

Nature Is Our Home Discussions on Youth

This is the 17th 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: The subject of many of your photographs, President Ikeda, is nature. When I look at them, I'm always surprised at how you've captured the beauty of even the most familiar scenes. What do you feel as you take those photos?

IKEDA: I always press the shutter with the desire to engage in a dialogue with nature. Through that dialogue, I see my true self — I see the true image of humanity and life.

Nature is like a mirror. It remains still, but I move. It seems unchanging, yet I am constantly changing. The mirror of nature reflects my inner world, the essence of humanity, and the great, all-embracing expanse of life itself.

IGETA: One high school student wrote: "I feel good on a beautiful day. I think it's because the wonderful sun, the wind, the grass and trees are completely natural, existing as they are without pretense or artificiality." I think this student is, in her own way, engaged in a dialogue with the blue heavens and the sun.

IKEDA: Yes, no doubt she is. Only when we are connected to nature, engaged with nature, are we truly alive and vigorous. To really be alive, one must be under the sun, the moon, the shining stars and surrounded by the beautiful greenery and pure waters of the natural world. A dirty, foul environment is not natural. When people live in such surroundings, their hearts become polluted, too. That is the oneness of life and environment.

People cannot exist divorced from nature. And the destruction of nature is nothing but a sign of the arrogance and ignorance of humanity.

I have always loved the writings of Japanese author Doppo Kunikida (1871–1908), which are filled with magnificent descriptions of nature. I still remember many of them. One passage in *Musashino* (Musashi Plain) reads: "The absolutely clear blue sky seen through the tips of the trees and the sun's light dappled by the leaves as they swayed in the breeze were indescribably beautiful."

IGETA: When one experiences such natural beauty, one's heart is cleansed. That's what we mean by having a dialogue with nature, isn't it?

IKEDA: I take photographs because I want to record such a dialogue, so that together we may experience nature's beauty and wonder. Photographs are taken with the heart.

Robert Capa photographed the tragedy of war from the battlefield and left a record of it for us to learn from. I want to leave behind a record of nature's importance.

Robert Capa (1913–54) is regarded as the greatest photojournalist of the 20th century. He was on the front lines as a photographer in five wars and took more than 70,000 photographs.

Today, there is little interest in pursuing the profound life inherent in nature. Much greater energy is devoted to the exploration of other subjects. While such study may be comprehensive, when it is removed from the essence of life, it has little value.

All of the greatest artistic and cultural achievements of the past were born of a love for nature and from intimate experience of it. As nature has been progressively destroyed, art has become more and more artificial.

KIMURA: The Kansai Soka Schools are well known for raising fireflies. Both teachers and students there are making efforts to breed and protect these luminous wonders of nature. I

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Subject: World Tribune 01/23/98 n.3175 p.7 WT980123p07

Author:

Keywords: Dialogue Discussions Guidance Home Nature Tribune World Youth

understand that you proposed this project, President Ikeda.

IGETA: I've heard that the students work hard taking care of the firefly larvae, feeding them every day, no matter what the weather. Caring for living things is a strenuous effort.

I remember hearing that once the students used a photographic developing pan to house the larvae. They, of course, washed the pan carefully, but it seems some chemical residue remained, and all the larvae died.

IKEDA: Sad as it is, I'm sure the students learned the fragility and value of life from that experience. Fireflies live only two weeks in their adult form, during which they glow and shine beautifully. Their brief lives demonstrate the drama of nature.

When I was a boy, there was a pond next to the cherry tree that stood by our house in Tokyo's Ota Ward. In summer, clouds of fireflies would dance in the night skies over the little stream that ran from the pond.

Where there are fireflies, humans and nature are in harmony. Fireflies are symbols of peace.

Mr. Shigeyuki Matsuda, president of the Kansai Soka Schools, told me that students who were involved in the firefly project are now growing into kind and considerate adults.

IGETA: Unfortunately, we rarely see fireflies in the cities anymore.

KIMURA: Fireflies can be found all over the world, can't they?

IKEDA: Yes. As a matter of fact, there are beautiful fireflies at the SGI Culture Center in Florence, Italy.

I heard that when the Brazilian poet Amedeu Thiago de Mello visited the Kansai schools, he shared with the students a childhood memory of fireflies. It was night in the Amazon and the sky was filled with stars that were reflected perfectly in the gleaming, jet-black surface of the river, clear as a polished mirror. Stars in the heavens and stars in the river, and in between a twinkling cloud of fireflies. He said it was an unforgettable scene.

IGETA: What a magical vision!

KIMURA: Mr. Mello is known as a protector of the Amazon. By the way, the SGI is carrying out a tree-planting program in the Amazon region.

IKEDA: Reforesting the Amazon is a tremendous art form in itself. It is backbreaking, dirty work — out of the limelight. Yet the volunteers stick with it, with great patience and determination, because they believe in it. They all deserve commendations.

Our world should be one in which people like that, those committed to preserving nature, are honored. It makes no sense giving medals and decorations to politicians just because they have been in government for a long time. I'd like to see any one of them speak in the legislature from a love for the environment and in favor of protecting it.

Government must be dedicated to the good of the people. It is a tragedy that the beautiful natural environment that people have cherished and protected for generations is being destroyed in the name of economic growth, political advantage and scientific progress. Because human beings have the capacity to be aware of the balance of nature, it is our duty to work to preserve it.

I once suggested to someone that each railway station in Japan should cultivate a unique natural character. One could be planted with cherry trees, another with azaleas, another with wisteria and so on.

I think, too, that we should plant more trees along our streets. China has many beautiful tree-lined streets and avenues. At Soka University, I made sure that many azaleas were planted because I believe that humanistic education can only occur in a rich, beautiful, natural environment.

I also had many cherry trees planted at the head temple, Taiseki-ji. Later, as you know, they were cut down by those who lack respect for the environment.

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The Nikken sect cut down 280 cherry trees that had been donated by the Soka Gakkai and planted on the grounds of Taisei-ji.

KIMURA: When someone outside Japan heard that story, they said that this itself is proof of the evil nature of the Nikken sect. They couldn't believe that anyone would commit such a hate-filled act.

IKEDA: In countries with an advanced appreciation of the environment, there are many laws protecting it. In Brazil, for example, you can't cut down a tree — even if it's on your property — without permission from a supervisory agency.

A saying goes that planting a tree is planting life. I think we should all consider the full significance of that.

KIMURA: We are facing an environmental crisis on a global level, and it is a fundamental problem that concerns all humanity.

IKEDA: Yes. Buddhism explains life in a system of 10 stages or states of being — the states of Hell, Hunger, Animality, Anger, Humanity, Rapture, Learning, Realization, Bodhisattva and Buddhahood. The state of Humanity is right in the middle, with nobler states of life above and uglier states below. Those states below are unnatural states of being, states that oppose nature. The four stages above Humanity all value nature and strive to create a paradise where its beauty flourishes in abundance.

The question is, will we allow ourselves to be dragged down to the lower states, or will we advance to the higher states? Only intelligence, culture and religious faith can lead us out of the Animality that thoughtlessly consumes nature, leaving a barren wasteland. Because of the oneness of life and its environment, a barren, destructive mind produces a barren, devastated natural environment. The desertification of our planet is linked to the desertification of the human spirit.

War is the most extreme example of this destructive impulse. War destroys both nature and the human spirit. This century has been a century of war. We must make the coming century a century of life. We must make the 21st century one in which life is the top priority in all spheres of human activity — in commerce, in government, in science.

IGETA: Environmental destruction is going on in our immediate environment as well. Where I live, green hills and empty lots are all being “developed” into apartments and other buildings. There is no place you can even walk your dog without a leash. It feels extremely cramped and binding.

IKEDA: The destruction of nature is the destruction of humanity. Nature is our home.

All life on this planet, including of course human life, was born from the natural environment. We don't owe our existence to machines or science. We are the products of nature. Life on this planet was not artificially created.

There are many theories about the origins of humanity. Some say that the first humans appeared in Africa; others say that human beings appeared in various locations around the world at the same time. Whatever may be true, it is indisputable that the human species was born of nature.

Because of that, the further we alienate ourselves from nature, the more unbalanced we become. Our future as a species is grim unless we recognize this.

The 18th-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) called for a return to nature. Civilization even in his time had become too mechanical, too reliant on science, too much concentrated on profit, distorting human life into ugliness. It was this unfortunate development that Rousseau protested.

Second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda used to tell young people to walk barefoot and plant trees. He was trying to teach them to root their lives in the natural world.

Indeed, we all want to be healthy. For that reason, we want to breathe clean air, to see

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beautiful flowers and greenery. We turn to nature for this, just as a sunflower turns to the sun. We must recognize that any action transgressing or negating this inclination is a terrible mistake. All the money in the world won't buy the blue sky. The sun and the breeze belong to everyone.

Human beings can either destroy nature or live in harmony with it. We must never forget that we are a part of nature.

KIMURA: It is true that our lives today are far more convenient than they once were. We can buy almost everything we need, and we can get something to eat anytime we like, day or night. We have access to such a variety of goods that our biggest problem is choosing what we want. But we seem to be destroying the environment and ourselves for the sake of convenience.

IGETA: When I was a student, I had a part-time job at a large fast-food hamburger chain. All of the food arrived frozen from the factory, and we warmed it so that we could serve it immediately. But whenever anything sat for 30 minutes, we would throw it out, wrapping and all, so that we could serve customers fresher food. I was shocked at how much food we threw away.

IKEDA: That's symbolic of our gluttonous society. In the old days, it was considered a crime to leave even a single grain of rice in one's bowl uneaten.

Mass-producing fast-food hamburgers requires large quantities of cheap beef. And beef cattle need pasture land. To get pasture land, huge tracts of forest are cut down. According to one calculation, five square meters of pasture land in the tropics are required to produce the meat for a single hamburger.

But when the trees are cut down and the roots that once held the earth together are gone, rains wash away the topsoil. As a result, a large proportion of all such pasture land becomes a wasteland after only a few years.

In fact, by 1985, two-thirds of all the accessible rain forests in Central America had been cut down, much of it for pasture. All of the plants and animals living there were killed. The indigenous peoples living in the forest lost their homes and their culture.

Any mass production that requires such a terrible sacrifice — and then that the product be thrown away casually — is base. Is this a sign of real wealth and a good life? How can we just toss food away while at the same time tens of thousands of our fellow human beings are dying of malnutrition and starvation every day?

IGETA: It seems to me that something is fundamentally wrong with the path the human race has taken.

IKEDA: No one is denying that science has improved our lives. Thanks to science we can use electricity instead of just oil lamps and candles. But we need to match the progress of science with progress in our commitment to preserve and protect our environment. We need a balance.

Let's talk some more about forests. Where does the oxygen that we breathe, that keeps us alive, come from? From forests, from sea plants. Plants have spent billions of years creating this oxygen.

What about water? Most of the water we use comes from river systems. Whether it rains or shines, water flows through rivers.

Why? The trees and the soil around them absorb the water, storing it underground, from where it flows constantly, bit by bit, into the rivers. If there were no forests and the mountains were hard as asphalt, all the rain that fell in a day would run immediately into the rivers and flow out to sea, just like a bathtub emptying when you pull the plug.

Soil is another gift of the forest. Small animals and microbes help transform the dead roots of trees and their leaves into rich soil. Without that soil, we could not grow grains or

vegetables. We would have no food, and humanity would perish.

Many other products come from forests. Without them, we would have no rubber bands, no paper, no wooden desks or furniture — no homes. All of these, too, are the forest's gifts.

KIMURA: The forest produces the air we breathe, the water we drink, the soil in which we grow our food — all of which we take for granted. Every aspect of our lives is made possible by trees.

IKEDA: And that's not all. Unless we take care of the forests, we won't be able to catch fish in the sea.

IGETA: Why is that?

IKEDA: As I said, without forests all the rain would flow away down the rivers to the sea. That rain would also carry large amounts of silt with it. The silt would cloud the sea waters, block the penetration of light, and lower the sea's temperature, making it too cold for many fish. The forests also produce nutrients that eventually make their way to the sea and become food for marine life. The forests protect the life of the sea.

IGETA: Everything is linked, isn't it?

IKEDA: Life is a chain. All things are related. When any link in the chain is harmed, other links will be affected. We should think of the environment as our mother — Mother Soil, Mother Sea, Mother Earth. There is no crime worse than harming one's mother.

KIMURA: It's important to have a philosophy that recognizes everything in the universe as living and sacred.

IKEDA: We are dependent on the Earth, not the other way around. In our arrogance, we have flagrantly overlooked this. The Soviet cosmonaut Yury Gagarin (1934–68), the first person to see the Earth from space, declared it a blue planet. This is a great testimony. The blue of the oceans, the white of the clouds — they are proof that Earth is the water planet, a planet sparkling with life.

The essential teaching of Buddhism is that the life of the Buddha resides in every plant and tree, even in the smallest mote of dust. No philosophy has a more profound reverence for life.

Buddhism elucidates this both deductively and intuitively. I believe that science ought to be committed to the welfare of humanity based on induction, based on reasoning derived from the concrete facts of life. Everything must begin from such purpose.

The Gaia hypothesis, that the Earth is a living thing, is well known. Dr. James Lovelock, who first formulated this idea, wrote in *The Ages of Gaia*: “Strangely, the view [Gaia theory] is not inconsistent with the human values of kindness and compassion.”

IGETA: If one were to possess such kindness, one would find it impossible to litter.

IKEDA: Only someone who lives in the selfish state of Animality could throw trash or aluminum cans by the road. This is an egoism that cares nothing for others. It is an unnatural way to live. A person who loves nature is simply unable to litter. Tossing one's trash away carelessly is to toss away one's humanity.

By the same token, one who loves nature can cherish other human beings, value peace and possess a richness of character unfettered by selfish calculations of personal gain and loss. Those who live in a calculating way will end up calculating their own worth in the same manner. Such a life is limited in the extreme.

Nature, however, is infinite. Though it may seem beneficial to keep track of personal gain and loss, from nature's broader viewpoint, this is actually a poor, miserable existence. Such people only hurt themselves.

KIMURA: People might think that there is no reward in picking up trash others have strewn about, but I think it's important to do things like that out of love for nature — without thinking about what one may or may not gain.

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Author:

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IKEDA: Only through such selfless actions can we live the best way as human beings.

IGETA: I think that because technology has advanced to the extent it has, it's more important than ever for each person to develop an awareness of environmental protection.

IKEDA: As science advances, it is only natural that we should become involved in many different endeavors to preserve the environment. Each of us, as individuals, must make an effort to not be selfish. To save energy, for example. We must take better care of our environment. Any apparent material improvements in our lives are illusory unless we enhance the fundamental quality of our lives.

KIMURA: Many of the members have begun pondering this subject. One wrote, "I think it's important to stop thinking that one person can't make a difference." And another said, "We mustn't believe that we can make an exception for ourselves, that it's OK for us to pollute our environment."

IKEDA: That's true. It is a lot easier to talk about environmental protection than to practice it. There are obstacles sometimes — and sometimes practicing it can even be life-threatening.

I wonder if you've ever heard of the American marine biologist Rachel Carson (1907–64). She wrote a ground-breaking book called *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, which attacked the problem of pollution.

At that time, very powerful insecticides such as DDT [dichloro-diphenyl-trichloro-ethane] were being used all across the United States. They seemed to be effective at first, but gradually beneficial insects, fish and birds were disappearing from the landscape.

With no birds to sing, Ms. Carson wrote, a silent spring awaited us. People were beginning to show signs of being poisoned and getting sick from the chemicals as well.

Her book announced these facts to the public and urged that dangerous pesticides be banned. Immediately after publication, she was attacked vehemently.

IGETA: She was criticized, even though what she wrote was true?

IKEDA: She was attacked *because* what she said was true — by the giant corporations that made huge fortunes from manufacturing pesticides, by officials and politicians who were in the pockets of those companies. This happens all the time, whenever someone tells an unpleasant truth. We must learn to see through such a charade.

All those linked to the pesticide industry joined in a campaign to discredit her. Agricultural magazines attacked her. One wrote, "Her book is more poisonous than the pesticides she condemns." Even state research organizations joined the campaign — research organizations that, needless to say, received large amounts of funding from the chemical companies.

It was a campaign to silence *Silent Spring*. At one time, attacks on Carson were appearing on radio and television as frequently as once every 50 minutes. Even the American Medical Association came out with a statement that the effects of pesticides on human beings were precisely as described by the manufacturers.

But she would not give up. And she went even further, declaring that pesticides were only part of the story of the poisons that were threatening our world. Eventually, she won the support of the people, and environmentalism began to spread across the United States and throughout the world. That torch of faith kept burning after she died in 1964 and has grown to dramatically transform public awareness.

Carson left these words in *The Sense of Wonder* for the younger generation: "Those who dwell, as scientists or laymen, among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life."

A Kenyan saying goes that we should treat the Earth well; it is not a gift from our parents but a loan from our children. But the adults of our day are leaving a dismal

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inheritance to today's young people and the children you will have. With their philosophy that making money is most important of all, they are selling off your legacy — the health, culture, environment and even life that nature has protected and nurtured for so many eons.

It is your legacy, so you must act. You who have not yet forgotten the beauty and wonder of the Earth must speak out. Your struggle to protect the 21st century, your century, the century of life, has already begun.

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