that it was to never give up before he succeeded in what he was trying to do. Not giving up — that's the only way. Once you give up, you are defeated.

This is equally true in the realm of faith. Quitting is not faith. We have to keep chanting until our prayers are answered. That is the correct way of prayer.

Edison commented: “Most fellows try a few things and then quit. I never quit until I get [*sic*] what I'm after.” It's shortsighted to throw in the towel the moment you encounter the slightest obstacle or block. People who are motivated by the spirit to contribute to the well-being of others and to humanity never give up in their endeavors. In contrast, those who are motivated by vanity or by a shallow desire for fame or fortune are easily disheartened. Unlike Edison, they cannot be called true researchers; nor, in the world of faith, can they be called true Buddhists.

Edison observed that his fellow researchers tended to abandon their efforts as soon as

they encountered difficulties. As a rule, he said, a single success could only be gained after 99 failed attempts. He declared:

A lot of people think that I have done things because of some “genius” that I’ve got. That too is not true. Any other bright-minded fellow can accomplish just as much if he will stick like hell and remember that nothing that’s any good works by itself, just to please you; you got to make the damn thing work. You may have heard people repeat what I have said, “Genius is 1 percent inspiration, 99 percent perspiration.” Yes, sir, it’s mostly hard work.

In faith, likewise, things don’t just happen automatically. Our prayers are answered only if they are accompanied by tenacious and steadfast efforts. Without 99 percent effort, there can be no victory.

‘I Work 18 Hours a Day’

In response to queries about the secret to his success, Edison would write:

I work 18 hours daily — have been doing this for 45 years. This is double the usual amount men do. This makes me 90 years old. Add 20 years for youth and you have 110 years as my age. I am still working 18 hours and expect to keep it up for 20 years more. This makes me 150 years old.

In other words, he attributed his success to the fact that he worked harder. Not until he reached age 75 did he reduce the number of hours he put in each day — from 18 hours to 16.

President Toda said: “The defining qualities of youth are passion and a contemplative mind. As long as we possess these, we will never grow old.” Throughout his life, Edison advanced with passion and vigorously exercised his mind. He kept striving for a better life, for better results, for a better society. Let us, too, advance in this manner.

I suspect that the second secret to Edison’s success was that he was not inclined to brood or fret. Things that were pointless to worry about he put out of his mind.

When Edison was 67, his laboratory and factory complex were completely gutted by a fire. In the aftermath, he told a reporter, “Although I am 67 years old, I will start all over again tomorrow.” He also said: “We’ll build up bigger and better than ever. Why should I be downhearted?” What a positive and undefeatable attitude!

Standing outside the still-burning buildings, he called his family together and urged them to enjoy the spectacle, since it was rare to see such a large conflagration. His confidence that they could rebuild and continue their work was unassailable. That was how positive he was. Rather than being discouraged over what had been lost, he simply resolved to make the new facility even better than the one before. He possessed firm conviction and unflagging optimism.

Since we uphold the Mystic Law, we have no cause to fret and worry over others’ trivial criticism. Being preoccupied by such things is a form of complaining. And complaining is what cowardly people do. Individuals who possess true conviction and a genuine philosophy are resolute and radiantly optimistic.

While Edison was full of confidence, he was not arrogant. A person of true greatness is certainly not haughty or high-handed. Rather than claiming credit for his inventions, Edison said he felt that all he did was receive impressions from the supreme intelligence that was the universe itself and then record them in his own way. He viewed the universe as a living entity. This outlook has much in common with Buddhism.

Edison was not a materialist. The last research project he undertook, in fact, involved an attempt to build a device to communicate with the dead. And he applied himself to this project with his trademark earnestness and rigor.

Edison also asserted that the technological age would necessitate a spiritual evolution in humankind. Spiritual evolution — in other words, human revolution — is essential for humanity today.

America Grows Stronger With Each Crisis It Faces

Edison gave his last public speech in 1931, when he was 84. The United States was still in the grips of the Great Depression. Edison urged people to have courage — for, as he had found through his own life, having courage was the key to all things. He said:

My message to you is to be courageous. I have lived a long time. I have seen history repeat itself again and again. I have seen many depressions in business. Always America has come out stronger and more prosperous. Be as brave as your fathers before you. Have faith. Go forward.

Such courage is admired and valued in American society. It is the basis for prosperity.

Such courage also exists in the SGI. For that reason, we have overcome storms of adversity and realized indisputable victory.

In the final analysis, those who abandoned their faith and betrayed the SGI were cowardly; they lacked courage.

Without courage, we cannot be compassionate. Courage and compassion are inseparable, like the two sides of a coin. And faith is the wellspring from which courage springs.

The Daishonin says, “Nichiren’s disciples cannot accomplish anything if they are cowardly” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 128). A cowardly person cannot realize victory in life. Unless we have the courage to really dedicate our lives to kosen-rufu, we cannot construct true happiness for ourselves and others.

Building a house or gaining status in society is all very well and good. But these kinds of achievements are of a material nature only, representing some tangible, readily discernible phenomena. They are essentially shallow.

There is something much more profound that underlies all things; it is the law that moves and governs the universe and is the source of all life. This is the Mystic Law.

We of the SGI embrace and live in accord with that universal Law. Our lives possess the most profound dimension.

Japan is today mired in a severe economic recession, but with courage we can break through it. In our efforts for kosen-rufu, too, let us advance with the spirit of “Courage First.”

Do We Really Understand What We Think We Know?

Edison firmly believed in the infinite power inherent in life. And he argued that people didn’t understand even a “ten-millionth of one percent” of what they thought they knew.

President Toda, commenting on the launching of the first satellite, remarked:

Seen against the vastness of the universe, it is a minuscule event. People are always directing their gaze outward, and they forget to investigate the inner realm. Our lives, which are entities of the principle of a life-moment possessing 3,000 realms, are untold billions of times more profound. That is what we need to make our focus.

People tend to pursue phenomena of the external world, including outer space, while

averting their gaze from life's inner realm. This is a fundamental flaw of modern civilization.

Edison worked to invent things that were of practical benefit to humanity. He was clear about his purpose. He wasn't simply interested in personal acclaim or riches. And he pursued his endeavors with a never-give-up spirit.

We, likewise, are living with conviction, determined never to give up in our efforts to help even a single person become happy. We are working for the noblest of all causes, kosen-rufu. With the electric light, Edison lit up the world. Today, we are illuminating the hearts of humankind with the brilliant teaching of hope that is the Daishonin's Buddhism.

(To be continued)

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