

**SGI President Ikeda's Essay**  
**What is Kindness?**  
**By DAISAKU IKEDA, SGI President**

*Kindness is in decline these days — yet it's exactly what humanity needs to cultivate.*  
*'Kindness is a universal language,' President Ikeda writes. 'It links hearts in every*  
*society and culture around the globe.'*

During World War II, when I was only 16 or 17, I worked at the Niigata Steelworks in Kamata, Tokyo. I was suffering from a serious chest condition, but my older brothers were all drafted into the army; it was up to me to take care of our family, so I had no chance to rest and recover properly.

Even if I could have afforded to, it wouldn't have been permitted in those days. The factory doctor told me right from the start that no sick days would be permitted.

I pushed and pushed myself. Sometimes I even went to work with a fever of 102. Finally, I collapsed one day during the military drill practice held under the hot noonday sun. In addition to having a high fever, I began coughing up blood. I was sent to the factory's dispensary.

**During the war, people were in desperate straits, which made me appreciate kindness even more.**

When the nurse on duty saw how gaunt and weak I was, in a worried voice she said: "Oh my! This is terrible! We don't have any decent medicine here. Let me take you to a proper hospital."

I hesitated, but she paid me no attention and briskly set about getting me permission to take the rest of the day off. I remember that she was in her mid-40s, a small woman. Yet she accompanied me all the way to the hospital, supporting me as I made my way on unsteady feet. She kept encouraging me: "Are you all right? You're still young. I know that you'll make it!"

During the war, people and society as a whole were in desperate straits, which made me appreciate her kindness even more. I thanked her over and over again, with great emotion, bowing my head. "Don't be silly," she said, "I'm only doing what anyone would do."

I regret that I no longer remember her name, but I will never forget those kind words.

**Far too many people have fallen into a self-defeating pattern of selfishness.**

One hundred years ago, Lafcadio Hearn, also known by the Japanese name Yakumo Koizumi, introduced Japan to Westerners in his book *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*. In it, he described the Japanese character: "Their simple politeness is not an art; their goodness is absolutely unconscious goodness; both come straight from the heart." It is true that in the old days, Japan was a land of considerate people. The idea that kindness to others was the proper way to behave was widespread.

But far too many people today have fallen into a pattern of selfish behavior, concerned only with their own interests. They ignore people in trouble as if they didn't exist. Worse, this tendency is prevalent from adults down to children. The problem of bullying, rampant in our schools, is also a product of this spiritual climate.

To what can we trace this decline in kindness? We used to frequently hear the expression "*Nasake wa hito no tame narazu*" ("Kindness is not for the sake of others"). Its true

meaning is similar to the English proverb “Kindness is its own reward,” meaning that an act of kindness eventually returns to its doer, rewarding him or her. The Japanese proverb reflects the Buddhist concept of karmic reward or retribution for one’s deeds, a concept that fostered an appreciation of kindness, of extending a helping hand to our fellow human beings.

Nowadays, however, this same proverb is often interpreted in an entirely different way — as if it were “Kindness is not in the best interests of others.” Or “Being kind to people doesn’t help them.”

**Sadly enough, humanistic proverbs are now on the verge of being forgotten.**

There is another interesting saying in Japanese, “*Sode furiau mo tasho no en*” (“The merest brush of kimono sleeves is the product of karmic links of many lifetimes”). In other words, “Even chance meetings are the result of karma.” This is expressed by the image of the kimono sleeves of strangers brushing against each other as the stranger pass on the street; even such a fleeting encounter is not an accident or coincidence, but the result of deep karmic links from past existences.

This, too, is based on the Buddhist idea of cause and effect. It emphasizes the profound significance of our relations with others. It teaches us how important it is to value those relationships.

Among many young people today, however, the proverb is frequently understood quite differently. They think that the Japanese word *tasho*, which actually means many lifetimes, is another word that sounds exactly the same but means a slight amount. So for them the proverb means, “The merest brush of kimono sleeves is the product of *a trifling* karmic link.”

Sadly, such deeply humanistic proverbs are now on the verge of being forgotten. This attests to the collapse of Japan’s spiritual foundation. And this disintegration, I believe, lies at the root of the lack of consideration for others that we see today.

**Our lives exist to help others — this is the most fundamental energy source for nurturing true kindness.**

Nichiren Daishonin regarded the sufferings of all human beings as his own. With great compassion and an awareness of the persecution he was bound to suffer, he rose up to free them from misery and delusion. He also taught us that all people are originally Buddhas and have an inalienable right to become happy. And, at the same time, that we are all Bodhisattvas of the Earth charged with the mission of leading the suffering to true fulfillment.

This philosophy — that our lives exist to help others — is the most fundamental energy source for nurturing a vigorous kindness.

Today, the contributions of our SGI members to their respective communities and areas are valued and praised the world over. This is the inevitable result of our altruistic way of life as Buddhists devoted to achieving happiness for both ourselves and others.

Kindness is a universal language. It links hearts in every society and culture around the globe. The spread of our kosen-rufu activities is cultivating a rich field for the growth and expansion of just such humanistic spiritual values.