

THIS BEAUTIFUL EARTH: PHOTO ESSAY BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA CHERRY BLOSSOMS ON A POND

There is a pond that each spring turns into a flowered mirror. Flower blossoms scattered, petal by petal, gently covering the water's surface like a delicate silk scarf scented with sweet fragrance. To the koi-fish in the pond, they must have looked like clouds spreading across the sky. Again, the pink flower-petals on the water's surface must have resembled scaly-pink clouds at sunset. Blown by the breeze, the shape of this mass of cherry petals shifted and changed like a school of fish, an ever-moving kaleidoscope image. The pond, which is in a corner of the Soka Gakkai Headquarters complex, was lit by the brightness of a beautiful spring day.

The fish and the entire spring scene were like finely decorated brocade. Cherry blossoms adorned the water's surface like a dotted pattern of inlaid mother-of-pearl. The reflections of hanging cherry branches danced amid ripples on the water; the clear-blue sky seemed to reflect up from the pond's very bottom. The small pond was not small at all. Encompassing heaven and earth, nothing was lacking. It was its own fully expansive universe.

Looking up, spring clouds streamed across the sky, always in motion, like flower blossoms of the heavens. Don't people live in their own small ponds?

*Many things past are
Brought back to my memory
By cherries in bloom*

This haiku by the famous poet Basho may well express the sentiment of most Japanese. We live out our years recording another ring of growth with each season of cherry blossoms.

When I was a boy, our house in the Kojiya district of Tokyo's Ota ward had a wide yard in which grew a large cherry tree. Each spring, both ground and sky were awash with flowers, our house an abode of blossoms. After we sold our house, the cherry tree was cut down. During the war, the lot became a munitions factory. Under daily bombing, Tokyo was a burned-out ruin.

One day I went for a walk in a section of Kamata district that had escaped destruction. It was in the spring of 1945, the last year of the war, but the war was still under way. As I strolled along, lost in thought, something bright appeared before my eyes. A few cherry trees had been spared and were in full, brilliant bloom. This colorful scene stood out like a point of light amid the ashen landscape of a ruined city. Life filled each blossoming branch, each treetop. At that moment those cherry trees stood for the richness of life. At the same time, however, the nationalist military rulers of Japan were using the cherry tree as a symbol of death. With the motto "Gallantly [give your lives] like scattering blossoms," they sent several million blossoming youth to their deaths. My friends and my brothers scattered themselves in this way among distant southern seas.

*Ah, cherry blossoms—
Some scatter, while some remain
To fall in the end*

At 17, I remained, without scattering in the winds of war. Year after year, blossoms bloom and fall—cherry blossoms of life. People often reflect on their lives with the

falling blossoms.

President Toda loved the cherry blossoms. About this or that he would say, “When the cherries are in bloom,” and “Let’s walk the path of cherry blossoms.” On occasion, we would walk together from Ichigaya to observe the cherry trees in full bloom. Standing on the bank of a moat, my teacher would say, “These cherry trees have endured the bitter cold of winter to bloom yet again!” Their image mirrored the blossoms of happiness that had accumulated in Mr. Toda’s heart, having endured the bitter winter of imprisonment during the war.

“Winter will turn into spring without fail!” he would declare. He also said, “I want to die when the cherries are in bloom.” That wish came to pass. Having filled the hearts of many people with the fragrant spring of happiness, gallantly, with serene dignity, he scattered his life to the wind along with the cherry blossoms. And like the falling blossoms, my mentor’s life ended with dignity and splendor.

The koi leapt and splashed in the water, and the raft of flower petals changed its form. Newly fallen blossoms danced in the breeze. Each petal seemed to glow with new life, descending joyfully toward the “skies” of the pond. Though fallen, they seemed to bloom again on the water’s surface. Now, at the height of their lives, they offered themselves as a gift to the earth. Their scattering was not an end but an outpouring of life.

I took this picture on April 7, 1994. That evening, I greeted a delegation of the Chinese People’s International Friendship Association. They had come to open an exhibit of modern masterpieces of painting and calligraphy by renowned Chinese artists. The exhibit was being held to commemorate the institution of friendly relations between our two countries. This was art of the “Hundred Flowers Movement,” fragrant with the spirit of peace. Friendship Association Vice President Wang Xiaoxian spoke of my relationship with Mr. and Mrs. Zhou Enlai and the season of cherry blossoms.

Mr. Zhou had recalled to me that he left Japan [after studying there] 50 years before when the cherries were in bloom. I had invited him to “please come again when the cherries are blossoming.” Later, fulfilling Mr. Zhou’s wish, his wife had visited Japan in the season of cherry blossoms. “When the cherries are in bloom”—these were Mr. Zhou’s last words to me.

Just as layer after layer of petals fill a flower basket, the blossoms of memories I have created over the years decorate my life. I pray that it will be the same for all of my friends. A monarch of flowers, the cherry blossom symbolizes the spirit of a champion of life, living fully to the end.

Fourteen in a series