

DIALOGUE OF HOPE HOW TO DEVELOP A TRUE FRIENDSHIP

‘Friendship is not simply a matter of the other person liking you and caring about your welfare,’ explains SGI President Ikeda. ‘Nor is true friendship conditional, lasting only as long as the other person does not betray you or let you down. It is your concern and feelings for the other person that make a friendship.’

A discussion on making friends among SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai junior high school division leaders Kenji Shira-tsuchi (young men’s leader) and Keiko Maekawa (young women’s leader).

Keiko Maekawa: This time, we’ll talk about the problem of making friends. I have a question from a junior high school student in Tokyo. She writes: “I had a hard time making friends when I was in elementary school. I decided that I would finally make friends when I went to junior high, but from the very first day I haven’t had any luck. And on top of that, I had a fight with my best friend in elementary school, and we still aren’t talking. Now she’s here at the same junior high, and that makes me uncomfortable. I just can’t stand it, every day is so awful.”

I think many students worry whether they’ll be able to make friends in a new environment.

Kenji Shiratsuchi: When I started junior high, I was really worried, too. There were so many new people, and I didn’t know if I’d be able to make friends. I was shy around others, so I wasn’t able to make many friends all through junior high, even during my second and third year.

Maekawa: Friendships are one of the things students are thinking about most at the start of each school year. Everyone is praying that they’ll be able to make good friends and get nice teachers.

The better the person you become, the better the friends you will find.

SGI President Ikeda: I see. I think it’s true to some extent that teenagers feel that their friends are more important and closer to them than their parents and teachers.

A person who has many friends is fortunate. A person who can say, “I have great friends” is lucky indeed. Those who possess true friends, people who really understand them and would never let them down, have something more precious than money, fame, or status. Their lives are rich and filled with treasure.

But there’s no need to worry if you don’t have such friends yet. You should try to relax. When you tell yourself, “I *have* to make friends,” you put pressure on yourself and you make yourself feel bad. Just be you. Think, “I’ll find the right friends eventually,” or “Real friends are worth the wait.” Then concentrate on developing yourself into a fine person. The better the person you become yourself, the better the friends you will someday find.

Shiratsuchi: Whenever I ask junior high school students whom they talk to about their

problems, they always say, “My friends.” But they also keep things from each other. It’s hard to be a true friend.

Maekawa: That’s true. Girls, in particular, seem to form cliques in junior high. I think many girls belong to such a group during those years. They tend to be anxious and insecure about being on their own. I was the same when I was in junior high. Some girls carry it so far that they won’t even go to the bathroom alone. Others won’t eat lunch by themselves; if there’s no one around to eat with, they take their packed lunch back home uneaten. But in spite of this tendency to hang out in cliques, the friendships formed within them aren’t always very deep.

Ikeda: There are many kinds and degrees of friendship. Some friendships end with the school year. Some last all through junior high, and some last a lifetime. Some who claim to have lots of friends have only shallow friendships. Some have only one friend, but that friendship is very deep and lasting.

Still, there’s no need to rank your friendships and say this one is good and that one is not. It’s important to treasure all kinds of friendship. Please try to be sincere and genuine in each one. That’s the main point of being a good friend: to be sincere and unchanging in your friendship.

Your attitude is important – not the other person’s.

Maekawa: I’d like to share a story. It’s about me, so I’m a little embarrassed, but maybe it will help someone. When I was in junior high, I was in a group with five or six other girls. One day, one of the girls broke a school rule, and another girl in our group told the teacher. The group decided to snub the one who had “snitched” by not talking to her.

The girl who told the teacher happened to be my best friend, but I knew that if I didn’t ignore her, too, the group would turn on me next. So the following day I didn’t talk to her all day. When she said “Good morning” or tried to talk to me, I refused to say anything back. She was so hurt that she looked like she was going to cry.

When I got home and told my mom about it, she exploded. “The girl who broke the rule might not have liked being told on, but your friend was only trying to do the right thing. Why are you punishing her?” I knew my mother was right, and that night I chanted daimoku for my friend for about an hour.

The next day at school, I immediately apologized to her and we made up. The others in the group may have looked on me as a traitor, but I decided that I was this girl’s friend even if the others in the group decided to ignore me as well.

After we graduated, the group ties gradually weakened, but I am still friends with the girl I apologized to and made up with.

Ikeda: What a wonderful story! Thank you. Your mother is to be commended.

I think you have given us a hint about the secret of true friendship. And that is that friendship depends upon you. It is your attitude that is important, not the other person’s. Friendship is not simply a matter of the other person liking you and caring about your welfare. Nor is true friendship conditional, lasting only as long as the other person does not betray you or let you down. It is *your* concern and feelings for the other person that make a friendship. Friendship is never betraying a friend, even if he or she should betray

you. Being friends with someone while they're experiencing good times but deserting them when they experience hard times cannot be called true friendship. Genuine friends have the courage to stick by a friend in even the worst situation, when everyone else has turned against him or her.

Shiratsuchi: Friendship means staying true to a friend even when you've had an argument and maybe aren't speaking for a while.

Ikeda: This brings us right back to the question of the student who wrote the letter we were discussing earlier. Even though she had a fight with her elementary school friend, I would encourage her to go over and say hello, putting the past behind her. It would be a good idea if she could convey somehow that she still regards the girl as her friend.

Friends are like a mirror. If you greet a friend, eventually they will greet you in return. You may not make up right away, but your sincerity will be reflected in the other person's life, as if in a mirror. You can't make new friends if you are always passive and waiting for the other person to make the first move.

Maekawa: After all, the other person may be thinking, "I'm willing to be friends again if she is," and just waiting for something from you.

It is hard, however, to find the courage to strike up a conversation with someone you don't really know.

Ikeda: Courage is something you have to summon. Everyone has that courage inside them. It's just sitting there dormant, hidden away. When we chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, courage surges forth in our hearts.

Try speaking to just one person a day. For instance, when you arrive at school, say "Good morning" to someone. They may be surprised, and they may not answer you or they may ignore you. But that's not your problem, that's theirs. You had the courage to say something, so you're the winner. If those you greet treat you coldly, then they're the ones making bad causes.

I'm sure you know the famous fable in which the Sun and the North Wind compete to see who is more powerful by trying to get a traveler to take off his coat. The North Wind blows coldly with all its might, but this only makes the traveler clutch his coat more tightly around him. Then the Sun smiles down, its bright rays warming the traveler and causing him to relax and take off his coat.

The same is true of relations with others. Here, persuading the traveler to take off his coat corresponds to getting a person to open his or her heart. It is important that you be like the Sun. The Sun always shines down on the Earth, sending us its warmth and light even when it's cloudy and rainy. It is constant and unchanging. I hope you, too, will always have such a big heart.

Shiratsuchi: What we have to do is shine!

True friends are independent – and respect your independence.

Ikeda: The Japanese word for *friend*, *tomo*, used to be written with a more complex Chinese character made up of symbols representing two hands, one on top of the other.

What this was supposed to signify was that friends are people who share the same goals and interests and join hands to help each other achieve them.

You are most likely to make friends when you have shared goals, such as winning a game or studying hard toward a profession where you can help others and contribute to society. Self-centered, egoistic people find it hard to sustain friendships.

Actually, the best and truest friendships are usually those formed between two self-reliant and independent-minded people who have the strength to survive on their own. They resemble a bamboo grove. Each bamboo stem grows independently, rising straight and strong to the sky. They do not lean on each other or prop each other up. But if you look below ground, a dense network of roots connects all these individual stems. People are the same. We each have the strength to be independent and live on our own, but we are linked to others by our hearts. That's friendship.

True friends, therefore, are not dependent on others, nor are they jealous of their friends or try to monopolize them; they are independent and respect their friends' independence.

Maekawa: Yes, some people feel sad when they see their best friend talking to others. They feel as if their friend has been stolen from them.

Ikeda: Anyone can be superficially friendly. First Soka Gakkai president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi used to say that there are three kinds of friendship: inferior, ordinary and superior. Inferior friendship refers to friendship that is based on money or material gain. Ordinary friendship refers to casual relationships in which people get along well and help each other out—for instance, recommending a friend for a job. But superior friendship, really caring for your friends, means you are concerned enough about their welfare to be willing to confront them about negative and destructive aspects of their lives and try to help them remove the causes for unhappiness they are making.

I hope you will all form superior friendships—friendships that transcend passing feelings of like and dislike. Superior friendship is wishing the best for your friends with all your heart and striving to grow and walk together with them on the path of justice and truth.

Ultimately, the only friendships that last are those you have with people who are right for you. That is another way in which friends are like a mirror. There's an old saying, "If you want to know a person's character, look at his friends."

If you make friends with corrupt and malicious people, you will be dragged down with them.

The friendships of youth are as pure as a mountain stream. When you grow up, it's harder to make real friendships. People sometimes pretend to be friends out of self-interest or desire for profit, or put on a mask and feign friendship without sharing their true feelings.

The Japanese, in particular, don't have many friends outside Japan. I think it may be because they don't have any unwavering moral principles or beliefs to which they are committed, so others don't trust them.

World peace starts with friendship.

Shiratsuchi: I agree. That's what's so amazing about the vast number of friends you have made around the world.

Ikeda: Friends are a great treasure. Having reached my 70s, I can tell you how true that is. And world peace starts with friendship.

I know our junior high school students have all heard of Mikhail Gorbachev. He used to be president of the Soviet Union, and I have met and talked with him many times. The place where he grew up was home not only to ethnic Russians but to people of many other ethnic groups as well. Radio broadcasts were in five languages, he told me. He had many non-Russian friends. They had different customs and ways of thinking.

What was the key to getting along with them? Not to rush things, and to have respect and consideration for others. If you reach out to others with respect, they will become trusted friends. But if you are disrespectful to others, they will become lifelong enemies. Gorbachev learned these important lessons as a boy, he says.

This is true everywhere. There are all kinds of people, with different personalities and ways of thinking. It can cause you problems and suffering. But when that happens, just think to yourself, "I am learning an important lesson about life." Learning is not just about getting good grades in school.

A tiny, newborn baby fish must swim, tossing in the ocean waves to become big and strong. The same is true of us. We become strong by forging ourselves in the ocean of human relations.