

**RECOLLECTIONS OF MY MEETINGS WITH LEADING WORLD FIGURES  
BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA  
VALENTINA TERESHKOVA, FIRST WOMAN IN SPACE**

ou cannot possibly imagine how beautiful it is. Anyone who sees the Earth from outer space, even only once, cannot fail to be assailed by a sense of reverence and love for this planet that is our home,” Russia’s famed cosmonaut, Seagull, said to me in Moscow.

“It is I, Seagull!” Valentina Tereshkova’s lively voice was broadcast from *Vostok 6* to people all around the world. She was the first woman in space, orbiting the Earth in June 1963 at the age of only twenty-six. Using her call sign Seagull (Chaika), she reported: “I see the horizon. A light blue, a beautiful band. This is the Earth. How beautiful it is! All goes well.”<sup>1</sup>

The image of a soaring seagull seemed to fit the young cosmonaut perfectly, and thereafter she came to be known affectionately as “Seagull” by people throughout the world.

Seated facing me with a warm smile of welcome, she retained a modest and unassuming presence. We met at the offices of the Soviet Women’s Committee on Pushkinskaya Street (now Bolshaya Dmitrovka Street) in Moscow in May 1975, during my second visit to the Soviet Union. I sat on one side of an oval table with my wife, Kaneko, and the members of our delegation. On the other side sat Ms. Tereshkova, the chairperson of the committee, along with the vice chairperson and several other members of the administrative staff. Ms. Tereshkova was wearing a green knit top and a brown cardigan. Her eyes, which had gazed upon the Earth from outer space, were the same blue as our planet. They shone with a sincere and friendly light.

I asked her why she had become a cosmonaut, curious to know what had caused her to embark on such an exciting adventure.

“Let me see, . . .” she began in a quiet voice, hands folded on the table. She said that she decided she wanted to go into space after Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin (1934–68) succeeded in the first manned space flight.

The whole world was talking about his epoch-making achievement, nowhere more so than in the Soviet Union. “Man has gone into space for the first time. A Soviet! A Soviet youth!” Everyone at the factory where she worked was filled with excitement and jubilation; they cheered enthusiastically.

On returning home that evening, after a day of rejoicing and celebration, the young Valentina’s life was changed forever by her mother’s casually spoken words: “Now that a man has gone into space, next time it’ll be a woman’s turn.” They struck her with powerful impact. She was so excited by that thought that she couldn’t sleep that night.

“I’m sure there wasn’t a single young person in all of the Soviet Union who wouldn’t have given their right arm to be able to do what Lieutenant Gagarin had done,” she says of that time.

But Valentina was very realistic, concluding that any woman chosen for a space mission would probably have to be an exceptionally brilliant scientist to qualify. As a member of the local air sports club, which she had joined with a group of friends, she had developed a great interest in parachuting. Her mother worried for her safety, but she had fallen in love with the sky.

Ms. Tereshkova was raised by her mother. Her father had gone off to fight in World War II when she was two and been killed in action a short time later. He had been a skilled tractor driver, and she has faint memories of him giving her a ride. One night in the mid-

dle of the war, during a blizzard, the news of his death arrived. Her mother's quiet sobbing remains like a bad dream in her memory. She was only three. She had an older sister, and her mother was pregnant with her brother. Her grandmother, unable to accept her son's death, never stopped waiting for his return.

What untold pain and suffering has been inflicted on women and children by the tragedy of war! I, and those of my generation, have witnessed this almost beyond endurance.

A widow at twenty-seven, Ms. Tereshkova's mother did her best to support and raise her three children. She would leave the house every morning before daybreak to milk cows on a dairy farm in Kolhoz. At times she would sigh and say that their family must have been abandoned by Fortune. She herself had been one of eight children, of which only three survived. Three died of starvation. Another two died in civil wars.

Eventually the family moved to the city. Her mother and her older sister worked together at a textile mill in Yaroslavl on the banks of the Volga. Her mother was such a hard worker, Ms. Tereshkova said, that she and her siblings never saw her idle or at rest.

At seventeen, Ms. Tereshkova went to work herself in a tire factory. Later she got a job at the same factory as her mother and sister, where she stayed until she was chosen for the Soviet space program.

On her first payday, she bought a flower-print head scarf and some sweets for her mother. When her mother saw the gifts, she burst into tears. After the long winter, the light of spring slowly began to shine on their humble little family.

After Gagarin's historic space flight, anyone in the Soviet Union could volunteer for the space program. "I also volunteered, of course," said Ms. Tereshkova. She had the good fortune to be chosen, but the training was far tougher than she had anticipated. She didn't go into details, but she did say: "The training was very tough, in both kind and quantity. It progressed stage by stage, and each stage was a real challenge to my physical strength." One can sense intuitively just how demanding the training must have been. When she was in the centrifuge, she felt as if her blood had turned to mercury, she once wrote.

She had to study many specialized subjects, including rocket science, intensively. Each day was a battle, but she was not deterred. "I believe," she explained, "that when you have a dream and dedicate all your strength and being to achieve it, you can realize it without fail."

She said she felt that the picture of her mother she kept in her room was cheering her on; her mother's gaze seemed to say: "I know you can do it!" Whenever she received her salary, she would hurry to the post office to send money home to her mother.

Those around her also encouraged her. It was common in the Soviet Union for men and women to work alongside one another, and she was well liked by everyone for her kindness and consideration.

At our meeting, she exhibited the same deference, making an effort to involve others in the conversation and apologizing for talking only about herself.

The day when she would actually go into space finally arrived! Over the course of three days, she circled the Earth forty-eight times—meaning that she saw a new dawn every one-and-a-half hours. "It was breathtakingly beautiful," she said, "like something out of a fairy tale." The Earth was surrounded by a circle of soft light that constantly changed color, going through the entire spectrum.

"There is no way I can describe the joy of seeing the Earth," she remarked. "It was blue, and more beautiful than any other planet. Every continent, every ocean, had its own dis-

Title: Valentina Tereshkova

Subject: Living Buddhism 09/99 v.99 n.9 p.45 LB9909p45

Author: Daisaku Ikeda

Keywords: Daisaku Figures First Ikeda Leading Meetings Military People Recollections Space Tereshkova Valentina Woman World

tinct beauty.” Africa was yellow, South America was green, and Asia was a deep brown.

As she circled the Earth, she thought of her mother back home. She thought of all the mothers on Earth.

The Earth teemed with life. She could see mountains: All the birds that dwelled there had mothers. She could see forests: All the insects and animals that lived there had mothers. She could see rivers and oceans: All the fish that inhabited them had mothers. And all the people on that planet had mothers, too.

Yes, she realized, every single person on Earth had a mother who had undergone the pain of childbirth to bring them into the world. All of these children were truly precious, born with the Earth’s blessing. Life passes from mother to child, from mother to child. Without mothers, none of us would be here. From mother to child, mother to child—if even just a single link in this chain of life were broken in the billions of years that life has existed on this planet, we would not be here today.

Behind each of us, she reflected, is the love of an infinite number of mothers—mothers who wish for nothing more than that we, their children, live good lives. She couldn’t help feeling that the Earth is filled with the sound of these mothers’ prayers.

The Earth itself is the mother of all life. Gazing upon it from space, Ms. Tereshkova cried: “The Earth is blue and beautiful. It is beautiful!”

And then she thought: “There are all sorts of mothers on our planet, but mine is the best. I want to make sure that there are no more war widows like my mother, and no more children like me, who do not even know their own fathers.”

The Earth gives people life; nations take it from them. The Earth nourishes life; nations throw it away. If nations are the product of men squabbling for territory and influence, then the Earth is the realm of mothers. This realm of mothers, who love life, is far greater and grander than the nation-states created by men.

The twenty-first century will be the century of life. It will be the century of women. We must make it an age where the prayers for peace of all mothers since the beginning of history are finally answered.

My friendship with Ms. Tereshkova continues to this day. I met her again in 1987 and 1990. I was glad to see that she still stands tall, strong and youthful, and continues her activities. She has one daughter, Yelena, who is a surgeon today.

In May 1987, I was invited to the Soviet Union by the Presidium of the Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, of which Ms. Tereshkova was chairperson. She not only came to greet me at the airport but also accompanied me to various functions over a four-day period. The SGI had brought its “Nuclear Weapons: Threat to Our World” exhibition to Moscow on that occasion, and Ms. Tereshkova was there very early on the opening day, busy helping with preparations.

I remember Ms. Tereshkova remarking: “Once you’ve been into space, you appreciate how small and fragile the Earth is. This small, blue, shining planet. We must not allow it to be covered by the black ash of a nuclear war. All of the women of the world must join hands and make peace happen. We are all riding on Spaceship Earth together.”

Seagull continues to fly here on Earth in pursuit of her dream of peace. □

1. *Notable Twentieth-Century Scientists*, ed. Emily J. McMurray (New York: Gale Research Inc., 1995), vol. 4, p. 1993.