

SGI President Ikeda's Essay Words of the Wise

'Words that have sprung from the depths of great souls,' writes the SGI leader, are a precious heritage — a heritage he has striven to introduce and share over the decades.

I am currently presenting various famous maxims to my esteemed fellow members in Japan and around the world, especially to the representatives of the youth division, the leaders of the 21st century. Why am I doing this? Because words that have sprung from the depths of great souls, and wisdom that has withstood the test of time are the most precious spiritual heritage of the human race. They possess insights that illuminate our lives, as well as a pervading hope that inspires us with courage.



When I was young, I avidly read the writings of the French thinker Montaigne. He was said to have pasted more than 50 maxims on the ceiling of his library. One of them was, "I am a man; and nothing human is foreign to me" — words of the Roman dramatist Terence. With these adages as his guide, Montaigne continued his unceasing lifelong quest for the truth of human existence.

I, too, have always appreciated and treasured the words and maxims of the wise. My youth was spent in the desolation following World War II, a time when traditional values were bankrupt, a time of chaos and confusion. Against that background, I made a tremendous effort to seek out the truth of life and find the correct path. The maxims of great thinkers and philosophers were the best signposts I could have asked for on my journey.



I often went to the used-book district of Kanda, where I would spend what little money I had to buy book after book, all of which I ravenously devoured. Whenever I found words in those books that inspired or moved me, I copied them out in a cheap notebook — words such as: "Those who are strong when they stand alone are the true heroes," and "The greater the resistance waves meet, the stronger they become."

I copied these maxims just around the time I first met my mentor, Josei Toda. I was deeply impressed to find later that each of these adages agreed with the Buddhist way of life.



Such maxims of the wise, which reveal the truth of human existence, resonate strongly with the humanism expounded in Buddhism. When we look at his writings, we see that Nichiren Daishonin quotes freely not only from the Buddhist scriptures but also many other non-Buddhist writings. At times, he even quotes well-known popular tales and stories. In doing so, he reveals just how true is the assertion: "All phenomena are manifestations of the Buddhist Law" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 566).

Commenting on sages and philosophers of old, such as T'ai-kung Wang of ancient China who overthrew an evil king and freed the people from tyranny, the Daishonin writes,

“The wisdom of such people incorporated in its essence the wisdom of Buddhism” (MW-6, 143). Clearly, the words of hope and courage of great people of the past, people who championed the cause of the common people and fought for their happiness and security, are a manifestation of the wisdom of Buddhism.



There are times when certain teachings of Buddhism can be difficult to grasp. For example, there is the passage from the Goshō, “All of the mountains, valleys and fields where Nichiren and his disciples live and chant Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō are the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light” (*Goshō Zenshu*, p. 781). This teaches us that through our practice of Buddhism we can transform wherever we are now into the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light, but it can be rather difficult for a person who knows little about Buddhism to comprehend. If, however, we quote the words of Cuban freedom fighter José Martí — “Wherever a person stands up courageously, the sun shines” — the meaning of the Daishōnin’s words becomes clear. Great words such as these are universal; they contribute to a deeper understanding of Buddhism and serve to verify its validity.



But even wise sayings that are the crystallization, the gemstones, of thousands of years of human experience are rarely referred to or contemplated today, and they are slowly being buried beneath the dust of history and forgotten. That is why I have made a conscious effort over the years to introduce the lives and thoughts of great men and women, past and present, East and West, in my speeches, and to share their words with you. I have also tried to widely introduce the insights of outstanding individuals from various countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, who are not very well known in Japan. I have done this with the pledge that we of the SGI will realize without fail the ideals, hopes and dreams of these people of sagacity and foresight.

The great philosopher Plato; the idealist Emerson; the great writers Goethe, Tolstoy, Hugo and Lu Xun; the leader of India’s independence movement Gandhi; the Philippine hero Rizal — all of these are our spiritual friends and comrades, because we are all committed to walking the noble path of humanism.



And how enjoyable it is to move forward toward our goals, our hearts conversing with giants of the human spirit through their timeless words of wisdom.

Buddhism aims to unite all humanity, to guide every single person into the vast blue sky of the spirit. As the great Indian poet Tagore writes: “The best does not come alone. / It comes with the company of the all.”

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