

SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA'S ESSAY SERIES
A RECORD OF MY LIFE
MEETING WITH NELSON MANDELA— CHAMPION OF JUSTICE
BY SGI PRESIDENT DAISAKU IKEDA

It was a scene that moved the soul. The mood was solemn, as it should be at the start of a new millennium. The stage was South Africa's Robben Island, a small barren outcropping of land nearly seven miles off the shore of Cape Town; a place once notorious as a prison island.

It was midnight on January 1, 2000.

In a dimly-lit room of earthen walls, a candle sparked to life. Through the lattice of steel bars appeared the faint image of a person. That person was former South African president Nelson Mandela. A smile shone on his gentle face, and his hair was speckled with gray. This indomitable champion of justice in the twentieth century had spent nearly eighteen of his twenty-seven years in prison on this island.

Mr. Mandela chose this solitary cell where he had passed each unimaginably long day during his incarceration as the place where he would welcome in the new millennium. He lit a candle as he prayed for the protection of human rights in the twenty-first century, dubbing it the "freedom flame."

Candle in hand, the towering figure slowly made its way out of the prison. Outside, on the grounds of the old prison, a smaller man stood waiting. His entire being exuded vitality. It was the new South African president Thabo Mbeki, Mr. Mandela's successor. Handing the candle to President Mbeki, Mr. Mandela remarked, "Because there are good people in the world, this flame will not be extinguished."

This scene filled me with deep emotion as I reflected on my meetings with each of these great men.

Greeted by 500 Youth

Let us now jump back in time to 1990. On February 11 of that year, Mr. Mandela was at long last released from captivity. This was also the ninetieth anniversary of the birth of my mentor and second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda, invincible champion of Soka. As I reminisced about my mentor on that day, I thought about the future of Mr. Mandela, a mighty lion who had broken through the chains of oppression.

Later in the year, on October 31, I received Mr. Mandela at the Seikyo Shimbun building in Shinanomachi, Tokyo. He had come to Japan as vice president of the African National Congress (ANC). When his car pulled up, a shout of "Viva! Mandela!" arose like the roar of the sea from the 500 representative youth division members who had assembled to welcome him. Stepping from the vehicle, Mr. Mandela smiled broadly and waved at the crowd. It was a brilliant autumn day.

As he entered the building, members of the Soka University Pan-African Friendship Society sang in English the beloved song of the South African people "Rolihlahla Mandela":

Rolihlahla Mandela
Free is in your hands
Show us the way to freedom,
In this land of Africa
Oh, Mandela, Mandela, Mandela,
Mandela's Freedom now

*Show us the way to Freedom
In this land of Africa.*

Welcoming a Hero of the People

I greeted him saying, “With my deepest respect, I sincerely welcome you, a hero of the people.”

Smiling brightly, he replied: “I am very honored to meet you. I had been hoping to see you during my stay in Japan.”

“It is I who am honored by your visit, despite your busy schedule,” I rejoined. “You have proven that justice always wins! You have given courage to the entire world!”

Mr. Mandela is a true gentleman.

At the outset of our meeting, he said he had been paying close attention to the activities of the SGI, which he hailed as a body that is creating lasting value for humankind and thereby uniting the people of the world.

How did Mr. Mandela, who had just been released from prison after twenty-seven years, know so much about our movement? The answer to this is somewhat detailed, but I would like to tell it just as it happened.

In 1985, the South African poet Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali,¹ whose poetry sings of the dawn of black liberation and is filled with a deep passion for human rights, wrote a series of essays for publication in the education journal *HIT* at the request of the magazine’s editor. They were to be serialized over four weeks. At the time, he was involved in scholastic education in Soweto, one of the townships in South Africa where black people were forced to live during apartheid. Incidentally, I met Mr. Mtshali for the first time in Tokyo six months after my meeting with Mr. Mandela.

Soweto was the epitome of the multitude of problems faced by South Africa at that time. Confusion reigned among the youth living there. The struggle continued and many students were turning to drugs and delinquent behavior. It was amid such circumstances that Mr. Mtshali received a copy of a collection of my essays titled *Glass Children* from a friend who was a Japanese scholar of literature. It seems that my writings resonated profoundly with his own ideas.

We had never met. And he apparently was unaware that I was the leader of the SGI, or that the SGI was a body dedicated to promoting peace, culture and education based on the teachings of Buddhism. Nevertheless, Mr. Mtshali introduced my message to youth as “the great words of a sage from the Orient.”

In his essays, the poet expressed his own sincere thoughts and expectations for youth, and quoted the following passages from my writings: “Youth is a time of hardships, but it is also a time when the light of hope streams in. The person who grows up with an ever constant hope for the future is the true singer of youth’s song.”² And “To do anything that would ... deprive [young people] of their vigor is equivalent to casting one’s treasures into the sea.”³

At a time when young people were giving in to despair and hopelessness, Mr. Mtshali’s works elicited a tremendous response from the journal’s audience. They even reached Mr. Mandela in prison.

Turning Prison Into a “Mandela University”

In a situation that to most would seem utterly hopeless, Mr. Mandela endured all with a tenacious spirit, using his time to reflect upon and ponder the history of South Africa from the time it was settled by the Dutch in the seventeenth century to the outbreak of the Anglo Boer War (1899–1902),⁴ and the path that the country had followed since its establishment.

Through his meditations, Mr. Mandela no doubt developed a clear vision about what his country needed most for the future.

In the dim light of his prison cell, he read countless volumes, turning even those small confines into a “Mandela University.” He and his fellow inmates created a system whereby they would teach each other the specialized knowledge or skills in which they had expertise. In this way, they squarely challenged the attempts of the prison to break them spiritually and intellectually.

His contemplation must have naturally led him to think about the issue of educating and raising young people. It was in such circumstances that he happened upon my writings. That is to say, even before we met in person, we had a meeting of the minds; in particular, we shared a conviction in the importance of education for youth.

About six months before Mr. Mandela was to make his first trip to Japan, I was contacted by the ANC office in Tokyo to see if a meeting between us could be arranged. When we finally came face-to-face, Mr. Mandela remarked familiarly, “I have been looking forward to meeting you. I didn’t want to leave Japan until I did so.” I was moved by his humble and sincere desire to use his encounters with people as a source of inspiration, hope and strength.

I said to him: “Looking toward the future one or two hundred years hence, what is necessary now for the long-term growth of a nation? It is education. This is my unchanging belief and conviction. And this is the focus of all my efforts.”

During the course of our discussion, I made five proposals: developing educational exchange; inviting artists from South Africa to perform in Japan; holding an exhibition on the theme of human rights; holding an anti-apartheid photo exhibition; and sponsoring public lectures on human rights. Mr. Mandela voiced his wholehearted support.

Each of these specific proposals was realized. In fact, one of them, the exhibition “Toward the Century of Humanity: Human Rights in Today’s World,” was shown globally in thirty cities of eight countries.

It is important that we fulfill our promises and live true to our beliefs no matter what. The SGI has gained the trust of people around the world precisely because we have upheld these principles.

Mr. Mandela is a humanistic educator in the broadest sense. Indeed, his life itself has imparted great hope and courage to people everywhere. On the day of our meeting, he warmly surveyed the Japanese youth who welcomed him, his face displaying the compassionate gaze of one devoted to education. What distinguishes a genuine leader from a mere powermonger is a love for young people and a dedication to fostering them.

Raising Successors

Mr. Mandela and I discussed the need for raising successors. Dispensing with formalities, I asked him candidly: “Even though your country has in you an unprecedented and great leader, unless there are many excellent people behind you, your job will never be accomplished.”

He sat on the sofa listening intently. I continued: “One tall tree does not make a forest. Unless other trees grow to the same height, you cannot have a large grove.”

Mr. Mandela was 72 at the time. The more significant a movement is, the more its leader will be committed to thinking about its perpetuation. A leader who takes full responsibility for a movement’s success or failure is one who is truly devoted to raising capable people to whom the future can be entrusted. As I spoke, Mr. Mandela nodded deeply, showing complete understanding. I also presented this great senior in life with a poem, “Banner of Humanism, Path of Justice.”

On the night of our meeting, a farewell reception sponsored by the ambassadors of various

African countries was held in Mr. Mandela's honor. Nigerian Ambassador to Japan Mai-Bukar Garba Dogon-Yaro later related to me Mr. Mandela's remarks that evening. Asked about his impressions of his visit to Japan, Mr. Mandela stated: "The part of my visit that made me happiest was my meeting with SGI President Ikeda. When I arrived for the meeting, I was warmly welcomed by young students, who even sang for me.

"I struggled in prison for twenty-seven years, but at that moment I thought to myself, 'All of my efforts have now been rewarded.' I was also moved by the sincere support that President Ikeda and the SGI members have extended to us."

His words about me aside, I wish to leave a record of this wonderful history as praise for the youth who helped me create it.

At Tokyo Narita International Airport the following day, as he prepared to end his brief trip to Japan, Mr. Mandela again said to the ambassadors surrounding him that our meeting was the most memorable part of his stay.

Five years later, in July 1995, Mr. Mandela visited Japan again — this time as a state guest. He had been elected president of South Africa [in May 1994] through free and democratic elections, heralding the dawn of freedom in his country. I paid a courtesy call on him at the Akasaka State Guesthouse in central Tokyo.

Two years prior to that, in December 1993, Mr. Mandela was jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize with then South African president Frederik W. de Klerk,⁵ whom I also had the occasion to meet in June 1992.

The Mission of Religion Is to Serve People

Knowing that he had been working tirelessly without a moment's rest, I told this indomitable champion of justice that I was praying wholeheartedly for his health.

With great feeling, President Mandela said: "I have been looking forward to seeing you again. I vividly recall our meeting five years ago. I will never forget the warm reception I received from you and the Soka University students. I was particularly moved by the female students. That's because the Western media gives one the impression that universities in Asia cater chiefly to men."

The South African president also commented on the role played by religion in his country, saying: "It was religious institutions, not the government, that provided black people with opportunities for education. Also, many religious people fought in the forefront of the anti-apartheid movement and struggled to elevate the status of blacks in South African society." For an instant a look of nostalgia flashed across his face and he gazed into the distance.

"During our incarceration, it was these religious figures who supported us in forming a prison choir, holding study groups and putting on Christmas shows, and who otherwise worked to make our lives more enjoyable." His words were few, but I could sense in them the weight of the 10,000 days he had spent behind bars.

The mission of religion is to serve people. It makes absolutely no sense for people to be forced to kowtow to religious authority. Religious figures should be willing to give their very lives for the sake of human rights. When I voiced such sentiments, Mr. Mandela smiled in agreement.

I praised his great struggle as bearing out the truth of the South African proverb, "He who perseveres has no misfortune," and expressed my gratitude for the honorary doctorate in education I had been informed would be bestowed upon me by the University of the North, of which Mr. Mandela was chancellor.

As our discussion drew to a close, President Mandela thanked me for the warm welcome and conveyed his sincere wish that I would further work to promote the welfare of all people.

In the course of our dialogue on this occasion, I once again inquired about Mr. Mandela's plans for a successor, as I had done during our meeting five years earlier. I did this out of concern for South Africa's ongoing development. "Everything is fine now while your country enjoys the guidance of such an outstanding leader," I said, "but the problem is the future. The world is also wondering what you will do."

With his charming smile, President Mandela noted that I had brought this question up during our first encounter. He must have given this issue serious thought. He responded definitively: "A successor — yes, I have one." He already had a successor in mind. That person was Thabo Mbeki.

Meeting With Mr. Mbeki

In April 1998, I met with Mr. Mbeki at the Seikyo Shimbun building. He was visiting Japan as South Africa's deputy president. We spoke in the same room where Mr. Mandela and I had our first meeting eight years earlier. He struck me as a tried and tested champion of human rights.

Mr. Mbeki's father had been a comrade of Mr. Mandela, struggling together with him in prison for twenty-three years. Having inherited his father's fighting spirit, Mr. Mbeki himself had endured twenty-eight years in exile.

He is quick-witted. When I praised his wife for her vigorous social activism, saying, "They say that behind every great man there is sure to be a great woman," he immediately retorted, "There's no 'behind' about it — she's out in front!"

I also commented on the high regard Mr. Mandela held for him, citing the South African president as saying: "Mbeki is the actual president of the country. I am leaving everything up to him. He is a person of exceptional ability. He has a deep spirit of respect for others, is extremely warm and acutely sensitive to the sufferings of the people."

Listening to these words, I could feel the deep love and respect Mr. Mandela had for his chosen successor. No sooner had I relayed this to Mr. Mbeki than he replied: "No, no. There is actually an explanation for why the president praises me so. The truth is that he owes me some money, but since he doesn't want to pay it back, he keeps trying to butter me up!"

The room erupted with laughter. His humor was premised on their absolute trust in one another. I was reminded once again of the certainty with which Mr. Mandela had responded to my inquiry, saying, "A successor — yes, I have one."

Mutual Understanding Gives Rise to Trust

Sure enough, about a year after our meeting, Mr. Mbeki was elected president of South Africa.

Mr. Mbeki advocates an African Renaissance. With firm resolve, he said to me when we met: "The people of Africa are faced with many problems. We must challenge and overcome them. We had felt that perhaps Japan and the Japanese people were our allies in this; and my current trip here has confirmed that. In particular, our meeting today has given my colleagues and me utmost confidence that this is indeed the case!"

I replied: "Those who have suffered the harshest oppression have the right to achieve the greatest victory and unsurpassed happiness. On the other hand, those who have perpetrated oppression will sink into nothingness like the setting sun. This is an unchanging rule of history."

Japan needs first to understand Africa. It must learn from Africa. Mutual understanding gives rise to trust. Forty years ago, I proclaimed that the twenty-first century would be the century of Africa. And I have since worked to develop exchange between Japan and many African countries.

Africa is indeed grappling with a host of problems — ranging from civil war and refugee crises, to hunger and epidemics — which could collectively be termed the "negative legacy" of

the twentieth century. But against this backdrop, President Mbeki's message at the start of this year shone like a brilliant ray of light: "The twenty-first century will be the century of Africa. We must promote the African Renaissance and turn the new century into a century of hope.... Precisely because we have experienced all the tragedies of the past century and the past millennium, we now direct our gaze toward the shimmering stars."

In a spirit of solidarity, I applauded his words wholeheartedly.

"I Want to Live to 125"

Mr. Mandela also began the new year in good health, throwing himself into his activities from the outset and delivering a speech at the UN Security Council. In introducing Mr. Mandela to the Security Council, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke said in his praise that history would rank Mr. Mandela with Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King.⁶

Speaking of Gandhi, while he was still alive, someone asked him how long he wanted to live. With a warm smile, Gandhi replied: "I want to live to 125! Because it will take me that long to accomplish everything I want to do!"⁷ His grandson, Arun Gandhi (president of the M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence), whom I have met, speaks often of this episode.

The year 1994 marked the 125th anniversary of Gandhi's birth. A commemorative issue of the scholarly journal *Indian Horizons* (published by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations) included articles submitted by both Mr. Mandela and myself. At the time of our second meeting, this came up, and I fondly remember that we spoke of Gandhi's life and achievements. It is my fervent prayer that Mr. Mandela, a great treasure of humankind, will live long and continue to build a Century of Africa.

The Flame of Freedom Will Never Die

An Eastern classic describes the infiniteness of spiritual succession as "a flame that is passed on, never knowing extinction." Mr. Mandela endured 10,000 days in prison, and the flame of freedom that he has entrusted to the twenty-first century will never die.

Likewise, the "flame of human revolution" that Soka Gakkai presidents Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda caused to burn even brighter in prison will continue to shine with increasing brilliance in the new century through the magnificent drama of spiritual transmission from mentor to disciple.

1. Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali: His first book of poetry, *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* (1971), is considered a seminal work in the movement for the Black Consciousness. He met with SGI President Ikeda in Tokyo in May 1991.
2. Daisaku Ikeda, *Glass Children and Other Essays*, trans. Burton Watson (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1979), p. 62.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 50–51.
4. Anglo Boer War: War between Great Britain and the two Boer republics of the Orange Free State and the South African Republic (Transvaal). It resulted in the dissolution of the two republics.
5. Frederik W. de Klerk: President of South Africa from 1989 to 1994; his administration began dismantling the system of apartheid.
6. UN press release SC/6787, January 19, 2000.
7. This episode is introduced as Arun Gandhi's favorite quote from his grandfather in *Jun Shioda's Ganji wo Tsuide* (The Portrait of a Family series: The Gandhi Family) (Tokyo: Nippon Hoso Shuppan Kyokai, 1998), p. 212.