

## Discussions on Youth Knowing History, Knowing Yourself

*This is the 14th 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 high school division members.*

**KIMURA:** Today's theme is history. There are some who love to study history, who find it engrossing. Then there are others who dislike it, finding history classes boring because of the emphasis on memorizing long lists of facts and dates.

**IGETA:** A lot of students are critical of their history classes. There are a few teachers, though, who give vivid, inspiring accounts of various historical episodes or use audiovisual presentations to try to make history come alive.

**KIMURA:** What can we gain from studying history?

**IKEDA:** One important thing is a broader point of view. If we're always looking at the ground when we walk down the street, we're likely to get lost. But by looking up, choosing something big by which to orient ourselves, we can make sure we are heading in the right direction.

Another way of thinking of it is to imagine yourself looking down from a high mountain. From an elevated vantage point, it is easy to pick out the road on which to proceed.

The same is true of life. If you always have a shallow perspective and only pay attention to trivial things, you are sure to get bogged down in petty worries and concerns, and not be able to move forward. Even relatively minor hurdles or problems will seem insurmountable. But if you look at life from a broad viewpoint, you will naturally spot the solution for any problem you confront. This is true when we consider our personal problems as well as those of society and even the future of the entire world.

The second Soka Gakkai president, Josei Toda, always said that leaders should study and read history books. History helps us see the direction in which our age is heading, how we can steer the times in the best direction. The German poet Goethe wrote:

*He who cannot be far-sighted,  
Nor 3,000 years assay,  
Inexperienced stays benighted,  
Let him live from day to day.*

That's why I want to say: Don't get tied up in knots over unimportant things. The more problems you have, the more you should read history books. Studying history takes you back to the events and lives you are reading about. You meet passionate revolutionaries and base traitors. You encounter vainglorious tyrants and tragic heroes. You come to know people who sought only to lead peaceful lives but were forced to wander through the wilderness. You experience the brief moments of peace between seemingly endless stretches of war, like sweet shade from the burning sun.

You see large numbers of people sacrificed for what we now know was foolish superstition, as well as men and women of principle who gave their lives for the love of their fellows. You meet great people who pulled themselves up from the depths of suffering

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to make the impossible possible. You watch this unfolding drama from a distance, or view it as in its midst — history is played out inside the human mind.

Watching this drama unfold in our minds, we naturally learn to see life from an expansive point of view. We can see ourselves riding the crest of the grand river of history. We see where we have come from, where we are, and where we're going.

History is our roots. Those who have studied history in depth have become aware of their origins, their heritage. Knowing history is knowing oneself. At the same time, the better one knows oneself and human nature, the more accurate picture one gets of history. This is how we acquire an insight into history.

**KIMURA:** Some say history repeats itself. Others say it doesn't. Which do you think is true?

**IKEDA:** History is a record of human probability, human cause and effect, and the science of human activity. We might call it the statistics of the human race.

For instance, though we can't predict the weather with complete accuracy, we can forecast weather trends based on statistics, on probability. The human heart is also unpredictable, but if we look at history we see trends, probabilities in human actions.

The study of history, then, is the study of humanity. Although not everyone can be a professional historian, it is important to use history as a mirror to guide us in shaping the future. You are the protagonists who will write a fresh history.

Without a mirror, it's impossible for you to see your own face or full appearance. Similarly, armed with the mirror of history, you can see what needs to be done. It's interesting, by the way, that many Japanese works of history have been called mirrors — for example, *Okagami* (Great Mirror), *Imakagami* (Mirror of the Present), *Mizukagami* (Water Mirror) and *Masukagami* (Clear Mirror) [these are from the 11th–14th centuries].

Mr. Toda stressed the importance of history. He said it is a signpost helping us move with greater certainty from the past to the present, from the present to the future, toward the goals of peace and the harmonious coexistence of all humankind.

There is so much recorded history now that one person cannot absorb it all. That is why it is necessary to have a firm historical perspective, an understanding of basic historical principles, even if we can't know every single fact and detail. If we are aware, through our knowledge of history, of humanity's negative tendencies, we can be on the lookout for them and avoid a repetition of our dark, destructive history. Repeating history's abominations signals a failure to learn the lessons that history teaches.

**IGETA:** It is certainly true that if all you focus on is names, events and dates, history loses much of its interest.

**IKEDA:** It is important to master the basics of history, of course, but it is more important to use it to acquire the ability to see the truth. Napoleon described history as an agreed-upon story. That is true in some respects — the history that is recorded and passed on does not always accurately transmit the truth. Of course, we know the dates on which certain events took place. I am not talking about such unarguable facts and details. But the historical conclusions based on those dates are not so reliable. At times, the exact opposite of the truth becomes the recorded historical opinion. And far more important truths are not recorded or transmitted at all.

**KIMURA:** That reminds me of a passage in *A Youthful Diary*. "History in books is full of errors," you wrote. "But in one's own history, the history written only in one's heart, one

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cannot record a single falsehood or embellish anything” (June 15, 1950).

**IKEDA:** History is never definitive. It can be interpreted in many different ways, which is why we mustn’t swallow everything that is written in history books.

For example, let’s look at the Crusades launched by Western Christians against Muslim powers during the Middle Ages. European and Islamic accounts of the Crusades have almost nothing in common! And most of the world history we study in Japan derives from European accounts. Though it’s natural if you think about it, Islamic history books don’t even use the heroic-sounding term *crusaders* to describe the aggressors who invaded their lands.

In fact, at the time, Islamic civilization was far more advanced than that of Europe. The crusaders invaded Islamic states, looting and pillaging, leaving a trail of destruction. At least that is how Muslims see it. Islamic histories record the horrible atrocities that the crusaders committed.

The true history of the Crusades is not simply a matter of the past, either. A strong prejudice against Islamic civilization persists today, casting a dark shadow over our chances for world peace. It is a problem of today. It is a problem of the future.

Another example: In the past, it was widely taught that Christopher Columbus discovered the Americas. But people were already living there long before. It was a discovery from the European perspective, but not from that of the Native Americans.

The problem is that the concept of discovery inherently demeans and discriminates against the Americas’ original inhabitants. The conquerors of the so-called New World were so self-centered that they didn’t even regard the indigenous peoples as human beings!

As Europeans moved from island to island, they slaughtered the inhabitants, rounding them up as slave labor, nearly wiping out entire populations. While the inhabitants had welcomed them with open arms and helped them, the European invaders repaid them with betrayal and violence. What can we say about this historical truth? The view that Columbus discovered America legitimizes the “discoverers.” At the same time, it legitimizes similar actions by others. Within the word *discovery*, we can detect a self-righteous historical view, a view of humanity that justifies the subjugation of other peoples in one’s own interests.

Perhaps we can call this the colonial viewpoint. This gave birth to tragedies the world over — not only in North and South America but in Africa and Asia as well — for 500 years. This is why one’s view of history is important. From a history of “discovery” comes a future of subjugation. It leads to misery and tragedy.

This colonial view of history lay behind Japan’s invasion of Asia as well. From the Meiji period, beginning in 1868, we Japanese were intent on catching up with Europe and aimed at becoming the Europeans of Asia. We treated our fellow Asians in the same way that the Europeans treated the indigenous peoples of America after Columbus’ arrival. We became subservient and fawning to white people, and arrogant and cruel to all other races. This Jekyll-and-Hyde nature of the Japanese, which persists, comes from this historical viewpoint.

What we should have done, of course, was build friendly ties with our fellow Asians and work with them toward world peace. If the leaders of Japan had possessed such a view — and such a vision of the future — the recent history of Japan would have been entirely different.

One’s view of history is crucial. Chancellor Wang Gungwu of the University of Hong Kong spelled it out clearly: “When leaders have a mistaken view of history, many decisively negative influences result, and they in turn push society in an even more mistaken direction.”

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**IGETA:** Columbus didn't discover anything, then. The people of Europe and the Americas simply met one another, that's all.

**IKEDA:** Yes. A view of history based on the idea of encounters is one in which all parties are equal. At the very least, it shows respect for one another. The reality in this case, however, was that the Europeans invaded the Americas.

**KIMURA:** So a single historical event can take on opposing meanings depending upon how it is interpreted or explained.

**IKEDA:** Not only historical events but current events as well. They all take on completely different meanings depending upon how they are viewed, what the viewer's agenda is.

For example, let's say that there is a demonstration in a certain country. The police try to stop it, and there is a fracas. If a TV camera is within the group of demonstrators, it will show the fierce faces of police officers swinging their nightsticks. Those who see the image will sympathize, naturally, with the demonstrators. But if the camera is on the side of the police, it may show the protesters as an unruly mob, angrily throwing stones and resisting police efforts to keep peace and order.

**IGETA:** Someone watching that image could decide it is a riot.

**IKEDA:** Depending upon which side you are on, the information could be interpreted in contrasting ways. Both images may be true as images, but where the truth actually lies is an entirely different question. Even the fact that a demonstration occurred cannot be understood without knowing why it took place, why it may have been suppressed. Knowing this background is essential in knowing the truth of the event.

**KIMURA:** We live in what we call the information age, but though enormous quantities of information are available, I think its quality is often questionable. Does the information come from the side of the people or the side of the authorities? In far too many cases, the intent behind the information is only to make money or create scandal.

**IKEDA:** Which only reinforces my point about how difficult it is to learn the full truth about past events. The history books are written by the victors, they say. Might makes right — the losers are portrayed as evil, as wrong. We must always be aware of this. And we must leave a record of true, correct history.

That is also why it is important for us not to lose in our struggle. We must create a history in which those who champion justice, truth and integrity prevail.

Both a solid historical perspective and insight are important. A pile of bricks is not a house, and you can't write history by just gathering a pile of facts. A history reflects, through the way in which its combined facts represent reality, the perspective of its historian. We need to be aware of this.

In reading a work of history, you must cultivate your historical sense by always remaining critically aware, by searching for the truth. Sometimes you will agree with the writer, sometimes you won't. There is no simple method to achieve this sense of history.

The only way is to study many things, think about many things, and experience many things. And it is crucial to remain objective. You must always seek the facts, the truth, without succumbing to your personal biases or self-interest. Never accept a lie.

The way in which World War II is presented has long been a problem in Japan.

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Whatever shameful acts took place, it is extremely important for the Japanese people and the world that the truth be recorded and passed on. That period may be a single frame in the long reel of human history, but our view of history will be distorted unless the truth is recorded. Not only that: Falsified or incomplete history causes future misfortune.

Creating a true historical record is creating the road to peace and happiness for all humanity. History must not be warped and distorted. Fabricated history is no more than fiction. Hiding unpleasant things and only recording favorable achievements isn't history — it's no more than a forged resumé. History must be recorded objectively and accurately, based on formal evidence and reliable firsthand witnesses.

**IGETA:** In the former West Germany, it was recommended that 60 classroom hours be devoted to the study of the Nazi period, and visits to the concentration camps were also strongly recommended. In this, we can clearly perceive the German people's sincere determination to honestly face and learn from their past mistakes.

**IKEDA:** I once met the first president of the unified Germany, Richard von Weizsäcker [1991]. He was a great man. He made the well-known remark "Anyone who closes his eyes to the past is blind to the present" [in a speech at the West German parliament commemorating the 40th anniversary of Germany's defeat in World War II, May 8, 1985].

**KIMURA:** Even in our personal relations, we don't trust someone who lies. So it is sad to hear the kinds of excuses Japanese officials give for Japanese schools not teaching students the truth about what the Japanese military did in World War II.

**IKEDA:** During the war, my eldest brother was sent to the front to fight, and I remember clearly that once, when he came home on furlough, he told us angrily that Japan was definitely in the wrong. "Japan's behavior is abominable," he said. "What we are doing to the Chinese is unforgivable." My brother died in the fighting in Burma [now Myanmar]. He was a fine person. It was a terrible waste.

The Japanese soldiers sent to invade Asia were also victims of Japanese militarism and imperialism. We must teach the unvarnished truth about the war to the next generation, so that such a tragedy will never be repeated.

As part of that effort, the Soka Gakkai has collected accounts of people's war experiences and published them in more than 100 volumes. The experiences of victims as well as remorse-stricken former members of the armed forces involved in the slaughter are documented. Our antiwar books have been published in English, French, German, Romanian, and in children's editions. We have also sponsored antiwar exhibitions that have toured the world.

**IGETA:** Because we have sincerely confronted and acted on this issue, the Soka Gakkai is trusted in Asia.

**KIMURA:** I was surprised to learn that the foreign students center at the University of the Philippines is called Ikeda Hall. The Japanese forces occupying the Philippines during the war were incredibly brutal, and anti-Japanese sentiment is strong there. I heard that this was the first public building ever to be named after a Japanese.

**IKEDA:** Jose Abueva, the former president of the university, is a dear friend of mine. Both his mother and father were killed by the Japanese military. They were tortured, murdered,

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and their bodies were abandoned. Every Asian country has an infinite number of such unspeakable tragedies in its past.

Dr. Abueva said of the situation that continues in Japan decades later:

Japanese leaders still stubbornly refused to admit, and apologize for, the grievous wrongs they had committed in the countries they had invaded in World War II. Japanese history textbooks purposely concealed the truth or justified the wrongs. Fellow Asians were outraged by the insensitivity and dishonesty of the Japanese. How could they gloss over the sordid truth that so many had witnessed and endured, recorded and remembered? (From an unpublished account)

I will never forget these heartrending words.

**IGETA:** Let me share the opinion of a high school division member about the war:

What Japan did to the other countries of Asia was really terrible. Unless we sincerely apologize and make amends for those actions, relations between Japan and its Asian neighbors can never be healthy and strong. I wish our political leaders would realize that this is not a matter that can be solved by throwing money at it.

**IKEDA:** That is so true. The high school division members are astute. Remember, the hope for peace rests in your hands.

To have a true vision of history, one must have a true vision of humanity, of society, of life. It is important to rethink everything from the viewpoint of whether it is in the interest of the people, whether it contributes to their happiness or not.

Up to now, history has almost always been centered around the interests of the powerful, around politics and the state. We must rewrite history so that it is centered instead around the people and their lives, so that it reflects all humanity's viewpoint.

A few years ago, a textbook of European history written from a pan-European perspective was published [1992]. It was unlike any previous history textbook where the focus was on only one nation's story, where everything was viewed from a national perspective. This represents the beginning of a trend to abandon national histories for those written from a broader point of view.

I think the time has come to seriously contemplate writing a pan-Asian history textbook and, after that, a pan-human or global history textbook — one written from the perspective of all humanity.

**KIMURA:** President Ikeda, you were a pioneering figure in reestablishing official relations between Japan and China at a time when relations were still fraught with difficulty. I think that shows a visionary wisdom.

You also opened the way to personal friendships and ties with the former Soviet Union, even during the Cold War. You were one of the first to predict that the Soviet Union and China, their relations extremely frosty at the time, would once again be friends. And you acted on that vision. How have you acquired the ability to read the future in this way?

**IKEDA:** I never lost my faith in the people. They are the main protagonists in history. In the long run, the people's awareness, their actions and wishes, are the strongest forces of all. Mahatma Gandhi once said: "When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers and for a time they can seem invincible but in the end they always fall."

So the basic task of making history is changing the consciousness of the people. For example, as part of the civil rights movement, African Americans staged sit-ins at lunch

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counters. This kind of protest began in 1960 with four students at a North Carolina agricultural college. At the time, lunch counters and diners in the town refused to accept orders from African Americans. Then one day four African American students entered a retail store and, after buying a few small items, sat down at the lunch counter and ordered coffee and doughnuts.

The store manager came and an argument ensued. A crowd gathered. The students were called every name imaginable, were spat on and struck. But they refused to budge. They sat there through it all, and they kept up their nonviolent protest, staying until the store closed.

The next day and the next they came and sat at the lunch counter. Eventually white students from another university joined them. Of course, they weren't really there for coffee and doughnuts. What they were after was equal rights and social justice.

The movement they started began to spread and, by September 1961, more than 3,600 protesters had been arrested. Some 70,000 black and white college students participated. As a result, discrimination at lunch counters began to fade all over the country.

**KIMURA:** We must take this as an example as we create history, too.

**IKEDA:** It is all up to young people. Political scientist and author Masao Maruyama declared that "Japanese history is the story of the passive resignation of the people to their fate." We must change this. To do so, we need the wisdom to distinguish truth from falsehood and the moral courage to publicly declare the truth.

Many years ago, I met the famous French journalist Robert Guillain, who was the Far East Bureau chief of the French newspaper *Le Monde*. He was in Japan during the war and observed the Japanese people close up. One reason, he concluded, that the Japanese could not call an end to the war was that, while they had physical courage, they had no spiritual courage. He also said that the Japanese lacked the important virtue of respect for the truth. As a result, they were easily manipulated by evil forces.

You, today's youth, are the new leaders of a new age. You must create a history of human unity for the dawning of this new age on our planet. Perhaps you think that there is little you can do as individuals. But "nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come." We are moving toward an ever-expanding humanism.

I am convinced that whatever twists and turns there may be along the way, that is the direction. You, my young friends, embracing a philosophy of humanism for which the world so hungers, are the front-runners who will lead the way.

**WT**