

Discussions on Youth WHAT IS TRUE FREEDOM?

This continues the first installment in the new series of "Discussions on Youth." SGI President Ikeda talks with Soka Gakkai high school division leaders Hidenobu Kimura (young men's) and Yoshiko Ueda (young women's). (Part 1 appeared in the Aug. 28 World Tribune.)

KIMURA: One of our readers has a question: "I want to do my best, but the combination of school, family responsibilities and high school division activities wears me out. What should I do?"

IKEDA: You need to develop strength. The stronger you are, the freer you will be. Someone without a lot of stamina may have a very difficult time climbing even a small, 1,700-foot mountain. And a person who is sick might not be able to manage it at all. But a strong, healthy person can do it easily with zest and enjoyment. That's why it's important to develop your strength. You must build a self strong enough so that you can be active in school, in club activities and in your Soka Gakkai activities. If you possess strength and capability, you will have freedom.

The same is true of sports and music, too. To play your chosen sport or instrument with complete mastery and ease, you have to gain an adequate level of proficiency and skill; you have to be prepared to make some sacrifices to practice with all your might.

Recoiling from effort or just doing as you please is not freedom. It is simply irresponsible and self-absorbed.

KIMURA: The mass media often cites "freedom of expression" in justifying sensationalist and damaging reporting. But such journalism is irresponsible and violates the freedom and human rights of others.

UEDA: When will they realize that freedom of expression does not mean freedom to lie?

IKEDA: Freedom exists within self-restraint. In human society, there are rules and a structured order by which we live and work. There is rhyme and reason, direction and purpose.

This is evident in the natural world, too. The sun rises at dawn and sets at dusk. The stars shine at night. They each have their role. They each follow a certain rhythm and order. They do not appear at random or on a whim; so, in a sense, their activities are restricted.

As high school students, your daily rhythm right now is getting up each day, going to school and regularly participating in high school division activities. I feel it is an extremely important rhythm for you to maintain. If you neglect such efforts, if you fail to develop your potential and strength, you won't be able to enjoy true freedom.

There are all kinds of assets that can contribute to our sense of freedom — intellectual ability, good health, physical stamina, mental and emotional strength, the ability to take care of ourselves and support ourselves financially. But the greatest asset of all is our spiritual state, our state of mind.

KIMURA: In other words, running away from responsibilities is not freedom.

IKEDA: You can run away, of course. That freedom exists. But it is a very small, petty freedom. It only leads to a life of great hardship, a life in which you are powerless, weak and completely frustrated.

Alongside this small freedom, however, exists a much greater freedom. The well-known Japanese novelist Eiji Yoshikawa (1892–1962) writes, “Great character is forged through hardship.” Only by polishing yourself through repeated difficulties can you build a self that sparkles as brightly as a gem. Once you have developed such a state of life, nothing will faze you. You will be free. You will be victorious.

Once you realize this truth, even hardships become enjoyable. Daring to take on tough challenges — that in itself is immense freedom.

The sea and its waves make it possible for ships to sail from one place to another. Air resistance produces the lift that makes it possible for planes to fly through the sky. Hunger makes food delicious.

Freedom is a relative thing. It is impossible to have absolutely everything go our way all the time. In fact, if it weren’t for the various restrictions and obstacles life presents us with, we probably wouldn’t appreciate what it is to be free. After all, planes can’t fly in a vacuum; they need air resistance to stay aloft. On the flip side, if we didn’t seek freedom, we wouldn’t know what it means not to be free.

You may run away from hard work and effort, declaring yourself a free spirit, but you cannot run away from yourself — from your weaknesses, personality and destiny. It is like trying to run from your shadow. It is even more impossible to escape from the sufferings of birth, aging, sickness and death inherent in the human condition. The more you try to avoid hardships, the more doggedly they pursue you, like so many relentless hounds chasing at your heels. That’s why it’s important that you turn and face your troubles head-on.

Life is a battle to win ultimate and unlimited freedom. Faith in Buddhism allows us to use our karma and the sufferings of birth, aging, sickness and death as springboards to happiness. The purpose of faith is to forge that kind of self. Faith enables us to attain a state of unsurpassed freedom.

UEDA: I have a friend who is a specialist in her field and is fluent in English. She has many friends and is actively involved in Gakkai activities. Now, she’s even cutting back on her sleep to study for a state examination. I was deeply impressed when she said to me, “The toughest times are the happiest times.”

IKEDA: That’s a very nice way of putting it. Freedom and lack of freedom are two sides of the same coin. The busiest people may seem to have the most constraints and demands on their time, but they often actually enjoy the most freedom.

Freedom cannot be measured in terms of time — the amount of “free time” we have has nothing to do with the amount of “freedom” we have. It’s what we do with our time that counts. Two people with the exact same amount of free time will use it differently: One might savor it, while the other might complain because he or she finds it either burdensome or too short. Similarly, you can spend the same hour watching television, the time passing by in a flash without anything to show for it, or studying, feeling a satisfying sense of achievement when you finish. That one hour can be a turning point in your life. Freedom is determined by your values, by what you place importance on in life.

When the great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821–81) was a young man, he was arrested for participating in revolutionary activities and sentenced to death by a firing squad. He was taken to the execution place, where he saw his fellow prisoners tied to posts and rifles aimed at them. He thought he would be killed momentarily, but he was given a

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last-minute reprieve.

Later, Dostoyevsky described this episode in one of his novels. The character being sentenced to death realizes that he has only five minutes to live and suddenly perceives those five minutes as a great treasure. He thinks: “What if I had not had to die! What if I could return to life — oh, what an eternity! And all that would be mine! I should turn every minute into an age, I should lose nothing, I should count every minute separately and waste none!” [from *The Idiot*].

Dostoyevsky’s experience was an extreme one, but it reveals a universal truth: Whether we have five minutes, five years, or 50 years to live, we should cherish and value each moment.

When all is said and done, freedom is determined by our values — it depends on our mental outlook, our state of life. There are certainly cases in which we may actually have great liberty but fail to appreciate it and instead feel trapped and confined; whereas others in precisely the same situation may experience tremendous freedom. And two people may use the same freedom in entirely different ways: one may use it to create wonderful value, while the other may fritter it away without a care, producing nothing of lasting value or significance. There are also people who brandish the word *freedom* but actually undermine and destroy it.

Freedom includes value and non-value. In the end, those who can exercise self-control are truly free. The wise are free; the deluded are not.

UEDA: Going back to the subject of school rules, I agree that some kind of guidelines or regulations are necessary, but at the same time I feel that some schools do go overboard. The rules get so picky and detailed that it’s hard to believe they serve any real purpose.

IKEDA: It’s true that no one likes to be unnecessarily restricted.

There was an American educator named William Smith Clark (1826–86), who taught at the Sapporo Agricultural College (now a part of Hokkaido University) in the latter part of last century. He is remembered in Japan for his famous words, “Boys, be ambitious!”

When the administrators of the men’s college where he was teaching were about to institute a long list of rules, he declared: “You will not raise people with those rules. At this school, all we need is one rule: ‘Be gentlemen!’ That says everything.” Dr. Clark explained that a gentleman strictly observes the rules, not because he is bound by them, but because he always acts in accord with the dictates of his conscience.

I agree. And no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in, our hearts can be free; we don’t have to let our spirits be shackled or confined. We need to have the strength to soar on inner wings of hope and freedom and never be defeated by anything.

UEDA: Some of our readers say that their parents don’t understand their dreams for the future. They say that it’s their future, and they should be able to decide what they will do with it.

IKEDA: This is a matter that can only be judged case by case. There are situations in which parents, because they have more experience and a better understanding of society, can see things more clearly. It is often wise for the inexperienced to seek advice and guidance from those who are more experienced, in order to choose a safer and more productive direction in which to proceed. That is an especially strong tendency in Eastern thought. And in most cases, doing what one’s parents say works out very well. But there is also sometimes a danger that parents — perhaps because their thinking is a little too old-fashioned or because

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their love for their children makes them domineering — may end up forcing their children in a direction that causes resentment and rebellion.

Things change with the times, however, so ultimately I think the best course is probably for each of you to make your own goals and take responsibility for achieving them. It is important that you work hard with your own sweat and effort and choose the path that you will follow — one that you feel will be right for you and not be the cause for any regret — and then pursue it with all you've got.

I say this because life is long. You are the one who has to live your life, fight your battles and win your victories. Your parents won't always be there. I think the best way for both children and parents to be happy is for parents to support their children in the path they have chosen.

It is also up to you to prove to your parents and those around you that you are responsible and know where you're going. If you find your chosen path blocked by their opposition, you have to convince them of your determination and commitment, and let them see how earnestly you are grappling with the challenges in front of you. Those who try to avoid dealing with problems and challenges will try to avoid them in the future as well. If that is the case, you will not convince anyone that you are serious or responsible.

KIMURA: University entrance exams in Japan are fiercely competitive. Each university has a limited number of places, and everyone is vying to get in. If you win a place, you have pushed someone else out of one. One of our members has asked whether freedom includes succeeding at the expense of others.

IKEDA: I think the answer to that question would have to be yes. Life is a struggle. We live in a harsh world. Freedom is not gained by being idle or passive. Whether we like it or not, ours is a dog-eat-dog world.

All people are of course essentially equal; all deserve equal opportunities for freedom and happiness. This is the spirit of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and also the spirit of Buddhism. But people are not robots. Everyone's thinking, personality, character and karma are different. Therefore, succeeding or getting ahead at the expense of others remains, unfortunately, a persisting aspect of human karma.

That's where our laws, our governments and our education systems come into play. It's sad to say, however, that we haven't done enough in these areas. Human society today is very far from the ideal. But the most fundamental way to approach that ideal is the SGI's movement of human revolution. We are promoting a way of life in which people pray for and create happiness in a world filled with contradictions.

Getting ahead at the expense of others is symptomatic of the state of Animality. Human revolution means becoming a person who works for the happiness of both oneself and others. For that reason, we must strive to create a society supported by the human revolution of each individual. In one sense, none of us can attain true happiness unless all others are happy. Basing one's life and actions on this awareness is what Buddhism calls the way of life of the bodhisattva.

Similarly, we cannot enjoy true freedom unless all others are free. In our world today, far too many people are bound in the chains of poverty, oppression, fear and ignorance; far too many people are robbed of their freedom by war and discrimination. One who stands up to fight for the freedom of such people is truly free. I hope each of you will become that sort of person.

It is therefore important that you squarely face and challenge the tasks that lie before

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you, and complete them successfully. Then, just as a tree grows, blossoms and bears fruit by sending down roots and extending its branches to the sky, you will naturally come to know greater and greater freedom. For that reason, may you always advance toward the sun of hope.

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