

Young Daisaku (5): Age of Great Cynicism

By KEN SARAGOSA

Phila. High School Division Chief

What prompts a 19-year-old to begin to practice a new religion, especially in a climate where all faith is seen as blind, where having firm belief suggests fanaticism? What kind of person embraces philosophy in an age of great cynicism?

On Aug. 14, 1945, Emperor Hirohito addressed the Japanese people, announcing Japan's surrender to the Allied forces. In the difficult postwar days, Daisaku Ikeda would find many reasons to grieve as his family continued to suffer and as his nation found itself conquered and spiritually adrift.

During the next two years, Ikeda tried to find the means to pursue his personal studies, enrolling in one of the many night schools that had sprung up. He describes the school as little more than a shell of a building with virtually no facilities: "Not a desk or chair was in perfect shape; every one was either partly broken or gouged somewhere.... Students, including of course myself, tried nevertheless to make up for what they'd lost during the war...."

Though the material circumstances of the time were certainly difficult, Ikeda describes the confusion of the day in primarily spiritual terms. For him, it was the confusion — indeed, crisis — in values that was the most important issue to face. Concerning this time, Ikeda writes, "The desolation and discouragement of the immediate postwar era had robbed people even of the ability to think."

The American Occupation of Japan had engineered a sudden transformation of the Japanese government and education into one modeled on the United States. This rapid change caused some to cling to traditional values, while others rushed to embrace new systems.

But common to everyone was a deep-rooted cynicism born from the utter bankruptcy of the spiritual principles that had fortified the nation during the war. For youth, even the appeal of nice-sounding ideas like democracy, peace and culture must have been dampened by the remembrance of the beautiful-sounding ideas that had led many of their friends to their deaths, that had deprived them all of their youth. The war's worst violence was perhaps the spiritual desolation of an entire generation. In this climate, some youth turned to gangs and violence, others to religion to fill the vacuum in their hearts.

In August of 1947, a month that was to change his life, Ikeda held a meaningful discussion with a friend who had decided to become a Christian and urged Ikeda, too, to seek religion. Daisaku's own experiences with the manipulation of the Shinto faith in the service of the state made him doubt any religion, however. Nonetheless, he felt deeply that there was some deep meaning to life, a purpose that he had glimpsed in his reading but was unable to find clearly articulated. He resigned himself to the likelihood that there was no person, no system of philosophy, that could satisfy his feelings, believing himself destined to a life of spiritual solitude.

This cynicism, this great spiritual desolation — how many young people have experienced just such despair as they have contemplated the meaning of life?

On Aug. 14, 1947, almost exactly two years after Japan's defeat, Ikeda attended his first discussion meeting of the Soka Gakkai.

WT

Title: Age of Great Cynicism

Subject: World Tribune 08/01/97 n.3150 p.11 WT970801p11

Author: Ken Saragosa

Keywords: biographical Cynicism Daisaku Great Ikeda Pages People Tribune World Young Youth