

Discussions on Youth Bringing Out Our Best

This is the 10th installment of a series of discussions on youth among SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai high school division chiefs Hidenobu Kimura (young men's chief) and Kazue Igeta (young women's chief), representing the members of the high school division.

Ikeda: Today, our discussion is on personality, something that greatly affects our lives. Someone once said it is determined by fate, and there's nothing we can do about it. The fact is, almost everyone agonizes over some aspect of his or her personality. This agonizing actually leads to growth. But you also have to realize that just worrying about your problems won't change anything.

Although the human race has made incredible advances in science, in reality we still understand very little about ourselves and the workings of the human mind.

Kimura: One student came to me upset and asked: "My mom told me that I inherited my father's unattractive qualities. What can I do to change?"

Igeta: There are different types of personalities: extroverted and introverted, level-headed and hotheaded, fickle and persistent. Is it impossible to change our personality?

Ikeda: Buddhism views a person's innate personality or nature as essentially unchanging.

People's personalities are truly diverse. In Buddhism, the word society (Jpn *seken*) also has the meaning of difference or distinction. In other words, society constitutes a gathering of people who each possess unique, distinct personalities.

There is a vast vocabulary to describe the various personalities and character traits people have. The English language is said to have as many as 18,000 words for that purpose. Some people even break personalities down into separate groups.

In the multitude of personalities, we see the Buddhist principle of cherry, plum, peach and apricot blossom at work. Just as each blossom is beautiful in its own way, each person is endowed with special qualities.

Being introverted doesn't make someone incapable, just as being quick-tempered doesn't make a person useless. We should live in a way that is true to ourselves. That is the fundamental aim of Buddhism.

Once, when encouraging a member who had begun practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism to change his angry nature, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda said: "You don't have to worry about changing your personality. All you have to do is chant daimoku and live the best you can. Then, very naturally, you will see the negative aspects of your personality disappear, leaving you with the positive ones. You must have a clear purpose and work for the betterment of society."

That member ended up being loved and admired by everyone and living a truly happy, fulfilling life.

Kimura: So you mean that even though our basic personality is difficult to change, we can bring out its positive traits?

Ikeda: It's like a river. At a certain point the river's banks are pretty much fixed. In the

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same way, the identity of a person doesn't change much. But the quality of the water in the river can vary. It may be deep or shallow, polluted or clean, have an abundance of fish or none at all.

The content, in other words, can change. It is the same with us. Our personality doesn't determine our happiness or unhappiness. Rather it is the substance of how we've lived that decides our happiness. The purpose of Buddhism and education, as well as all our efforts toward self-improvement and growth, is to enhance that substance. This is what life is all about.

Igeta: So, are you saying that while our river can't become a different, separate river, we can, through effort and hard work, clean and purify our river so that lots of fish will be happy to swim in it?

Ikeda: Exactly. By chanting daimoku, we can cleanse our lives of negativity and impurities. We can push everything in the direction of happiness. For example, a person's shyness can be transformed into valuable qualities such as prudence and discretion, while someone's impatience might be transformed into a knack for getting things done quickly and efficiently.

A river meanders, but never stops. This is the natural way of things. Similarly, if you make continuous efforts, your personality will improve slowly, steadily. The key is to keep moving forward and never stop.

No one's personality is flawless. Everyone, without exception, has some karma that renders his or her less than perfect. It's inevitable that you won't like aspects of your personality. But it is foolish to become obsessed by such things and succumb to feelings of self-hatred and unworthiness, consequently hindering your growth.

Kimura: A member told me that his mood swings were taking a toll on his friendships and causing him a lot of grief.

Ikeda: In this apathetic age, being a bit impetuous might not be such a bad thing! You are young, so it's natural to have passionate emotions.

Getting along well with others is of course important, but doing so to the point of suppressing your individuality will only bring you misery. Furthermore, a strong character is almost a requirement to survive in this tumultuous, ever-changing world. And having intense emotions enables you to understand the feelings of others. It is not a bad thing to be passionate, but if it is driven by egotism and hurts others, it can be dangerous. A race car that can reach hundreds of miles an hour also needs extremely powerful brakes.

The point is, you must have self-discipline. And that comes from chanting daimoku, from developing a strong life force. When you bring forth your Buddhahood, your passionate nature will become your impetus for your progress, strong sense of justice and burning desire to help other people.

Igeta: How would you encourage those who get down on themselves for being content with second best, who don't apply themselves seriously, who give up easily, or who immediately look for a way to get out of anything unpleasant?

Ikeda: I think half the problem's already solved because they know what the problem is! People tend to lack willpower. To take the path of least resistance is human nature. Outstanding individuals didn't become great overnight. They disciplined themselves to

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overcome their weaknesses, conquering apathy and inertia to become true victors in life.

Life is a struggle with ourselves. It is a tug-of-war between moving forward and regressing, between happiness and unhappiness. Those short on willpower or self-motivation should chant daimoku and pray with conviction to become people of strong will, who can tackle any problem with real seriousness and determination.

Perhaps they should try challenging some task at hand — it can be anything — and keep at it until they're absolutely satisfied that they've done their best. Taking the first step leads to the next one.

Igeta: One student really got down on herself because, though she tried hard to overcome her laziness, her resolve never lasted very long. Soon she would find herself slacking off again.

Ikeda: Anyone who has ever made a resolution discovers that the strength of his or her determination fades with time. The moment you feel that is when you should make a fresh determination. Say to yourself: "OK! I will start again from now!" If you fall down seven times, get up eight. Don't give up when you feel discouraged — just pick yourself up and renew your determination each time.

The important thing is not that your resolve never waver, but that you don't get down on yourself when it does and throw in the towel. The fact that you realize you've become lazy is evidence that you are growing.

Igeta: Another student told me she feels alone and isolated even when she's among other people. She is quiet by nature, but others think she's melancholy.

Ikeda: If you are not talkative, how about becoming an excellent listener? You can say to others: "Please tell me about yourself. I want to hear all about you." If you try to show people that you're something you're not, then speaking will be nothing but torture. You are fine just the way you are. You should let people get to know the real you, warts and all.

There are some people who just ramble on mindlessly without saying anything. A person of few words is likely to have far more substance and depth than someone who talks just for the sake of hearing his or her own voice! Someone who takes action swiftly and effectively is a great deal more trustworthy than someone who is all talk.

Of far greater importance than whether one is quiet or talkative is whether or not one possesses rich inner substance. The beautiful smile or small, unconscious gesture of a person with a rich heart, even if he or she is reticent, will speak more eloquently than any words. And often such people will speak out with authority and confidence at a crucial moment.

In Buddhism, we say that the voice does the Buddha's work. Fundamentally, this refers to chanting daimoku. Those who chant daimoku are, in essence, the most eloquent of all.

Start with what you want to say to the Gohonzon. It's also important to chant for others' happiness. Then, quite naturally, you'll develop the ability to freely, confidently say what you want to say.

Kimura: What about people who dwell for a long time on things that upset them?

Ikeda: It's not necessarily good to get over things easily. Injustice, for example, must never be excused. In Japan, people tend to think that letting things go, like water under a bridge, is the noble thing to do. But such an attitude can hinder society's progress. It allows

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mistakes to be repeated. We should keep our anger alive and continue to fight against injustice tenaciously and courageously. Those who have done so have effected positive change for their fellow human beings. It is also vital that we strive toward our goals with fierce perseverance and determination.

In short, it is important to become a person who views things not in terms of your tiny, selfish concerns, but from a larger, more generous perspective. You have to pray to the Gohonzon to become more broad-minded and tolerant. You have to chant and look unflinchingly at the people and things in your life that are making you unhappy. Running away from things you find unpleasant is what causes suffering. But if you face and challenge such situations, they will enrich your life.

Igeta: Some students complain that they can only see their faults, and ask how they can find their good points.

Ikeda: People who are strict with themselves often feel that way — it's a sign of a sincere, laudable character.

It's difficult to see ourselves objectively. The Goshō states, "We common mortals can see neither our own eyebrows, which are so close, nor heaven in the distance" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 271). Perhaps you could ask someone who knows you well, like a friend, parent or sibling, what strong points he or she thinks you have and should develop. I'm sure they'll name many admirable qualities you possess.

No one has only faults or only merits. We all have a mixture of both. Therefore, you should strive to develop and polish your positive attributes. As you do, your shortcomings will fade until they are no longer apparent.

Also, if someone should point out your faults, rather than getting offended or upset, it is to your benefit to listen calmly and objectively to what they have to say as constructive criticism. Once you take your place in society, there won't be many people who will be so honest with you.

Igeta: Many young people worry about what others think of them. Although they tell themselves that no one is paying attention, they feel intimidated. They have no confidence in themselves and think that others are talking about them behind their backs.

Ikeda: Timidity and shyness are signs of a gentle, sensitive nature.

Perhaps you've heard of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt (1884– 1962), who remains one of the most respected women in the United States. She once wrote: "Looking back, I see how abnormally timid and shy I was as a girl. As long as I let timidity and shyness dominate me I was half paralyzed."¹

Through self-discipline, Mrs. Roosevelt conquered her fear. What concrete measures did she take? Like most shy people, she was plagued by fears about herself, so she applied herself earnestly to break those chains. First, she stopped worrying about making a good impression on others and caring what they thought of her, instead thinking of others. Second, she quit obsessing over herself and wholeheartedly pursued her interests. She learned that people don't pay much attention to what others are doing and the amount of attention we pay ourselves is actually our greatest enemy. Realizing this, Mrs. Roosevelt put great effort toward disregarding herself. Third, her sense of adventure and desire to experience life were helpful in overcoming her shyness. She maintained a lively spirit to discover what life had to offer.²

By continuing to challenge herself, Mrs. Roosevelt gradually gained confidence. She

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was later involved in historic initiatives, such as the drafting of the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights. And she was loved by many people.

The important thing is to take that first step. If you bravely overcome one small fear, it will give you the courage to take on the next one.

Make goals. Whether they are big or small, work toward realizing them. You must be serious about and dedicated to your goals — you'll get nowhere if you just treat them like jokes. An earnest, dedicated spirit shines like a diamond and moves people's hearts. That is because a brilliant flame burns within.

If we are sincere, people will understand our intentions, and our positive qualities will radiate. It is pointless to be caught up in outward appearances.

The German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749– 1832) writes: “How may one get to know oneself? Never by contemplation, only, indeed, by action. Seek to do your duty, and you will know at once how it is with you.”³

It's all about taking action, taking that first step. If your aim is to swim across a vast ocean, it will do you no good to get cold feet before you even take the plunge. Rather, you've got to make a move, keeping your sights on your goal in the distance. Hindsight can be valuable toward one's growth, but it is self-defeating to set yourself up for failure before even trying.

Kimura: What about people who can only see others' faults?

Ikeda: It's much more valuable to look for the strengths in others — you can gain nothing by criticizing people's imperfections. To develop a bigger heart, please try chanting, even a little at a time, for the happiness of your friends. Gradually, you will cultivate tolerance and broad-mindedness.

I'm sure there are many other ways in which people are unhappy with their personality. That you are troubled means that you can change those things causing you suffering. Adults tend to just resign themselves to fate and give up on their personality altogether! That, however, is where their growth ends.

As long as we are moving forward and continuing to grow, we will inevitably face various problems and inner struggles. Even second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda confessed that he made great effort to overcome his cowardly nature. You cannot achieve human revolution without working hard at it. If you keep challenging yourself without giving up, you will definitely develop courage and strength.

Kimura: Is our personality or character determined by our genes, our environment, or both?

Ikeda: I imagine it's a little of both. Many studies have in fact been conducted on this topic. Essentially, however, we are the architects of our lives.

The English word *character* is derived from the Greek word *charakter*, meaning to engrave or make an impression. From a scientific standpoint, one's personality and physical constitution may be determined to some extent by genetic factors. But that knowledge alone isn't going to change anything. What matters is what we do to improve ourselves on a practical basis.

Buddhism stresses the importance of the present and future. These are what matter. Always challenging oneself from this moment onward — this is Buddhism.

Personality is also viewed a number of ways by psychology. One view looks at personality in terms of a concentric circle. At the core of this circle exists our most basic

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nature. Around that is the side of us that is shaped by habit and custom, and surrounding that is the part we have formed to cope with various situations and circumstances.

Kimura: This idea has also been explained using layers: The first layer represents one's inherent nature, the next portrays the basic personality developed during childhood, and so on.

Ikeda: Our core personality isn't easy to change. Yet other aspects can sometimes change so much that people may comment that we seem like a completely different person.

Anyway, you have to be true to yourself. You have to follow your path and do your best to contribute to society. Education equips us with what we need to do that. And faith is what fuels our efforts.

Igeta: In other words, we become our best selves when we pursue a goal that allows us to fully develop and make use of our uniqueness.

Ikeda: Those who practice Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism are fortunate to chant daimoku to the Gohonzon. And those who don't practice Buddhism can also lead good, fulfilling lives, if they aim and work toward a great goal or purpose that embodies the values of beauty, benefit and good. Indian political and spiritual leader Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) is an excellent example.

As a boy, Gandhi was excruciatingly shy. He was unable to sleep without a light on, haunted by imaginary thieves, ghosts and serpents. He was introverted and always worried that people would make fun of him. Gandhi struggled with this for many years.

Kimura: That's so hard to imagine. I always think of Gandhi as a courageous figure who feared nothing.

Ikeda: Let me add, however, that even as a young man, Gandhi possessed a strong sense of justice and an aversion to anything underhanded or morally wrong. Once, during his first year in high school, his class was paid a visit by an education inspector who told the students to write the word *kettle* to test their spelling — and Gandhi misspelled it. The teacher, noticing Gandhi's mistake, gestured to him to copy the correct spelling from his neighbor's slate. But the concept of cheating was alien to the young Gandhi. Consequently, he was the only boy in the class who got the word incorrect.

Igeta: Gandhi's unyielding sense of right and wrong didn't change throughout his life.

Ikeda: Nonetheless, even after passing the bar and qualifying as a barrister, he was still quite timid. When he finally had to present his first case in court and the time came to cross-examine the witness, he became nervous and confused, and the room started spinning. He completely forgot what he was going to say and had to leave the courtroom.

A major turning point occurred when Gandhi was in South Africa. The Indian residents there faced severe discrimination. On one occasion, Gandhi was riding in a first-class car on a train when a white person brought over the train conductor, who ordered him to move to the freight car. Gandhi wouldn't budge, so the conductor called a police officer who forcibly pushed him off the train.

In the waiting area at the train station, Gandhi sat shivering in the cold and dark. He stayed awake all night lost in thought, pondering whether he should return to India or

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endure the hardship of taking a stand and fighting for human rights. He finally came to the conclusion that it would be cowardice to run from his fears and disregard those who were being discriminated against. From that moment, with the determination to save people from injustice, Gandhi faced and challenged his timid nature.

After a 20-year struggle, the Indian people in South Africa gained concessions toward freedom. And, as is well known, Gandhi then returned to India where, through his movement of nonviolent civil disobedience, he achieved the independence of his home country.

Gandhi held the conviction that we can become anything we want to be. It all depends upon the strength of our determination.

Each of us embraces this great life-philosophy of Nichiren Daishonin, which expounds the principle of a life-moment possessing 3,000 realms. It is the Buddhism of human revolution. Therefore, there is absolutely no reason to put yourself down.

The Daishonin's Buddhism enables us to reveal our most intrinsic nature — to fully reveal our unique potential, to develop our character and bring our true self to shine. To do this we need life force. A strong life force will bring forth the most positive aspects of our personality.

All rivers, irrespective of their differences, flow unceasingly and unflaggingly to the sea. If we, too, continue to make persistent efforts, we will eventually reach the great ocean of happiness, for ourselves and others. We will savor boundless freedom and potential, shining brightly while celebrating and encouraging others' individuality.

The important thing is to accomplish everything you possibly can. You'll be more surprised than anyone at how much you can achieve. All of you possess such unlimited potential!

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1. Eleanor Roosevelt, *You Learn by Living* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), pp. 31–32.
2. Ibid. p. 32.
3. *Goethe's World View: Presented in His Reflections and Maxims*, Frederick Ungar, trans. Heinz Norden (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1963), p. 65.

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