

## Discovering My Mission Through Creating Value

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### *Real Education and the New School of Collaborative Learning*

OVER the last six years, my life has taken off. What led to the rather astounding confidence I now have in myself? How did I go from someone who was accomplishing little to establishing a school in China based on value-creative ideas? The answer lies in studying and applying the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin, developing my confidence in the Gohonzon and finding my mission—which can be traced to Tsunesaburo Makiguchi. When he died, I think he knew the world was going to be okay. He had helped to restore it.

When I arrived in Beijing in the summer of 1993, I had no intention of starting a school. I put my children, Alena (now 16), and David (now 14), into the existing international school, planning, myself, to study Chinese and do doctoral research. When I was invited to present a paper at a Neo-Confucian conference in Shanghai that October, I wrote on the relationship between the Buddhist teacher T'ien-t'ai and Neo-Confucianism.

I discovered in doing the preliminary research for the paper that the Confucian "Doctrine of the Mean" (which became part of China's educational system) had ideas very similar to the "Mean" in Greek philosophy and that both were related to the Buddhist Middle Way. I further realized that the Western Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," was similar to the Confucian Golden Rule, "Don't do unto others that which you do not want done unto you." And that both "golden rules" expressed ideas similar to the "practice for oneself, practice for others" we have been taught in our practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. It struck me that Eastern and Western thought both tried to teach people to be true to themselves and to others—to be *real* human beings.

As an intercultural educator, I quickly perceived that there was much frustration and anger between the Chinese and the foreign community in Beijing. I wanted the Chinese and the Americans to become friends and understand one another. When an opportunity arose to promote a new international school, I saw my chance. It ultimately became a school based on my curriculum and method design. I wanted children to become wise citizens of the world, to know the satisfaction of doing quality work and to pursue their happiness. The only meaningful way was for them to learn to create value for their lives—to become real people.

INTERNATIONAL schools tend to be isolated from the host community even if they try to teach its language and culture. (I had such an experience in Japan when I was growing up.) Despite the fact that my children were in China and studied Chinese every day in school, I was dismayed to see that they were neither using their Chinese nor liking the Chinese or Chinese culture.

I took two weeks away from China to design the school. First I went to Japan to research the Soka High School in Tokyo. I asked the principal how to develop self-

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motivated students. He said that he and President Ikeda had just discussed this and concluded that self-motivated learning sprang from the relationship between the teacher and the student—the teacher treasuring the student and the students asking themselves who they were, where they were going and why they were studying.

Next I met with educators from the excellent Sidwell Friends School of Washington, D.C., which has a ten-year history of education exchange with China. Together we infused the Chinese language and culture throughout a quality curriculum of Sidwell's design and added the self-motivated learning ideas. Self-motivated learning became the essence of the school and the American and Chinese curricula became the spiritual and material elements. The school could not have come to exist without the profound relationship I was able to develop with my Chinese colleagues.

A school that promoted mutual respect between Americans and Chinese was a twenty-first century concept that was fundamental to Chinese culture. I learned this from President Ikeda's wonderful book, *The Human Revolution of China*, which he wrote in 1974 after his first visit to that country. The Chinese have little trust of foreigners because of their long history of invasion and recent history of isolation. Most Americans try to understand China from a Western point of reference. Trust rarely comes into the picture.

Fortunately, one of my colleagues had a trusting relationship with a friend involved in the establishment of a high technology development zone called Shangdi, located in the northwest section of Beijing. His friend grasped the educational importance of our school, and was willing to work to get it established. It is this relationship that has been at the foundation of the school, and without it, the school would not have survived the first year. I called it the New School of Collaborative Learning (NSCL) because we need the wisdom from all cultures and peoples to build a peaceful world.

PRACTICALLY speaking, we teach in both English and Chinese, using team teachers at every level. Both languages are used to teach math, science, social studies, music and art. We use three teaching strategies to develop self-motivated learners—active learning, the Chinese steady incremental and systemic approach, and the learner-centered method.

Our first year, 1994, was very rocky. We had twenty-six students and several teachers. Differences in culture, management styles and teaching methods and training were major obstacles. But every obstacle was turned into a building block of the school. By the end of the first year, I noticed a transformation in myself from someone with some good ideas into the head of a school and founder who was a confident, valuable human being.

The second year was also hard. One teacher left at the beginning of the year and I had to help teach 6-year-old students; we also had deep problems on the Board of Trustees. By the end of the year, I felt burnt out. I realized a fundamental mistake, however, that I corrected with great success. I realized I was trying to teach how to be a real person. I realized no one can teach another how to be real. The great teachers are not teachers—they are guides. The Gohonzon has always been a

guide to me. My practice of the Daishonin's Buddhism guided me through my victories and mistakes by enabling me to develop my wisdom. I don't have any of the credentials for starting a school, but I do have the wisdom I've developed through my Buddhist practice and the encouragement of my fellow SGI members.

So the next year, the faculty and I learned to be guides. We wanted the students to be in the driver's seat of their education. To be global citizens, we need to care for others as much as for ourselves. We have had some splendid results in the school. Parents feel that we are bringing out the best in their children; our math scores are extremely high; and we have done well on national standard tests. Students write papers on who they are, where they are going and why they are studying. They are learning what it means to be real, to be self-reflective and have sparked their own human spirit.

The fourth year after coming to China, my family and I moved to Chengdu, Sichuan. Jon Zarkin, an American, is now at the helm of NSCL. He speaks Chinese fluently, truly understands our mission and is dedicated to steering the school in that direction.

This year will be my final year in China, so I am spending one week of every month up in Beijing training teachers how to incorporate the "Makiguchi Method" of guiding students to create value. But already, the level of teaching and commitment to the school's mission is so high I am thrilled.

NSCL is one of the models for the educational reform of China. We have made friends with officials at all levels—district, municipal and state—all who believe in the school. Both the Chinese and American educators know NSCL is a twenty-first century school concept. We are also winning the respect of the business community. In this way NSCL is succeeding in its mission to become a bridge between cultures, as well as to nurture self-motivated learners.

## **My Mission**

THANKS to my practice of Buddhism, I am the founder of an international bilingual school in China—a new concept in education. I have also created a global education program for Chinese students, and have just started work on establishing an international culture center in Chengdu, Sichuan. I could not have done any of these things if I did not realize what my mission was. I discovered my mission by seeking for it—by studying President Ikeda, Makiguchi, Nichiren Daishonin and others to see how they discovered theirs.

I deeply wanted to contribute to world peace but was unable to find my niche. I was taught to use the Daishonin's writings to solve my problems, to believe in them. When I did this, all my problems changed—including a supposedly incurable disease, hypoglycemia, which I conquered through my practice of Buddhism.

In 1990, President Ikeda came to the United States and talked about being "on the open road," like Walt Whitman. I decided to go on the open road to my own mission and I have been on it ever since. A big breakthrough occurred through contemplating the following quote from Nichiren Daishonin: "There are not two lands, pure or impure in themselves. The difference lies solely in the good or evil

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of our minds.... While deluded, one is called a common mortal, but once enlightened, he is called a Buddha" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 4). This passage made me realize that my happiness (and I was really unhappy at the time) was right in front of me.

I realized my dissatisfaction with my lack of direction lay in the fact that I didn't really believe I was going to realize my mission, or be in the great rhythm of kosen-rufu with the SGI. *That* was a lack of faith. I realized that the difference between suffering and joy is my state of life. If I completely believe in my potential, my ability to solve my problems, my ability to believe in the Gohonzon with absolute faith, then I can tap my Buddhahood.

IN January 1992, I decided to pursue a Ph.D. in education. In the same month, along with others, I founded "The Alliance for International Collaboration and Development" (now re-named as the Society for Inter-national Friendship and Understanding), which eventually became the parent non-profit educational corporation for NSCL.

I have accomplished a lot, suffered a lot, laughed a lot, been in agony a lot. But my joy is having found what I can do—my particular contribution to kosen-rufu—to help presidents Ikeda, Toda, Makiguchi and Nichiren Daishonin in this task. I am very happy educating—finding ways to express Buddhism and the world's wisdom so that students can understand and apply it in their own lives. It is not Buddhism that I teach, since it is a school and not a religious center, but it is learning to live wisely. When I see the students become conscious of their own potential, I know I am doing a good job at accomplishing my mission both as an educator and as a Buddhist.

Each person needs to discover his or her mission. I think President Ikeda gives us a clue in his 1998 peace proposal where he says, quoting Umberto Eco, that the third millennium will be like "a constellation—a society based on respect for the value of cultural pluralism" (May 1998 *Living Buddhism*, p. 23). In the same way, each person's discovery of the mission only he or she can fulfill will bring into the night sky another brilliant star to add to the glorious night.

Only I can be in the driver's seat of my own enlightenment. I need to behave like a Buddha. A Buddha is very strict with herself and compassionate to others. I need to be growing continually myself if I want my teachers and students to be growing.

This is the real learning that is going on at NSCL and Chengdu. This is where the Gohonzon has guided me so far. President Ikeda is really the best living example of such a guide and I want to be as exemplary as he. He always says that we each have a mission only we can accomplish. NSCL is the mission that only I could accomplish. It gives me great joy to contribute concretely to kosen-rufu and do my part in helping President Ikeda create a renaissance.

### **Makiguchi and the Creation of Value**

TSUNESABURO Makiguchi's book, *Education for Creative Living*, is truly profound. It is not just about teaching how to teach. It is also a concrete example of Buddhist

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humanism. In it he states: “A life without learning is a life groping in the dark. At the same time, learning divorced from life is empty theory. We must check our knowledge against our own experience, especially if we ourselves are not the source of the knowledge. Somewhere we must make the intuitive leap, shifting our eyes from scant details of immediate familiarity to a more comprehensive picture” (p. 68).

What is value? Makiguchi says: “Water in and of itself has no value. It often goes unregarded. Nonetheless, as soon as someone wants a drink of water, it has bearing. Then water is seen to possess the capacity to quench thirst, just as the person is able to be satisfied with water. At other times, water means nothing but disaster to people, as when a flood strikes. The value is not inherent in the subject (person) nor in the object (water) but is manifest in the attracting or repelling force between them” (Ibid., p. 72).

What does it mean to create value? We need first to assess our personal values correctly, we need self-awareness and other-awareness working in unison. This is the personal value of oneself as a whole engaged in the greater whole of society. Human living, Makiguchi explains, is conscious behavior. “The human personality is a whole entity that is unified for its purpose. The person is that union, that something, able to orchestrate various elements together into a space-time continuity we know as life...” (Ibid., p. 87). We must also awaken to consciousness of an underlying order and a commitment to a rule by law. Education is a key factor responsible for guiding human beings in developing this growing awareness and consciousness.

At the moment we realize that we possess this powerful consciousness, like a sunrise outshining the stars, “the focus of that consciousness driving our very being shifts from persons related to our own individual loss and gain to the natural order and social laws that work equally for all without favor or discrimination” (Ibid., p. 85).

We can then create value ourselves through creating benefit, good or beauty as part of life itself. “Mature core beliefs and a clear life purpose lead to a sense of mind-body unity—a harmony of part to part and whole to whole. The depth and degree of this unification in a given individual’s life are the most important elements of personal character. Such a person is empowered to create value. It is the task of education to provide guidance toward this end” (Ibid., p. 88).

President Ikeda said: “President Makiguchi defined the “value of good” as benefiting society and maintained that this is also the *raison d’être* of religion. Social contribution is the fundamental spirit of the SGI. The dynamic pulse of *kosen-rufu* lies in our energetic efforts to contribute greatly to society and to expand our network of trust and friendship” (*SGI President Ikeda’s Addresses in the United States*, pp. 116–17). As his disciple I believe it is my responsibility to affect others’ lives as he does, to guide others to their own realization that they can create value. In this way I can show Mr. Makiguchi how much I appreciate his efforts on my behalf and that of my precious students. □