

AN ESSAY BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA A PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION

‘John Dewey’s philosophy was a philosophy of action,’ SGI President Ikeda writes. ‘It was a democratic philosophy aimed at nurturing individuals who could contribute actively to society, rather than being isolated and removed from it.’

The obstacles which confront us are stimuli to variation, to novel response, and hence are occasions of progress.” These are the words of the American philosopher and educator John Dewey, for whom first Soka Gakkai president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi had abiding respect and admiration.

Dewey’s educational philosophy brought profound changes to education in countries across the globe in the 20th century. His social philosophy also played a major role in America’s economic recovery after the Great Depression in the 1930s.

Dewey, born in 1859, was 12 years Makiguchi’s senior. These two men who lived in roughly the same era share surprising similarities in their ideas and actions.

Five years ago, I gave a lecture at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York City, in which I touched on Dewey’s philosophy of education and Makiguchi’s concept of value-creating education. Dewey, incidentally, taught at Columbia University for many years.



In the auspicious month of June, we mark the anniversary of Dewey’s passing on the 1st and the 130th anniversary of Makiguchi’s birth on the 6th. It was my honor to meet with a noted scholar who has solemnly carried on Dewey’s intellectual legacy—Dr. Larry Hickman. He is the director of the internationally renowned Center for Dewey Studies at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

The epitaph on Dewey’s grave is inscribed with this passage from one of his works: “Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it.”

Dr. Hickman emanates the quiet pride of a person whose life and scholarly research are dedicated to carrying out this lofty responsibility. This path of transmitting spiritual treasures to the future also resonates with the path of mentor and disciple that is the essence of humanistic education.



Education determines the future. Education creates a new world.

A century ago, Dewey called for the kind of education in which “the child becomes the sun about which the appliances of education revolve; he is the center about which they are organized.” Placing the child at the center of education, the American educator said, represented “a revolution, not unlike that introduced by Copernicus when the astronomical center shifted from the earth to the sun.” This vision was born from experience gained through establishing an experimental elementary school attached to the University of Chicago, where Dewey was then a professor, and putting into practice and testing his educational ideas and theories.

Makiguchi, too, from his long, strenuous experience in teaching, proclaimed that the

happiness of children is the true aim of education. The more one studies the educational ideas and theories of Dewey and Makiguchi, the more conspicuous their similarities become.

In a thesis he wrote when he was 25, Makiguchi quoted a passage from *Psychology*, a work authored by Dewey when he was 28. Soka University graduate student Takao Ito kindly sent me the English original of this passage.

Mr. Ito, incidentally, is a graduate of the Kansai Soka School System and Soka University's 22nd class. He is presently a doctoral student of Soka University's Faculty of Letters. He is also working energetically as a vice leader of the education section of the Soka Gakkai student division.



What were the words of the young Dewey that had special resonance for the young Makiguchi? It was this passage: "If we inquire under what circumstances any object or event enters into our intellectual life as significant, we find that it is when it is connected in an orderly way with the rest of our experience. The meaningless is that which is out of harmony, which has no connection with other elements. To have meaning, the fact or event must be related to some other fact or event. The isolated, the separate, is never the object of knowledge."

Only when it is connected to a greater whole can knowledge or learning create value. Dewey and Makiguchi insisted that education, rather than just cramming fragmented bits of information into students' heads, be oriented toward helping students cultivate knowledge that serves humanity.

This is one of the reasons why Soka University of America, Aliso Viejo, which was dedicated on May 3, will begin as a full-fledged liberal arts college with a commitment to fostering well-rounded individuals who will use their knowledge to contribute to humankind.



Dewey visited Japan for two months from February 1919. He then visited China, arriving at the height of the anti-imperialist, anti-Japanese May Fourth Movement. [This was an intellectual and social reform struggle that took place in China from 1917–21, the pivotal event of which took place on May 4, 1919, in Beijing, from which the movement takes its name.] After two years of lecturing in China, he again stopped briefly in Japan on his way back to the United States.

Around this time, there were growing calls in Japan to adopt democratic ideals and practices. Dewey observed that this rising public opinion lacked consistency and was at essence shallow.

The Japanese could turn even philosophy into an object of fashion. They seemed able to believe one thing one day and its opposite the next, without the slightest discomfiture.

As a result, though they might seem to be advocating democracy and reform, they had no real, practical grasp of these concepts. There was no knowing when they might suddenly slide back in the direction of nationalism or, just as easily, hurtle down the path toward extreme radicalism. With his keen insight, Dewey pointed out this dangerous aspect of Japanese society.

His observations apply with equal aptness to Japan today.



Dewey's philosophy was a philosophy of action. It was a democratic philosophy aimed at nurturing individuals who could contribute actively to society, rather than being isolated

and removed from it.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Dewey participated in demonstrations for women's suffrage in the United States. When the Sacco-Vanzetti case rocked American society, he rallied to the cause of the innocent defendants and refuted the falsehoods that had been spread about them. [In 1921, two Italian anarchists who had immigrated to the United States, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, were convicted of murdering a paymaster at a shoe factory in South Braintree, Mass. It was widely recognized at the time that they were innocent and had been convicted and sentenced to death solely because of their radical political views. Dewey and many other leading American intellectuals spoke out against this miscarriage of justice, but Sacco and Vanzetti were executed in 1927.]

In the 1930s, when fascism was on the rise, Dewey said that "the liberals are divided in outlook and endeavor while reactionaries are held together by community of interests" and called for the organization of the forces who championed truth and justice. He also noted that liberals were weak when it came to "organization for action," asserting that "without this organization there is danger that democratic ideals may go by default."

At that same time, as Japan was beginning its headlong march into nationalism, Makiguchi was decrying the fact that corrupt, unscrupulous people were busily forming alliances, while good people remained isolated and separated.

If we are to prevent the spread of evil, it is vital that good people join forces and unite, that they organize so they can act effectively. This is the way to defeat evil.

Now we, following in the footsteps of our great predecessor who laid down his life for his beliefs, are building a vast, ever-growing alliance of people united in the cause of good in our communities and throughout the entire world.



"Democracy begins in conversation," Dewey said on his 90th birthday. Embracing the conviction that there is no retirement from life, he lived a full, fruitful life up until his death at the age of 92.

Dewey wrote, "What one person and one group accomplish becomes the standing ground and starting point of those who succeed them." This was the eminent educator's profound conviction.

Let us, too, resolutely struggle and grow together, securing a glorious new starting point for democracy in the new century!

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