

Discussions on Youth A Time for Self-Discovery

This is the conclusion of the second installment in the second series of “Discussions on Youth” among SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai high school division chiefs Hidenobu Kimura (young men’s chief) and Yoshiko Ueda (young women’s chief). (The first half of this installment appeared in the Oct. 16 issue under the headline “What Does Individuality Mean?”)

UEDA: A future division leader remarked to me: “Nowadays when students improve their grades, their classmates aren’t happy for them. The atmosphere of competition is fierce, especially among students preparing to take university entrance examinations. That’s why at our meetings we always try to introduce members by pointing out some area of special interest or ability they possess. For example, we introduce a member who knows a lot about flowers as ‘our flower expert’ and a member who loves books as ‘our book wizard,’ and get someone who loves music to talk about the latest hit CD. We try to focus as much as possible on their individuality.”

KIMURA: One of our members, who recently returned to Japan after having lived in the United Kingdom since he was a small child, said: “If I behave the way I did in the United Kingdom at school here in Japan, I stick out like a sore thumb.” He says that Japanese schools give lip service to providing education “that respects the student’s individuality” but, in reality, conformity rules and everyone looks the same.

I think the tendency to dissolve one’s individuality into a group, to seek strength in numbers, to follow the crowd, is a negative feature of Japanese society.

IKEDA: The purpose of education is not to suppress individuality but to cultivate and develop it. The most fundamental principle of government, of science, of all cultural activity, is respect for people’s individuality. That is what we mean by human rights.

The reality of Japan’s educational system, however, is that it is bureaucratic and conformist, and it judges students in a strict hierarchy based on grades alone. Many students voice their dislike of the system and wish they could escape it. Some decide not to think about it and just try to concentrate on getting through the day without too much discomfort.

This is a serious problem for Japan. It is a place where creativity and originality are nipped in the bud with tragic frequency. A nation whose citizens lack those qualities will be left behind by the rest of the world. A lack of creativity and individuality also means a lack of character.

People are not all the same. The enforcement of conformity ignores basic human rights; it is an injustice that destroys individuality. In its ultimate form, it is tyranny and fascism.

KIMURA: Under such circumstances, many people lose their self-confidence, becoming ser-vile, nihilistic or violent.

IKEDA: Everyone wants to realize their unique potential. When that natural desire is obstructed, people either become totally apathetic or destructive. That also sows the seeds for bullying and fascism.

Title: A Time for Self-Discovery

Subject: World Tribune 10/23/98 n.3214 p.1 WT981023p01

Author:

Keywords: Developing Discussions Guidance News Self-Discovery Time Tribune World Yourself Youth

That is why it is so important for you young people not to be defeated by your environment. You mustn't lose faith in yourself. Each of you has a mission in this lifetime that only you can fulfill. Each of you has a life that only you can live and from which you can create something of value. Whatever else you may doubt, I hope you will never doubt this.

Even should someone look upon you as a lost cause, you must never look upon yourself that way. Should someone berate you as having no talent or ability, you mustn't succumb to the negative message of their words. Unperturbed by others' negativity, grit your teeth, keep believing in yourself, chant daimoku and face your challenges with all your might.

Who Am I?

UEDA: How can we gain confidence in ourselves? Many people say that they have a hard time being themselves, that they don't know how.

IKEDA: Daimoku is the key. Daimoku is the mother bird that warms and hatches the egg of potential that is you. The inside of a bird's egg is liquid. Just looking at it, you would never guess that it could ever become a bird. But when the egg is warmed by the mother bird, slowly from this liquid a beak forms, then eyes, then wings, until eventually a fine bird emerges that can soar high into the sky.

UEDA: I think it's true that in our teens we are still like eggs, and most of us have no idea what we will hatch into.

IKEDA: The same can be said of our individuality. When we're young, we don't fully understand what the term means, and that's perfectly normal. In fact, many young people who make bold statements about their individuality are often just copying others — "borrowing" someone else's image.

Goethe once said that young people are like fountains. A fountain does not spout water from a source all its own but recirculates and spouts water taken from its surroundings. Similarly, young people are really just incorporating the ideas and fashions around them, but they are under the delusion that those borrowed ideas are their own, that they are an expression of their unique individuality.

KIMURA: We have to take time to develop ourselves, to establish our identity and realize our potential.

IKEDA: It was Nichiren Daishonin who said that daimoku is the mother bird that warms and eventually hatches the egg of potential (MW-1, 259–60).

When we speak of a Buddha, of someone attaining Buddhahood, we mean a person who has developed his or her individuality to the highest level possible, someone who has realized his or her fullest potential and undergone human revolution.

Chanting daimoku can also be compared to flowers — cherry, plum, peach and damson — turning their faces to the sun or spreading their roots in the life-giving earth.

As for self-confidence — self-confidence comes from hard work and effort. You're deluding yourself if you think you can have self-confidence without it. Only those who strive to challenge some goal and work toward it at their own pace and in their own way,

Title: A Time for Self-Discovery

Subject: World Tribune 10/23/98 n.3214 p.1 WT981023p01

Author:

Keywords: Developing Discussions Guidance News Self-Discovery Time Tribune World Yourself Youth

only those who keep trying, no matter how many times they may fail, can develop unshakable confidence in themselves. Self-confidence is synonymous with an invincible will. You cannot be said to have true self-confidence if your opinion of yourself seesaws from high to low every time you compare yourself to others. A life spent judging yourself by others will only end in frustration and deadlock.

The Courage To Be Your Own Person

UEDA: The key, I guess, is learning to be true to ourselves. It takes a lot of courage to be ourselves, doesn't it?

IKEDA: Youth is a time for self-discovery. The well-known Japanese novelist Natsume Soseki (1867–1916) journeyed in search of himself. Interested in English literature, he went to study in London. There, he experienced such culture shock that he developed a powerful inferiority complex and even had a nervous breakdown. After a long period of inner turmoil and self-reflection, he finally arrived at an answer to the question that had plagued him, “What is literature?” He realized that the only solution was to come up with a definition of what literature was through his own efforts. Recognizing that he had allowed himself to be overly swayed by others, he decided from then on to listen to his own voice and be his own person.

Later, Soseki addressed the following words to young people: “Here is the path I am meant to follow! I have found it at last!” When you can exclaim this from the very depths of your being, your heart will know peace for the first time. And with that cry, a hardy self-confidence will show itself.”

You are young. Show independence of mind, take up a challenge, any kind of challenge, and throw yourself into it with all your energy.

The Mirror of Others

KIMURA: In the journey of self-discovery, I think it is also important to listen to the opinions of others, because it can sometimes be difficult to see ourselves clearly.

IKEDA: That's true. There are certainly instances when you think you are one way, while the people around you think you are just the opposite. Other people can often see things about you that you can't. It's just like not being able to see your face without a mirror: the people around you can serve as a mirror to let you see yourself. Your friends or your parents may at times see you more clearly than you do.

The comments of people close to you can help you focus your individuality in a positive direction. The education, guidance, advice, warnings and even rebukes that you receive can all be used constructively to steer you along the right path. On the other hand, refusing to listen to others' advice, doing only what you want, cannot be described as individuality. That's just being stubborn, and it doesn't benefit anyone.

Even famous people are sometimes taken to task and scolded by members of their family. I'm sure your parents read the riot act to each other sometimes, too! No matter how influential or important someone may be, they too have to heed warnings, advice and recommendations as they carry out their work.

When people point out your faults, remember that it's just part of the process of forging

Title: A Time for Self-Discovery

Subject: World Tribune 10/23/98 n.3214 p.1 WT981023p01

Author:

Keywords: Developing Discussions Guidance News Self-Discovery Time Tribune World Yourself Youth

your individuality. Refusing to listen to advice is foolish.

Rebelling when someone says something to you and making things unpleasant for everyone is to no one's advantage. It's important to be wise. Having people point out your shortcomings and help you weed out your bad habits at the root is, in the long run, a great help to you. If the roots of those bad habits remain, they will gradually affect your life more and more adversely, moving you in a harmful, destructive direction.

UEDA: In other words, individuality does not exist apart from society and other people.

IKEDA: True individuality is realizing oneself fully within the structures of society, while working on behalf of others. We establish our own value as individuals within society, using the practical wisdom we possess.

Therefore, observing society's rules is also an indispensable part of letting our individuality shine. In society, actions that violate the agreed-upon rules make one an outcast, thus depriving one of the very place in which to exercise individuality. If, for example, you break your school rules out of sheer willfulness, it is likely that you will have problems fitting into society when you graduate from school or as you grow older.

People who are secure, who have a strong self-identity, are always willing to listen to the opinions of others. They have that strength and capacity. By comparison, those who refuse to listen to others tend to be rather weak.

Good Role Models, Good Books and Good Friends

KIMURA: One reader writes: "When I try to bring forth my individuality, I always end up imitating someone else I look up to, some ideal. Is that all right?"

IKEDA: It's impossible to nurture our individuality without learning from others, just as it's difficult to run a race without fueling our bodies with nutritious food. Learning, it is widely accepted, begins with imitating. Children learn how to live and behave by observing and imitating their parents. The same can be seen in the animal kingdom. All great men and women, all excellent people, all people of action, have developed their outstanding individuality by learning from and emulating others. That's one reason for reading the biographies of exceptional people. You will learn much from them. On the other hand, reading books that carry base and negative messages will only lead you to unhappiness.

Nichiren Daishonin cites the passage from the Nirvana Sutra: "Bodhisattvas, have no fear of mad elephants. What you should fear are evil friends! Even if you are killed by a mad elephant, you will not fall into the three evil paths. But if you are killed by an evil friend, you are certain to fall into them" (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 13).

Positive stimuli contribute to the positive development of your individuality. While shaped by such things as education, family environment and your own efforts, your individuality and its development ultimately depend on your consciousness. It's important to read good books and have good friends.

Youth is the time when you're still unsure about which is the best way to proceed — uncertain about which direction is beneficial and which is not. By acquainting yourself with the lives and achievements of courageous and admirable individuals, you will gradually get an idea of the direction you would like to follow. You will begin to get an idea of who you are.

Title: A Time for Self-Discovery

Subject: World Tribune 10/23/98 n.3214 p.1 WT981023p01

Author:

Keywords: Developing Discussions Guidance News Self-Discovery Time Tribune World Yourself Youth

Your Worth as a Person

IKEDA: In any event, it is important to remember that your worth as a person is not based on your profession. It is not based on wealth, fame or academic credentials. What counts is how hard you have striven in your chosen path, how much good you have accomplished, how earnestly you have devoted your energies to it. It is your spirit of devotion, your sincerity, that determines your true worth. For that reason, our individuality constitutes the basis for leading a life of dignity and meaning as a human being.

When you spend all your money, it's gone. Material things break, and they can't enrich you in any real, lasting sense. But the more you cultivate your innate individuality, the richer it becomes; the more you use and give expression to it, the richer it becomes. It never diminishes or disappears. Each of you possesses this wonderful treasure. Life is the struggle to make that precious treasure shine.

Your success or failure in life is not decided by your achievements and results in high school. To win true victory in life requires that you keep polishing the unequalled jewel of your unique potential as you make your way through life, bringing it to shine with supreme brilliance.

To be continued

Title: A Time for Self-Discovery

Subject: World Tribune 10/23/98 n.3214 p.1 WT981023p01

Author:

Keywords: Developing Discussions Guidance News Self-Discovery Time Tribune World Yourself Youth