

**NEW SERIES:
DIALOGUE OF HOPE
PROBLEMS AND ANXIETIES MEAN GROWTH**

‘When you run, you create resistance,’ SGI President Ikeda says. ‘When you climb a mountain, you get short of breath. In the same way, you experience problems and anxieties because you are growing.’

Part one of a discussion on the meaning of the word smart among SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai junior high school division leaders Kenji Shiratsuchi (young men’s leader) and Keiko Maekawa (young women’s leader).

SGI President Ikeda: All right, let’s begin! We’re calling this series “Dialogue of Hope.”

Kenji Shiratsuchi: Thank you, President Ikeda, for joining us in this dialogue.

Keiko Maekawa: Yes, thank you so much.

Ikeda: The junior high school years are an especially important period of life. It is a time when you build the foundation for the rest of your life.

Have you ever seen a butterfly break out of its chrysalis?

Shiratsuchi: In photos.

Maekawa: Me, too.

Ikeda: When it breaks out of its chrysalis, the butterfly has undergone a complete self-transformation, having changed from a caterpillar into a butterfly. Exposing itself to the cool breezes of the outside world, it gradually stretches out its crumpled wings, until finally they are fully spread in all their colorful glory. Then it flaps them a couple of times and, before you know it, takes off, flying into the sky. It is like a second birth.

We human beings have a second birth, too. Our first birth takes place when we are born from our mother. But later, the time arrives when we begin to fly on our own wings. For most people, this takes place during junior high school, at about 13 or 14.

Because this is a period of so much growth, it is also a period of many problems and anxieties. When you run, you create resistance. When you climb a mountain, you get short of breath. In the same way, you experience problems and anxieties because you are growing.

Youth is the time when hopes and problems fight it out. It’s a contest to see which will win in your heart.

I want all our junior high students to win in this contest. I want you all to have a youth that you can look back on and say, with satisfaction, “It was a wonderful time.” I will gladly do anything I can to make that possible.

I want to give you hope and courage, to support you with my entire being. If there’s anything you want to ask — anything at all — please feel free to do so.

There may be parts of our discussion that are a little difficult, but now that you’re in

junior high, you're an adult—that's how I will treat you in this discussion. As a "senior in life," I want to share life's truths with you. If there are places that are hard to understand, please just skip over them and go on reading. You don't have to understand everything right now. Just read the parts you do understand.

All right, then, let's begin.

Shiratsuchi: I have a letter from a member, who just entered junior high, asking for advice. He lives in Tokyo, is an only child and is attending a local public school.

He writes: "From elementary school, I haven't been good at studying. Since starting junior high, it seems that the pace has picked up and the classes are harder. At first, I tried my best. But somehow, I just can't manage to keep up. The other students in my class seem to understand the lessons, though, and it makes me really anxious. I'm worried that I'm going to get left behind. I'm beginning to think that I'm just not bright. What can I do?"

Ikeda: Thank you to that student for sharing this with us! It's certainly true that junior high is completely different from elementary school. It's a completely different world.

In most elementary schools, you have one teacher who teaches almost all the subjects, but in junior high you have a different teacher for each. There may be teachers you get along with and teachers you may find intimidating.

Shiratsuchi: And, as he said, the pace of classes does pick up. In Japan, you also start studying English for the first time, and arithmetic suddenly gets a new, fancy name: mathematics. You also have to deal with new concepts such as mid-semester and end-of-semester exams, which can be quite daunting.

Maekawa: I've heard first-year junior high students say with surprise that their teachers talk in loud voices and are quick to yell at students.

Ikeda: Those teachers may simply be excited because they've got a fresh class of students to teach!

It is human to have problems.

Ikeda: Everyone is anxious and insecure in a new environment. It's quite natural. Maybe you think you're hopeless when you see friends who do better at school than you do. Maybe you feel depressed and discouraged.

But you're not alone. Everyone is anxious or worried—that's how it is. Even your friends who appear confident have some kind of problem of their own.

It's human to have problems. You're all human beings. You're all junior high students. It's natural to feel anxious. There's nothing wrong with being anxious, but it's wrong to let it defeat you.

Shiratsuchi: I was very timid myself. I was nervous and worried about junior high even before I started.

Maekawa: I was more relaxed, I guess. But I went to a pretty tough junior high, with a reputation for senior students enforcing a strict hierarchy that had to be obeyed or else. And when people told me that the classes would be a lot harder in junior high school, I did feel pressured.

Ikeda: It must be difficult for junior high students with all that pressure, plus other things going on at school, to have things further compounded by the classes getting harder.

Shiratsuchi: Some students are ready to give up from the start, it seems. When you talk to a lot of junior high students, they immediately blurt out that they're just not bright, just like the student whose letter I shared.

Maekawa: Yes. When I chide them for saying that and want to know why they feel that way, they say, "Well, because I've been dumb since elementary school." It wrenches my heart to think of the suffering that has been inflicted on these youth as a result of others' criticizing them or putting them down.

Ikeda: I think we should ask ourselves what *smart* means, actually. I once heard it said, "A smart person is one who has a lot of questions."

Maekawa: Not someone who knows a lot.

Ikeda: Yes. In this view, a really smart person is a person who questions, who is curious, who wonders about things—someone who is not afraid to admit they don't understand this or don't get that, someone who wants to know why this is so or why that is like it is.

Maekawa: Then getting good grades isn't always the same as being smart, is it?

Ikeda: Of course, it is better to get good grades. But just because you have gotten bad grades so far, does not mean that you are not bright. You mustn't think that way. You are insulting yourself. Each of you is a treasure chest filled with infinite potential.

Everyone is a genius at something.

Ikeda: There are many ways to be smart. Good memory is one thing, and the ability to think is another. There is inventiveness and creativity, and there is insight. There is perceptiveness and expressiveness.

All of these are different. It's just like how the ability to run fast and the ability to throw a ball a long distance are two completely different skills.

Shiratsuchi: School exams mainly test memory.

Ikeda: Our society is in trouble because we tend to regard memory and retention of information as the only marks of intelligence, of being smart. As a result, we have produced a lot of people who passively accept whatever others write or say.

Shiratsuchi: In Japan, there are many people who tend to accept rumors as truth without any attempt to verify them.

Ikeda: Such people can't be called smart.

Scientists are now saying that our brains are all pretty much the same. Of course, we all have particular things that we are and aren't good at. And we have individual talents. We don't learn everything at school.

Our brains contain many gifts and abilities: the ability to paint beautiful pictures or to make people laugh; the ability to get along with others; the ability to organize; the ability to comfort others; the ability to write good letters; the abilities to excel in music and sports. All of them are there.

Maekawa: Everyone is an individual.

Ikeda: Everyone is different, and everyone is a genius at something. This is what we call our mission. Each of us has a mission that is ours alone, that only we can accomplish.

That is why we were born. If we didn't have a mission, we would never have been born in the first place.

Look up at the stars. There are so many. In this universe filled with countless stars and planets, you were born here, on this earth, at this time. That is definitely not an accident.

There is a meaning to your having been born. You were born because it was a good thing for you to be born. You have a mission that only you can fulfill. You are a genius at something.

It's just that you don't know what it is yet. That's why you mustn't ever write yourself off or think that you aren't bright.