

Discussions On Youth Why Do We Have An Organization?

This is the 21st installment of a series of discussions on youth among SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai high school division leaders Hidenobu Kimura (young men's leader) and Kazue Igeta (young women's leader), representing the high school division members.

Organizations play an important role in coordinating the efforts of like-minded people and in helping develop each individual, SGI President Ikeda says. But the SGI is not perfect — it's what we make it.

Kimura: Let's talk about the role and function of the Soka Gakkai organization. Someone asked me "Why do we have an organization? Is there anything wrong with people just working individually?" Another commented, "I don't like group activities, so I'm uneasy with the word *organization*."

Igeta: Many members have expressed their joy at being a part of such a compassionate group as the Soka Gakkai.

At a meeting commemorating May 5, Soka Gakkai Successors Day, last year, you shared with us President Toda's statement that the Soka Gakkai is "the organization for kosen-rufu more precious than my life." We were all very moved by those words, and many of us renewed our determination to cherish and protect this great organization.

Kimura: Most high school division members have been in the Soka Gakkai ever since they can remember. Each person's attitude to the organization varies depending on their personal experience and circumstances.

Ikeda: The word *organization* probably conjures certain images for some people, but the fact is, everything in this world involves some sort of organization. The human body itself is made up of more than 60 trillion cells, all working in concert. That's an amazingly efficient organization. There are all those cells and, yet, they are not just clustered together at random. Each cell has its own distinct role to fulfill. Some unite to form muscles, others to form nerves, and still others, our blood. The body functions as a whole because all these cells carry out their unique missions in harmony with others.

Kimura: It's truly a united effort.

Ikeda: Yes. Coordination is very important. Everything involves closely coordinated organization. This is true not only of human beings. All life functions in an organized way. From the tiniest plankton to the largest whales, all life forms on our planet are organized entities, or organisms. Even the molecules that make up these organisms themselves contain an organized structure of atoms. Our planet, too, is one great organization where all manner of sentient and nonsentient beings — animals, plants and natural resources — exist to form a coherent whole.

Igeta: From that perspective, the universe is also an organization.

Ikeda: Yes. That's true. The Earth is part of the organization known as the Solar System, which is itself part of the galaxy known as the Milky Way — a still larger system comprising some 200 billion stars just like our own sun. When several galaxies join together they form galaxy clusters or superclusters. The universe is a collection of an infinite number of such clusters. If we were to send a letter to a being on another planet, our return address would have to be appended to read something like the following:

Planet Earth
The Solar System
Orion Arm, The Milky Way
Local Galaxy Group, Local Supercluster
The Universe

We can see the same kind of organization in human society. Countries, cities, towns, villages, businesses and schools — all are organizations. This is because close teamwork and interaction are necessary for them to function most effectively.

It is the same with sports. A soccer team is an organization. And even for individual sports like tennis, judo or fencing, practicing and competing with others, in a club, for instance, can be helpful in polishing one's skill and becoming a winner. Working closely with trainers, nutritionists and others can also be indispensable to success.

Everything is an organization.

When a couple unites to create a happy family, they are quite naturally forming an organization.

Then there is the invisible organizational framework that we find exists within our local communities, where communication has become a vital key in maintaining good relations with friends and neighbors.

You are in some way connected to everything around you — to society, school, your family, and so on. Everyone is part of some kind of organization. No one in today's world, except perhaps a hermit living on a remote mountain somewhere, is exempt.

It is only natural, therefore, when we seek to achieve a great objective or to develop ourselves so that we can make great accomplishments, that some sort of organization is essential.

The Soka Gakkai is an organization working to realize the great objective of kosen-rufu — of achieving peace and happiness for all humanity based on the principles and philosophy of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. Such an objective cannot be accomplished through the efforts of one person alone. It becomes possible only when people in various spheres of society come together, organize themselves into a cohesive force, and work to achieve that goal.

Nichiren Daishonin had by his side the six senior priests, and Shakyamuni had 10 major disciples. These, too, may be regarded as organizations. Both the Daishonin and Shakyamuni formed a network, or organization, through which they endeavored to spread the teachings of Buddhism as they raised and protected their followers.

Kimura: So organizations exist for a purpose.

Ikeda: Exactly. But it's important to note that there are both good and bad organizations. An organization that inflicts suffering on people and leads them down a path of destruction is nothing but evil. The war machines of militarist Japan and Nazi Germany during World

War II are cases in point. In contrast, an organization that seeks to improve relations among people around the world, to work for a more positive, constructive direction for humanity, is a worthy and honorable organization. The SGI is such an organization.

Igeta: The world of the Soka Gakkai is one where people warmly encourage one another. A high school division member in Saitama related her efforts to support and encourage a fellow member who had stopped going to school. At first the person she wished to help refused to see her when she visited, so she began to write letters about school, about her interests and hobbies, and also about faith and practice. She kept writing, and a year later, the member finally responded with a letter, stating that although she wasn't attending school she continued to chant every day. She also requested that the young woman continue her correspondence. With tears in her eyes, this young woman told me of the deep joy she felt knowing that her sincere concern had gotten through. Moved by her fellow member's spirit to challenge and not be defeated by her problems, she became all the more determined to continue growing and advancing herself.

Ikeda: That's wonderful. The organization of the Soka Gakkai emerged naturally from that spirit — the spirit to somehow encourage another person, to want to see others become happy. The Soka Gakkai didn't appear first and then become filled with people. People began forging bonds with one another, and then those ties of friendship spread, naturally giving birth to the Soka Gakkai organization. For that reason, we must be aware that the organization exists for people. People don't exist for the organization. Please never forget this point.

I hope that you will give your lives to being the staunchest friends and supporters of those who are suffering or in distress. And I hope that you will cherish the Soka Gakkai, an organization of and for the people, that you will revere it, support it and work for its development. This is my heartfelt request of all of you.

Igeta: Chiharu Ota, the young women's high school division leader for the Chubu region, shared her gratitude for the Soka Gakkai. She said: "Through my activities in the Soka Gakkai, I am able to challenge my weaknesses. I feel tremendous appreciation to the organization for the simple fact that I've grown from a person who was overwhelmed by her problems into a person who is genuinely concerned about the welfare of her friends and chants for their happiness."

Kimura: Kazuhiro Kawakami, the young men's high school division leader of Fukui Prefecture [close to Kobe and Osaka] was one of the people who transported relief supplies by truck in the aftermath of the Great Hanshin Earthquake that struck Kobe, Osaka and the island of Awaji in January 1995. In response to the disaster, many youth division members worked tirelessly through the night, distributing to earthquake victims the numerous donated supplies, such as blankets and hand-warmers, that had been delivered to Soka Gakkai community centers in Kobe and Osaka from throughout Japan. That episode, Mr. Kawakami said, deeply impressed upon him the unmatched strength of the Soka Gakkai organization, a body of ordinary people united in a common cause.

Ikeda: Because those young people were united in their desire to do anything they could to help, they could make a powerful contribution. Our organization exists to mobilize such human goodness, people's desire to help and benefit others, and use it to create great value. You might say the Soka Gakkai is a body or organism that took form and came to life

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specifically to bring together the basic goodness of people's hearts, to further develop that goodness and strengthen it. Without the organization, there would be no cohesion or order to our efforts.

An organization dedicated to good enhances people's capacity to work for good and promotes unlimited growth and self-improvement. It does not hinder people's progress or lead them astray. It supports people's self-development, putting them on a sure course to happiness and personal growth. And it is for this purpose that our organization exists.

In that respect, the organization is a means. The end, meanwhile, is for people to become happy.

Kimura: Millions of people in Japan and throughout the world unhesitatingly state that because of the Soka Gakkai they have found a way to become genuinely happy.

Ikeda: The Soka Gakkai is a wondrous organization. There is without doubt no other realm as pure, genuine, warm and beautiful. Being young, you may be unaware of society's harsh and ugly side, and so may not fully appreciate just how great this organization really is. But let me assure you, there is none other like it.

For almost as long as our organization has existed, our members, including many of your own mothers and fathers who are practicing, have been ridiculed and insulted by arrogant people as they have worked with incredible patience and fortitude to build this great castle of the people.

There are people who criticize and attack our organization. But are they the ones who will teach others how to achieve absolute happiness? No, they are not. Those who recognized this encouraged one another to become happy and came together to help those who were suffering. And the result is the Soka Gakkai. This is a fact most solemn and sublime. The organization is the crystallization of genuine democracy, handmade by the people, for the people. It is the only body carrying out the widespread propagation of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, which places the highest value on the dignity of the human being. It is the sun of hope for all humanity. That is why President Toda declared that the Soka Gakkai organization was more precious than his life. I feel exactly the same way.

Igeta: Some people have the impression that joining an organization means giving up their freedom or losing their self-identity, but the Soka Gakkai isn't like that at all.

Ikeda: Organizations that deprive people of their freedom and identity definitely do exist. They exploit people to achieve their own objectives. This is a negative aspect that organizations can have.

However, though you may dislike organizations, is remaining alone really a sign of freedom? Can you guarantee that you won't lose sight of yourself anyway? That's hard to say. Genuine freedom does not mean living selfishly and doing just as you please; it is traveling the correct path in life.

The Earth, for example, revolves around the sun. If it were to stray from its orbit even in the slightest, it would spell disaster. A spacecraft, if it assumes the correct course, can traverse the vast cosmos and reach its destination. This is the meaning of true freedom.

Kimura: If we depart from the proper orbit, we can wind up "lost in space."

Ikeda: That's true. Sports, too, have their own set of rules. There's a certain way of doing

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things. Does breaking these rules to suit your own convenience mean freedom? I don't think so. Making full use of your strength and skill while following the rules of the game is genuine freedom. To live without a goal or purpose, doing whatever you please whenever you please, makes for a reckless and self-destructive life.

Our organization is one of great human diversity. This acts as a stimulus for our personal growth. In many sports, it's hard to assess your real ability if you train or practice only by yourself. We develop and grow through contact with many other people. In Japan, the mountain potatoes known as taros are rough and dirty when harvested, but when they are placed in a basin of running water together and rolled against each other, the skin is peeled away, leaving the potatoes shining clean and ready for cooking. It's probably inappropriate to compare people to potatoes, but my point is that the only way for us to hone and polish our character is through our interactions with others.

Being on your own without having to see or think about others may seem very comfortable and hassle-free, but you'll find yourself locked in a world that is terribly small and limited. By avoiding belonging to any group or organization, you deprive yourself of contact with many people and, in the end, you are left wondering about the meaning of your existence.

A society without any organization whatsoever would be chaotic and disordered; there would be mob rule with everyone just doing as they pleased, regardless of the consequences. It would be like a ship sailing out to sea without a compass — either it will lose its way or end up wrecked.

In the realm of Buddhist practice, I urge you to find at least one trusted senior in faith with whom you feel comfortable discussing anything. President Toda gave the same advice.

Igeta: Yuko Nakaniwa, the young women's high school division leader of the Shikoku region, told me how she was nervous and afraid when she moved to Tokyo to begin her first year at a university. Her young women's division leader at that time, despite her own demanding schedule, visited her frequently. Ms. Nakaniwa said that she could talk about anything with this person and said that encounters with such seniors in faith are one of life's great treasures.

I personally will never forget the warm encouragement of my seniors in faith who were there for me when I was having a hard time struggling with university entrance exams or was facing some problem.

Ikeda: Developing personal relationships with people you can trust is important. Though we use the term *organization*, it is actually a collection of bonds among individuals. And this is the reason that the Soka Gakkai has and continues to cherish and support each member unstintingly. To forget this would lead to an organization that constrains and oppresses people.

Kimura: Some people insist that they don't need the organization to keep up their practice of Buddhism. They say they can do it on their own.

Ikeda: In reality, it's not so easy to do. And even if one could continue to practice Buddhism alone, it would amount to a self-centered practice, consisting of prayer and little action. Even if you were doing well practicing alone, for instance, what about others? How could you truly help others?

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Nichiren Daishonin taught his followers to proceed in the spirit of many in body, one in mind. This was his clear guidance. True practitioners of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism are those who act in exact accord with his teachings.

In modern terms, *many in body, one in mind* means an organization. *Many in body* means that each person is different — that people differ in their appearances, standing in society, circumstances and individual missions. But as for their hearts — their hearts should be one; each person should be one in mind, united in faith.

On the other hand, with many in body, many in mind, there will be no unity of purpose. In addition, the concept of *one in body, one in mind* means that people are coerced into uniformity, made to think, look and act alike. This is akin to fascism, where people have no freedom; it ultimately only leads to a condition of one in body, many in mind, where people give the appearance of being united and committed to the same goal on the surface, but in reality don't go along with that goal in their hearts.

Kimura: The best kind of organization, then, is made up of members who are diverse in every way but are united in purpose toward achieving a shared lofty objective — in other words, an organization that exemplifies the spirit of many in body, one in mind.

Ikeda: Yes. *Many in body* means to allow each individual to give full play to his or her unique potential and individuality. *One in mind* means that everyone works together based on faith, sharing the same goal and purpose. This is true unity.

Many in body, one in mind can be likened to a bamboo grove where each stalk of bamboo sprouts up independently, yet their roots are firmly intertwined underground. The world of faith is the same: because we share the same “roots,” because we share a common spirit and purpose, each one of us can grow limitlessly, reaching for the sky in our personal development and achievements. True unity is achieved when each person has the strength to stand alone — the conviction and fortitude to advance, even if you are the only one. Mutual dependency is not the answer.

The Earth rotates on its axis while revolving around the sun. This allows sunlight to bathe the entire planet, causing life to flourish. We, too, engage in a sort of axial rotation when we practice for ourselves by doing gongyo and chanting daimoku. Our connection and interaction with others and with society, then, constitutes our orbital revolution, like that of the Earth around the sun. The Earth's axial rotation and its revolution around the sun are interrelated. This is a universal law.

The function of our organization is similarly to enable us to support and encourage one another so that we each maintain the “axial rotation” of our personal practice and our broader “orbital revolution” of working with and for others, thus never veering from the proper orbit in life.

Igeta: It's sad to think that in our wonderful organization there are still people, including leaders, who stop practicing.

Ikeda: I hope all of you will surpass those seniors in our movement who have turned cowardly, lost their faith and betrayed the trust of members. Other people are other people; you are you. The important thing is for you to grow into a fine person yourself, never letting yourself be influenced by those who would turn their backs on their fellow members.

Even in the Daishonin's time, numerous followers abandoned their faith, and after his death, too, many priests practicing under Nikko Shonin, his direct successor, also

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abandoned the Daishonin's teachings. Even those who were revered by lay believers as venerable priests discarded their faith.

In the Soka Gakkai, as well, most of the leaders were quick to give up their faith when President Makiguchi was imprisoned for speaking out against Japanese militarism during World War II. And even during President Toda's day, there were many members who simply quit their practice because they were worried about the negative reputation the Soka Gakkai was gaining due to its broad and rapid development.

Those who persevere in their Buddhist practice throughout their lives are true followers of Nichiren Daishonin. Those who embrace the Gohonzon and never abandon their practice no matter what difficulties lie ahead are the Daishonin's genuine disciples. This describes perfectly the members of the Soka Gakkai.

Compared to the past, people in society today have grown very self-centered, irresponsible and undisciplined. To maintain a steadfast commitment to one's Buddhist practice in this directionless age is truly noble.

There are some who gave up their practice, influenced by the barrage of abuse and criticism hurled at our organization. But Nichiren Daishonin declared that our faith mustn't be like fire, flaring up one moment and burning out the next, but rather it should be like flowing water, moving forward unceasingly (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 2 [2nd ed.], p. 250). What's important is having faith strong enough to continue chanting daimoku and advancing toward kosen-rufu, no matter what our environment, circumstances or the conditions of society.

Igeta: One student said that she was extremely disappointed when she met certain senior leaders who were very arrogant and full of their own self-importance.

Ikeda: President Toda fiercely scolded arrogant leaders and those who tried to use the Soka Gakkai for personal gain or gratification. He said that leaders should think of themselves as the members' servants and that arrogant or haughty leaders ought to be expelled from the organization.

Leaders are there to serve the members. It is their job to work for the members' happiness. A leader who has forgotten this responsibility has already lost the vital spark of faith and is headed on a downward spiral toward abandoning his or her practice altogether.

The Soka Gakkai is not about vertical relationships between leaders and members. A leader is merely one who takes responsibility and plays a central role in keeping things together.

Leadership positions in the organization are, after all, just a bunch of made-up titles. Faith is what is crucial. No matter what leadership position one may occupy, without faith, there will be no benefit. It is the same as quitting one's practice. Such leaders are simply taking advantage of the Soka Gakkai and the members' sincere faith. The Daishonin would surely condemn such a person.

Igeta: What would you say to someone who asks if it's necessary to attend meetings that are clearly being held out of formality as opposed to meetings that have real substance and value?

Ikeda: I feel sorry for all those who attend meetings that lack substance or are led by a complacent or overbearing central figure. The responsibility for that, of course, rests on the shoulders of those involved in the planning and preparation of the meeting.

However, it's important to remember that everything is up to you. If you are determined

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to absorb everything you can, you will most likely learn something from any meeting you attend. If you were to make the effort to attend a meeting but return home without having gained a thing, that would be your loss.

In addition, once you've been involved in planning a meeting yourself, you learn that, while it's easy to criticize, it's a challenge to hold an inspiring meeting. The most important thing is that, if you feel the organization or the meetings you're attending are boring and unproductive, you yourself make efforts to change things. The organization is a means, not an end; it is not perfect.

In the early years of my practice, I wasn't happy with the Soka Gakkai organization. Back then, we weren't particularly cultural or involved in any cultural activities, and I just couldn't bring myself to like the organization as it was. Sensing this, President Toda said to me: "If that's how you feel, then why don't you create an organization that you truly like? Work hard and devote yourself earnestly to building the ideal organization through your own effort!"

Igeta: That's so inspiring!

Kimura: I can sense President Toda's great broad-mindedness in encouraging you in such a way. It is so impressive to see how you immediately set about putting his suggestion into practice.

Igeta: Since this Buddhism teaches the importance of having a stand-alone spirit, I guess we should each do our best to try to change things for the better.

Ikeda: This also applies to your stance in organizations such as your school or family. As a member of the organization known as school, you need to be committed to making it a better place. As a member of the organization that is your family, you need to make efforts to create the best possible environment. That spirit is vital.

It is also common sense, and Buddhism accords with common sense. The correct way to practice Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is to have the attitude that "I will be the driving force for change!"

Our organization dedicated to kosen-rufu was created so that we can deepen our understanding of the Daishonin's teachings and also share it with others.

Igeta: There are many students who say that they would like to tell their close friends about their Buddhist practice but aren't sure how they should go about it.

Ikeda: Just do what comes naturally. Religious freedom belongs to everyone, and no one can prevent us from talking about faith with others if we want to.

We have to keep in mind, however, that there is an appropriate time for everything. If you sat down to a formal dinner, for example, and were immediately served the main course, you might be a little surprised, since it's usually customary to serve an appetizer or salad first. When you visit someone's home, you don't just barge into the house; you wait until the host opens the door and invites you in.

Similarly, if you wish to talk to someone about Buddhism, there is a proper way to go about it. To friends, you might say something like: "I practice Buddhism. It's a profound philosophy that teaches us many important things, such as the nature of life and the universe. Through Buddhism, you can come to understand things that are not taught in school, things that are more fundamental and profound. It is a philosophy that has deep

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value and significance for our lives. Would you like to talk about this life philosophy of Buddhism sometime? Or would you like to read about it?" Even if they say they're not interested, through you they have made a connection to this Buddhism and will surely come across it again. We should use the same natural approach when encouraging our fellow members.

There's no need to be impatient. Faith is a lifelong process, spanning the three existences of past, present and future. What's important is to make plenty of friends and work at solidifying those relationships. Introducing others to Buddhism and striving for kosen-rufu are extensions of the spirit of friendship that wishes to see those we care about become happy.

Kimura: Some students say that they're apprehensive about sharing Buddhism with others because they don't want their present condition or circumstances to give a negative impression of the Soka Gakkai. They want to wait until they've fixed up their lives or become shining models of faith.

Ikeda: It's up to the individual. Just as these students seem to recognize, the main thing is to show actual proof of faith in one's daily life. But that doesn't mean that you should pretend to be something that you're not. It's perfectly fine for you to speak about Buddhism from the heart, in your own words, in a very natural way, just as you are. The purpose of faith is not to make yourself look good in the eyes of others. To have compassion for others means sincerely praying and working for others' happiness, no matter how they may regard you. They may not appreciate your sincerity at the time, but if you are genuine in your efforts, at some point they are bound to recall the friend who once encouraged them or who helped them through a difficult time. Surely this is a most worthy way to live.

Kimura: Some students have said that they are so busy with their studies and extracurricular activities that they don't have time to participate in Gakkai high school division activities.

Igeta: There are also some students who are busy with part-time jobs to pay for their school tuition.

Ikeda: All of these things are important. The challenge is to work hard and try to do the best you can in each of them. If everything were easy, there would be no challenge. The greater the challenge, the greater our exhilaration and sense of accomplishment when we succeed. By striving to do our best, we can become winners; we can become people of great substance. When plants are exposed to strong winds, their roots grow deeper. Everything works this way. Without challenges, we would grow lazy and decadent; our lives would be empty and barren. And emptiness means unhappiness.

Igeta: Some students believe that because study should be their main priority at this time in their lives, it isn't necessary to exert themselves in faith. But I don't think that's true, is it?

Ikeda: What is important — study or faith? The answer is both. They are important in different ways. Faith is our very foundation, our roots. From the roots grow a trunk, branches, leaves and flowers — these represent the various activities of human life. For all of you, the members of the high school division, your studies are your trunk — your first priority. Everything else — the branches and so on — comes next.

Faith is the engine that powers our growth throughout life. But without making concrete

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efforts to advance, that engine won't work. For students, advancement means studying. Even if you chant and engage in faith-related activities, if you do not challenge yourself in your studies, you will be like a stalled car that is going nowhere.

Simply put, for those of you who are students, faith is your foundation and study is your priority.

Kimura: So, while basing our lives on faith, it's vital that we work hard in our studies.

Ikeda: Yes. And what is the purpose of study? It's to enable us to gain some practical ability or knowledge so that we can contribute to society and to the happiness and welfare of many people. What's the purpose of faith? It's so that each of us can become truly happy and enable others to do the same. Faith is the driving force that lets us apply what we gain from our studies to genuinely serving people.

Simply becoming university professors or lawyers does not automatically make people great or worthy of respect. The question is what have they done since acquiring that position; how much have they helped others?

A great person is someone who encourages many people and helps them become happy. In this sense, those who are playing an active role in the Soka Gakkai for the realization of kosen-rufu are the most honorable of all. Those of your parents who are devoting themselves to this cause are far more respectable than any famous celebrity or political leader. The members of our organization have worked with a powerful resolve to help those they have some connection with become truly happy. I hope you will always remember this spirit of the Soka Gakkai.

Perhaps when you were younger, your parents went off to do activities for kosen-rufu while you stayed at home, and you felt lonely. I'm sure your parents would have found it much more relaxing to stay at home with you. Instead, feeling it would be selfish to think only of their own and their family's happiness and comfort and ignore others' suffering, they were always out working tirelessly to spread the Daishonin's teachings. A mature person is someone who can understand and appreciate this fact.

My dream is that all of you will enjoy a brilliant future, playing leading roles in all fields of society and throughout the world and fully revealing your potential.

That said, however, if you only seek and gain fame and status, you will be no different than the leaders the world has seen until today. Therefore, it's crucial that you become leaders who possess the spirit to do whatever they can to serve the people. When our world is illuminated by vast constellations of such outstanding, humanistic leaders, the time of kosen-rufu will have arrived. That will be an ideal society. The only way to truly develop this spirit is through faith — by perfecting yourselves and honing your character within the organization of the Soka Gakkai.

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