

DISCUSSIONS ON YOUTH SURROUNDED BY GOOD FRIENDS

How do you get more good friends? SGI President Ikeda says in this discussion that the first step is becoming a good friend yourself. 'For example, when you notice someone is worried about something, offer a kind word...,' he explains. 'When you make a promise, always keep it, no matter what. If you try to be that kind of person, you'll soon come to find yourself surrounded by good friends.'

YOSHIKO UEDA: One of the biggest areas of difficulty for high school students is their relationships — especially with their friends.

SATORU MIURA: Yes, many of our readers have asked if you could discuss friendship once again. [See *Discussions on Youth*, vol. 1, pp. 76–112.]

Of all the different relationships we have — with our teachers, our parents, our seniors and juniors, our supervisors at part-time jobs and so on — those with our friends are an especially big part of our lives.

Relationship problems are an inevitable part of human life.

SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA: That's true. In Japanese, we write the word for human being, *nin-gen*, with two Chinese characters that mean person (*nin*) and between (*gen*). This expresses the idea that human beings only fully exist in their relationships *between* people. None of us can live alone. Because of that, experiencing relationship problems of some sort or other is an inevitable part of life.

Sometimes our relationships with others get so bothersome that we want to shout, "I wish I could live somewhere where there are no people!" But that's impossible, unless we become hermits.

So, where does that leave us? Basically, we have to make an effort to cultivate good relationships with others. We have to become people who can develop such relationships. That's all there is to it.

Relationship problems are opportunities for you to grow and mature. Such problems can be character building, if you don't let them defeat you. That's why it's important not to isolate yourself. No one can exist apart from others. Remaining aloof from others only cultivates selfishness, and that accomplishes nothing.

MIURA: One of the high school students says: "I think human relationships have grown rather shallow and superficial. It's rare these days for people to sit down and really share their thoughts and feelings with others. It seems like they don't really want to forge deep bonds of friendship."

When we encounter an obstacle, good friends give us the strength to keep moving forward.

IKEDA: It's up to each individual how to live his or her life. That, however, doesn't change

the fact that having close friends can be tremendously rewarding. There's a Mongolian proverb "A hundred friends are more precious than a hundred pieces of gold." People who have friends are rich.

Quite often, the encouragement and stimulation of friends spur us toward self-improvement. We are inspired to lead fulfilling lives and to create a better world — to work together with our friends toward that goal.

Having good friends is like being equipped with a powerful auxiliary engine. When we encounter a steep hill or an obstacle, we can encourage each other and find the strength to keep pressing vigorously forward.

If someone is hurting others, we can help him or her move in a positive direction by pointing out what's going on.

MIURA: Good friends are a real treasure.

But there are also bad friends, who can exert a negative influence. Several students wrote about this, saying things like "One of my friends has a side I really dislike. He is always bullying others around and getting them to buy things for him." "There is a student who is constantly borrowing money but never returns it. He orders his friends to tag along with him, and he won't take no for an answer. He couldn't care less about what others want. I don't think he's a real friend at all."

IKEDA: Buddhism teaches that we should associate with good companions (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 78), meaning that we should be careful to choose good people as our friends and role models. It also instructs that we should distance ourselves from bad company.

A Buddhist scripture states that even a good person who associates with evil people will, in two, three, or even five cases out of 10 be tainted by that evil (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 7, p. 22). We should therefore have the attitude, it says, to rebuke wrong, to rebuke destructive behavior.

By pointing out to someone that their actions are inflicting suffering and hurt on others, we can urge them to move in a more positive direction. Our honesty, in fact, can open the way to forging deep bonds of genuine friendship with that person.

In other words, it's quite possible for a "bad" friend to become a good friend.

There are also cases in which friendship starts out as a casual thing, with two people just sitting around talking. Then one day, something happens that inspires them both to try to achieve some goal. They then become good friends, who have a positive influence on each other.

UEDA: We asked the high school students what they thought made friends good or bad. Most of them described a good friend as someone they can talk to about anything; someone who understands them; someone who is there for them, whom they can consult when facing a serious problem.

Bad friends, on the other hand, were described as selfish, those who gossip maliciously about people behind their backs, tell lies, let people down, broadcast others' confidences and secrets, break promises or cruelly ignore people out of spite. All the latter traits have one thing in common: an utter disregard for others' feelings.

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The quality of our friendships is based on what kind of character we can develop.

IKEDA: Character and integrity are very important. A spirit of mutual respect and trust is a vital basis for real friendship.

That said, there naturally might be times when you have arguments and disagreements with your friends. But there should always be an underlying spirit of respect and consideration for each other, no matter how close you are. In friendship, you mustn't think only of yourself.

Bad friends cause people trouble and grief through delinquent behavior. Good friends, by contrast, warmly encourage others, give them hope and inspire them to self-improvement.

MIURA: We are very fortunate if we have such good friends.

IKEDA: Yes, and to have friends like that, the first thing you must do is become that kind of person yourself. For example, when you notice someone is worried about something, offer a kind word. You could say, for instance: "You look down. What's wrong?" When you make a promise, always keep it, no matter what. If you try to be that kind of person, you'll soon come to find yourself surrounded by good friends.

Really cultivate your character — then, even if you lose a friendship, an even better one always awaits you.

MIURA: One student writes: "I have a hard time making friends. There was a time in the past when everyone used to gang up on me and bully me. I was really hurt by that treatment, and now I'm afraid of people."

IKEDA: There's no need to worry or be overly anxious, if you can't immediately make the ideal friendships for which you wish. Life is long, and you will have many opportunities to make friends. Just be patient, and don't give up.

When you are young, you go through many changes, and so do your peers. The most important thing is to forge a strong self. Find your dream — the way that's right for you — and work to make it come true.

Sometimes friendship just happens. Sometimes you have to seek it out. Sometimes it develops from sharing similar likes and dislikes. However it starts, friendship is friendship.

UEDA: Yes, our interests, our likes and dislikes, play a big role in friendship, don't they?

IKEDA: We all have likes and dislikes, and in some cases they may mean that we cannot become friends with a certain person. Or they may even destroy a friendship.

But what's important is to cultivate the kind of character that makes you a good friend. Such a person may lose a friendship, but the sprout of an even better friendship always awaits them.

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A real friend won't tell you to do things that are just plain wrong.

UEDA: I've seen that no matter how they may appear on the surface, most of the high school division members are essentially good, decent kids. And that's what makes them particularly sensitive to lies and deceit. If they find that a friend has deceived them — even just a little — they feel that they can no longer be friends with that person, because their trust has been destroyed.

MIURA: Another student writes: "I can't help it, but I just don't like myself. Everyone else seems better off than I am, and I feel jealous."

IKEDA: Yes, you may feel that way sometimes. But you are all still young. Each of you is a work in progress, still developing. And that's perfectly normal.

To still be growing, to still be improving, is a wonderful thing. Just continue to press on tenaciously to find your way forward — despite the suffering and pain that is part of youth and growing up. Indeed, that's the only way to grow.

No matter what happens, please don't arrogantly jump to the conclusion that "People are all the same!" It's not as simple as that. All people have their less than attractive sides, but they also have sides that are beautiful and noble.

It all comes down to what you do, not what anyone else does. If someone should betray your trust, vow that you'll never, ever do the same thing to anyone else. Be determined to keep your promises to others. Take an interest in others' problems as your own, and work to help them overcome them. This kind of strong resolve is important.

Mr. Toda always urged the youth to be people of integrity.

UEDA: I read about your meeting with Russian physicist Dr. Anatoli Logunov and his 14-year-old granddaughter Anna [April 2, 1998]. Anna asked you why it was that some people make great progress, while others don't. She wanted to know what it was that set them apart.

You replied that environment was a crucial factor: Even if different people made the same amount of effort, what they achieved tended to vary depending on their environment. One environmental factor, you stressed, was having good friends who keep you moving in a positive direction.

IKEDA: There are all kinds of environmental factors that foster growth and self-improvement. Compared to love relationships or parent-child relationships, our relationships with our friends are a far more universal, broad-ranging influence.

The relationship between mentor and disciple, of course, exists on a much more solemn, profound dimension. Our friendships, nevertheless, are a close, everyday part of us.

Having good friends is a great blessing. A relationship based on selfish motives or that is spoiled by unpleasantness over money cannot be considered a good friendship. Similarly, relationships that everyone disapproves of, because you're hanging out with people who don't know right from wrong and engage in delinquent behavior, are clearly bad.

A real friend will not demand money from you or encourage you to do things that are wrong. That is just evil disguised as friendship. You must speak out against it and avoid getting involved in it.

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Don't prolong an association with bad friends. I even think it's fine to sometimes run away from such company. Discuss your situation with someone you trust. Don't just fret silently over it by yourself.

Part one of a discussion on the importance of friendship among SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai high school division leaders Satoru Miura (young men's chief secretary) and Yoshiko Ueda (young women's leader). Part two will appear in an upcoming issue.

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