SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA'S ESSAY SERIES
A RECORD OF MY LIFE
SPEAKING AT THE INSTITUT DE FRANCE
BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA

The Institut de France faces the Louvre from across the Seine River. The Louvre represents political power, and the Institut power of intellect.

It would actually be more correct to say that the Louvre *used* to represent political power. The Louvre is located in the center of Paris directly west of the Ile de la Cité, the French capital's historic core. Today, as an art museum, it serves as the repository of artistic treasures not only of France, but also from around the world. However, originally a palace of kings, the Louvre remained for some time, along with the palace at Versailles, an integral part of the nucleus of political power in France.

The Louvre is situated on the right bank of the Seine, and the Institut on the left, relative to the direction of the river's flow. On a map of Paris, the right bank is to the river's north and the left bank is to the south.

I would like to emphasize the fact that the Institut de France is positioned neither downstream from nor next to the Louvre, but directly opposite. The seat of government and the seat of intellect have long stood together at the very center of grand Paris, separated by the serene and motherly Seine.

This is evidence of the tremendous import that has been placed on the Institut's existence. While people often speak of the fortitude of the British and discipline of the Germans, the French have long been known as people of intellect. Indeed, great value is placed on intellect in France.

The Institut's Origins

It is well known how Napoleon, while pursuing his Egyptian campaign, would refer to himself first as a member of the Institut de France before using his title of supreme military commander. Upon being selected as a member of the Académie des Sciences1 (in 1797), he remarked: "True conquests, those which yield not a single regret, are conquest over ignorance. Therefore, the most honorable and useful endeavor for all nations, is to contribute to the expansion of human thought. The real power of the French Republic from now on must consist in allowing not a single new idea that is not our own.— Bonaparte."2

The Institut de France, a sanctuary of intellect, has a long and glorious tradition as one of the foremost authorities on thought and culture not only in France, but in all of Europe, and as a fulcrum of the human spirit. It is a wellspring of refined and exalted culture. It is a "citadel" of knowledge that has fought to uphold the values of beauty, intellect and art in order to preserve France's identity.

The origins of the Institut go back to the time of Louis XIII (1601–43). The Académie Française was founded in 1635 under the iron-willed Cardinal de Richelieu.3 Later, during the reign of Louis XIV (1638–1715), the Académie des Sciences (Academy of Sciences), Académie des Beaux-Arts (Academy of Fine Arts) and a number of other institutions were established. Together these were known as the Royal Académie.

The Royal Académie was dissolved during the French Revolution, but Napoleon reconstituted it as the Institut de France in 1795. Behind the seat of the Institut's chairman there stands today a statue of Napoleon holding a crown of laurels. Thus, while the Institut de France was officially established at the end of the eighteenth century, its scholarly and artistic

Title: Speaking At The Institut De France
Subject: Living Buddhism 08/01 v.5 n.8 p.31 LB0108p31
Author: Daisaku Ikeda
Keywords: Encouragement France Globalism Guidance Ikeda Institut Life President Record Speaking

traditions go back more than 150 years earlier.

At present, the Institut de France is made up of five academies. The oldest of these, the Académie Française (language and literature), has forty members all holding lifetime appointments. Because the doors of this academy are engraved with the words, *À l'immortalité* (Aiming for Immortality), its members are respectfully referred to as the "Forty Immortals." It is considered a great honor for a French citizen to become a member of the Académie Française. The French art scholar René Huyghe (1907–97), with whom I met on several occasions and subsequently published a dialogue, was one of the Forty Immortals.

There is also the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres (history and archaeology), the Académie des Sciences, the Académie des Sciences morales et politiques (moral and political sciences), and the Académie des Beaux-Arts. Membership in each of the other academies is also limited to certain numbers.

Springtime in Paris

Ten years ago, on June 14, 1989, I spoke at the Institut de France at the invitation of the Académie des Beaux-Arts. My talk was titled "Art and Spirituality in the East and the West."

It was the final week of a more than one-month long trip to four European countries. In the United Kingdom, I met with Her Royal Highness Princess Anne and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, visited the University of London and the University of Oxford, and attended the opening of the Oriental Gallery of the Taplow Court Grand Culture Centre. I also attended three SGI meetings — the First SGI European General Meeting, a conference commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the start of the kosen-rufu movement in the United Kingdom, and a conference of top leaders — in an effort to meet with and encourage my fellow SGI members.

In Sweden, which I was visiting for the first time, I met with King Carl XVI Gustaf and Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson, and we discussed a variety of issues relating to peace and environmental protection. I also attended the opening of the "Dialogue with Nature" exhibition of my photographs at the Stockholm Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, and the First SGI Nordic General Meeting.

In France, I met with President François Mitterrand and Senate President Alain Poher, and visited the University of Paris V (Sorbonne). In Switzerland, I visited the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, where I was presented with the UNHCR's Humanitarian Award, and attended an SGI-Switzerland General Meeting.

My address at the Institut de France took place amid this arduous schedule.

Paris in June is a city abloom with flowers. Since the winters there are harsh, Parisians look forward to spring that much more. With the arrival of May, blossoms everywhere begin to open as if on cue, and by June, flower beds on street corners and in the squares are a multicolored pageant. The gardens of people's homes also vie to outdo one another in beauty.

The cotton-like tufts from the horse chestnut trees lining the streets dance in the wind eddies at street corners. When the breeze picks up, the blossoms come down like snow, covering one's shoulders and painting the streets white.

Crimson roses in flower arcades enrich one's heart with their exquisiteness. And the trees display a fresh tint of green.

Driving through Paris in all its springtime splendor, we approached the Institut de France via a road that runs along the Seine. It was evening and the city was bathed in a clear luminescence.

A Proud Stone Edifice

The Institut was moved from within the Louvre Palace to its present location on the left bank

Title: Speaking At The Institut De France
Subject: Living Buddhism 08/01 v.5 n.8 p.31 LB0108p31
Author: Daisaku Ikeda
Keywords: Encouragement France Globalism Guidance Ikeda Institut Life President Record Speaking

of the Seine in 1805. Louis XIV's prime minister Mazarin4 entrusted the task of constructing a proud stone edifice to house the facility to the hand of the same master architect who had handled construction of the Louvre.

Entering the gate and making our way across the cobblestoned drive, we arrived at the entrance, which was richly draped in green ivy. There, Marcel Landowski, permanent secretary of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, kindly waited to welcome us. It was our first meeting, but he was most genial and received us with a warm smile. His tranquil eyes shone with intelligence and creativity.

Mr. Landowski is a distinguished composer. Although he is first and foremost a musician who says that music is his *raison d'etre* and that composing is his life, he is also a great leader with the ability to bring out the personality and talent of outstanding artists and intellectuals.

When French author André Malraux (1901–76), who is an old acquaintance of mine, became France's Minister of Cultural Affairs, he asked Mr. Landowski to serve as director of the Department of Musical Affairs, in which capacity the illustrious composer left behind a record of brilliant achievement. Several years after we met, Mr. Landowski became chancellor of the Institut de France, with responsibility for all five academies. I sent him a telegram expressing my sincere congratulations on his appointment.

During my visit to the Institut, I was delighted to also have the chance to speak informally with René Huyghe and his wife, who had come to welcome us.

My address was scheduled for 5:00 p.m. in the Institut's conference hall. I planned on speaking for an hour, allowing time for interpretation.

The event began with greetings from President André Jacquemin of the Académie des Beaux-Arts. This was followed by a generous welcome from Mr. Landowski. He thanked me for coming and remarked: "The power of spirituality is the driving force behind artistic activity. I understand that the principle of the "human revolution," which the Soka Gakkai International is promulgating, rejects all forms of violence. Here at the Institut de France, for more than 350 years we have continuously sought to promote fraternity and humanity, and, through various forms of art, have constantly striven to enable people to respond appropriately to advances and improvements in their daily lives. In this context, we are extremely pleased to be able to hear President Ikeda's views on art and spirituality."

I began by reading a poem I had composed, and I also closed with a poem. While I'd had many opportunities to speak at universities and scholarly institutions in different parts of the world, this was the first time that I recited my own poetry at the outset and conclusion of a speech. Nor have I done so since. In a country of poetry such as France, it seems that my lecture style was received by the members of the Academy in the spirit of an intellectual challenge.

The Blossoming of the "Creative Life"

A portion of my address went as follows: "Since ancient times, art has appeared as a natural, irrepressible manifestation of human spirituality. While being manifest in various concrete forms through its guileless pursuit of expression, it also conveys a certain wholeness penetrating all life. It has further aspired to identify the individual life of the human being with the universal macrocosm. In contemporary times, however, art has lost its power to unite human beings with the universe and nature; its "life force" has weakened."

I also touched on the Buddhist concepts of dependent origination — the interrelation of all things — and nonsubstantiality, as well as the idea expounded in the Lotus Sutra that life is infinitely unfettered and dynamic. Bringing to bloom the "creative life" inherent in all people, I

Title: Speaking At The Institut De France
Subject: Living Buddhism 08/01 v.5 n.8 p.31 LB0108p31
Author: Daisaku Ikeda
Keywords: Encouragement France Globalism Guidance Ikeda Institut Life President Record Speaking

said, would lead to an inner revolution in the life of the human being and the revitalization of art. This resonates with ideals sought by the great French poet Paul Valéry, who advocated the coming together of like minds on a spiritual level, and André Malraux, who foresaw the coming of a "spiritual revolution." I further stated that this would become a wellspring of energy bringing renewed life not only to art, but all fields of human endeavor.

Statues of such renowned French writers, artists and scholars as Corneille, Moliére, Racine and La Fontaine graced the four walls of the high-ceilinged conference hall at the Institut. The color scheme was simple and unaffected. The white sculptures stood in stark contrast against the dignified wood-paneled walls. The wooden tables and chairs were all covered in deep green velvet.

While decorated with a casual simplicity, the room exuded a feeling of pleasant solemnity. It needed no further ornamentation. The atmosphere conveyed the importance of doing away with the superficial and focusing on the essential when it comes to learning, intellect or art.

Buddhism in Europe is generally associated with the static and nihilistic ideas of the Hinayana teachings. I keenly felt the need to change this static image and bring about an awareness of the existence of a Buddhism that is alive and active in the present age.

The French philosopher Henri-Louis Bergson attempted to understand all phenomena as part of a continuity rather than as having a fixed aspect. This point of view is intimately linked to the Mahayana concept of nonsubstantiality. While touching on the views of eminent Western intellectuals such as Bergson, Valéry and Huyghe, I discussed the exciting development of the creative life expounded in the Lotus Sutra — the quintessence of Mahayana Buddhism.

In order to clearly convey the heart of the Lotus Sutra as a teaching of the joy of life, I introduced the passage from Nichiren Daishonin's famous writing "Great Evil and Great Good" that goes: "Even if you are not the Venerable Mahakashyapa, you should all perform a dance. Even if you are not Shariputra, you should leap up and dance. When Bodhisattva Superior Practices emerged from the earth, did he not emerge dancing?" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 1119).

The Lotus Sutra is abound with such artistic imagery. Its climax dynamically describes the emergence of countless bodhisattvas from the earth, saying that they "performed dances," "leapt up and danced" and "emerged dancing." This is what is meant by a creative life pulsing with vitality. It symbolizes the supreme joy that is unleashed when we deeply pursue a life based on universal truth and dedicate ourselves wholeheartedly to improving society.

In this connection, I cited a beautiful passage in Valéry's exquisite dialogue "Dance and the Soul" where the writer has Socrates comment on the sight of a dancing woman.5

Responses From Intellectuals

The members of the Academy, all representing the French intellectual community, listened earnestly to my address. The atmosphere was quiet and tense. The tables were equipped with built-in lights to aid the participants, as the only other lighting in the hall came from the chandeliers and natural sunlight shining through windows high above. Some people avidly took notes.

The speaker does not make his or her address from an elevated podium. Rather, both speaker and listeners are seated at tables of the same height. Moreover, probably owing to a tradition that values dialogue, each desk is equipped with a microphone.

The solemn mood made one hesitant to even clear one's throat. The only sounds that could be heard in the hall were my voice and that of the interpreter.

I always pour my whole life into preparing the manuscripts of my addresses, polishing and

Title: Speaking At The Institut De France
Subject: Living Buddhism 08/01 v.5 n.8 p.31 LB0108p31
Author: Daisaku Ikeda
Keywords: Encouragement France Globalism Guidance Ikeda Institut Life President Record Speaking

refining until the very last minute. I cannot overlook even the smallest detail in presentation—from the resonance of my voice, to the spacing of words and places to break for interpretation. It is an all-out struggle. Before those who listen with the heart, one must speak with the heart.

Actually, up until I was about to enter the hall I had thought that, depending on the mood in the room, I might mention the story of Cosette and Marius from Victor Hugo's great saga *Les Miserables*. That's because situated just to the south of the Institut de France is the Jardin du Luxembourg, one of Paris's most beautiful parks, which is the setting where these two youth first encounter one another from afar. Hugo describes with penetrating brilliance just how their hearts danced in anticipation of the mere sight of each other. As a young man, I was utterly captivated by this part.

It occurred to me that I might share with my audience how I had been looking forward to that day with a feeling of excitement akin to that felt by the two youths in Hugo's drama. But the atmosphere in the conference hall did not lend to such levity. From start to finish, a keen tension filled the air.

I concluded my remarks with another poem of mine:

And here is Art,
Inviting the soul by reaching
her hand out
Toward a soothing and
serene wood,
Toward a garden where imagination blazes across the sky;
Inviting it to the noble stage
of wisdom
And leading it toward
the far-off horizon
Of universal civilization.

Thus concluded my hourlong speech.

When I finished with "Merci," the hushed hall suddenly erupted with applause. It seemed to go on forever. People came up to me one after another to shake my hand.

Mr. Landowski graciously praised my address as an epic poem in and of itself, calling it "a work of art dedicated to the pursuit of the essence of life, and to bringing tranquil joy to our lost and wounded spirits." He further commented: "Modern art tends to be removed from life and daily existence. Your talk has taught me the importance of harmonizing such art with the fundamental reality of the universe. It was a highly thought-provoking speech, which has reminded me of the things that really matter that are presently overlooked."

The sculptor Jean Cardot, who is a member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, remarked with delight that my lecture was spiritually, morally and intellectually stimulating, and he commented on my deep understanding of the culture of the West. And the composer Daniel Lesur, a member of the same academy, remarked that I had captured the essence of life and art, and clarified art's universality. Many others praised the speech for its logical clarity, for getting at the essence of Buddhism and for its poetic beauty. The response was really beyond anything I could have hoped for.

Dr. Serge-Christophe Kolm, director of studies at the School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences in Paris, who has a profound understanding of Buddhism, said that the relation between the Lotus Sutra and the artistic life was a completely new perspective for him. And

Title: Speaking At The Institut De France
Subject: Living Buddhism 08/01 v.5 n.8 p.31 LB0108p31
Author: Daisaku Ikeda
Keywords: Encouragement France Globalism Guidance Ikeda Institut Life President Record Speaking

President Gabriel Peronnet of the French Association for the United Nations remarked that as a Westerner who prizes reason and inquiry, he had listened to my address with a rather critical ear, but that in the end, he found that he could not help being moved by and agreeing with my views. He also highly acclaimed my commitment to action.

Thanks to the efforts of many people, my address at the Institut de France elicited a tremendous response and was a great success.

Encouraging Emissaries From the Future

The French SGI members also took good care of us during our stay. I was particularly struck by the growth of these dear friends, whom I had not seen in two years, as well as by how much their activities had developed.

Prior to the address at the Institut, I attended a gathering to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the start of the kosen-rufu movement in France. A thousand members from six countries came together under azure skies in the verdant garden of the Soka University European Language Training Center in Verrieres-le-Buisson, a southern suburb of Paris.

Adults and children alike participated joyfully in the event. Everyone rejoiced in the network of happiness they had constructed. It was a departure toward a wonderful future.

Girls and boys performed skits and sang songs. We all earnestly applauded their sincere efforts. Speaking directly with these pure-hearted youth, I gave my all to praising and encouraging them. We took a commemorative photo together. As usual, the impassioned performance of the blue-and-white clad fife and drum corps members stole the show.

Children grow up in an instant — at a rate that adults can hardly comprehend. It is crucial for children in their formative years to be bathed in the nourishment of love and encouragement. That is why, wherever I go in the world, I pour my heart and soul into giving courage to the emissaries from the future with whom I may have occasion to meet.

A Meeting With Members of the Fife and Drum Corps

In the spring of 1973, I made a stop in florid Paris en route to green London, where my dialogue with the illustrious British historian Dr. Arnold J. Toynbee (1889–1975) was taking place. At the time, there was only one small community center in the whole of France.

A mini culture festival was held in the garden of that center, located in the Paris suburb of Sceaux. A light breeze was blowing. The thirty-member French fife and drum corps, made up of girls ranging in age from five to twenty, performed the march "The Thunderer."

Everyone joined in singing the fife and drum corps favorite "Frères Jacques." The short song was repeated over and over, to the point where I could even remember the French lyrics! The Japanese version of this tune is also popular in Japan. The song goes: "Are you sleeping, are you sleeping, Brother John, Brother John. Morning bells are ringing, morning bells are ringing. Ding ding dong, ding ding dong."

I remarked to the gathering: "People everywhere are as if sleeping amid their suffering. It is our mission to rouse them with the bell of Buddhism."

Some fifteen years had passed since then when I visited Paris for my address at the Institut de France in 1989. The fife and drum corps members had grown into fine young women. Delighted that I would be speaking at the Institut de France, and understanding the event's significance, each was also challenging her own mission. In their own unique capacities, they were gaining rich life experience and devoting themselves wholeheartedly in their chosen fields of endeavor. Nothing could be more wonderful than seeing youth develop into capable people making their way through life freely and happily.

Title: Speaking At The Institut De France
Subject: Living Buddhism 08/01 v.5 n.8 p.31 LB0108p31
Author: Daisaku Ikeda
Keywords: Encouragement France Globalism Guidance Ikeda Institut Life President Record Speaking

Following my address, a lovely reception was held. After exchanging greetings with many of the guests, my party and I took our leave from the Institut. Our car passed through the streets of Paris' sixth district as we headed south. The sixth district, where the Institut de France is located, is an area truly suited to being a center of intellect. The neighboring fifth district, incidentally, is home to a large number of universities and scholarly institutions, such as the Sorbonne.

The sixth district is the site of the plaza St. Germain des Prés and its environs, as well as buildings that date back to the Middle Ages and those that symbolize intellect and art. Many intellectuals, attracted by the staid academic atmosphere produced by the concentration of publishers of specialized books on philosophy and thought, have settled there. There are famous cafes like Café de Flore and Les Deux Magots where such writers as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, the parents of existentialism, used to discuss philosophy and life. Today, the area continues to attract young scholars and artists.

Feeling pleasantly fatigued, I fondly reminisced about the comings and goings of great French thinkers as we made our way through the streets of Paris.

1. Académie des Sciences: French scientific society established in 1666. In 1793, after the French Revolution, the Academy was suppressed by the National Convention. Its functions were resumed in 1795 by a branch of the newly formed Institut de France.
2. Translated from French: Napoléon, "Remerciement Académique," 26 December 1797, *Mémoires et Œuvres de Napoléon*, ed. Tancréde Martel (Paris: Albin Michel, 1926), pp. 378–79.
3. Richelieu (1585–1642): French politician who served as advisor to Louis XIII. He actively sought to protect writers and artists, and founded the Académie Française.
4. Mazarin (1602–61): French cardinal and statesman. Succeeded Richelieu as prime minister in 1642.
5. "While this explanation and vibration of life, while this supremacy of tension, and this whirling into the greatest agility humanly possible, have the virtues and powers of flame; and that the shames, the worries, the sillinesses, and the monotonous fare of existence are consumed in it, making a shining light in our eyes of what is divine in a mortal woman?" [Paul Valéry, "Dance and the Soul," *Paul Valéry: An Anthology*, ed. Jackson Mathews (Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 299.]

Title: Speaking At The Institut De France
Subject: Living Buddhism 08/01 v.5 n.8 p.31 LB0108p31
Author: Daisaku Ikeda
Keywords: Encouragement France Globalism Guidance Ikeda Institut Life President Record Speaking