

WHAT IS TRUE FREEDOM?

We all may have different ideas about how to define the word ‘freedom,’ but SGI President Ikeda says in this dialogue that ‘real freedom ultimately hinges on what you decide to dedicate yourself to with all your heart.’ It has nothing to do with having a good time, spending a lot of money or going on vacation, he adds.

This is the first installment in a new series of “Discussions on Youth.” SGI President Ikeda talks with Soka Gakkai high school division leaders Hidenobu Kimura (young men’s) and Yoshiko Ueda (young women’s).

Kimura: President Ikeda, thank you for making time to hold this second series of “Discussions on Youth.” We appreciate how busy you are, and we’re deeply grateful. I know that all of our members are eagerly looking forward to the start of this new series.

Ueda: Yes, thank you so much, President Ikeda. I am personally determined to use this opportunity to grow and to learn as much as I can.

Ikeda: On the contrary, please allow me to thank *you*. Let’s embark together on a journey of heart-to-heart exchange. I am always delighted to do anything I can to bring joy to you, the young men and women who are the future leaders of our movement.

As you just mentioned, the title of this series is “Discussions on Youth.” Would you happen to know, incidentally, the origins of the Japanese word for youth (seishun)? It is written with two Chinese characters meaning “green” and “spring,” respectively. In ancient China, the color green was identified with spring. Red, meanwhile, was associated with summer, white with autumn, and black with winter.

These colors aptly capture the different moods of the four seasons. In terms of our own lives, the time of infancy and childhood might be likened to the black winter, the season when all things are at rest and plants store their energy beneath the earth’s surface for the coming of spring. When the time is ripe and spring finally arrives, all life stirs with the determination to sprout, to bloom. In English, the word spring also has the meaning of a coiled spring, full of bounce and impetus. In Japanese, too, the word spring (haru) connotes energy welling up from inside.

According to the ancient Chinese view of the universe, the green spring is associated with the east direction — in other words, the direction from which the sun rises. (The direction of the red summer is south, the white autumn is west, and the black winter is north.)

The green spring of life — our youth — is meant to be lived with our faces turned toward the sun. As the season of growth, youth is both a time of great joy and great suffering. It is filled with all kinds of problems and worries. But it’s important not to run away from them. The key is to keep seeking the sun, to keep moving in the direction of the sunlight, as we challenge the pain and agony that are part of youth and growing up. Please never give in to defeat. For a seed to sprout, it must exert tremendous effort to break out of its hard outer covering. To reach outside to view the blue sky above, that sprout must then valiantly push

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its way up through a thick layer of soil.

The hardships you come across now will all contribute to your growth. Problems are part and parcel of the growing process. Therefore, the important thing is to keep pressing forward, no matter how tough or painful the going may get. Youth is the spirit of persistence — to keep making an effort to grow and to become more capable despite all obstacles. Those who keep striving for improvement remain youthful no matter what their age. Conversely, those who fail to do so, even if they are young in years, will be old and weak in spirit.

Kimura: I see what you're saying.

The theme for today's discussion is freedom. When asked about how much freedom they have, the majority of high school students say they sometimes feel as if they have no freedom at all.

Ueda: Many students complain that school rules are too restrictive. They aren't allowed to carry beepers, they can't dye their hair, they can't wear their socks the way they want to, they can only carry a regulation book bag and, in the case of girls, their school-uniform skirts must cover their knees. They say they don't like attending schools with such strict rules.

Kimura: Others have remarked that they don't like their parents being so nosy. When they get a phone call at home, their parents ask them who it's from. When they leave the house in the evening, their parents continuously page them on their beepers even though they've told them where they're going. Some students comment, "They say it's because they love us, but they really go overboard sometimes!"

Ueda: Still other students complain that they have no time for themselves or the things they want to do because they are so busy with their studies and extracurricular activities during the day and then have to attend cram schools in the evening.

Ikeda: They sure have a long list of grievances!

I understand what they're saying, though, and I think they're right. No one likes to be controlled by others, and it's only natural to wish that we could do our own thing without people hassling us all the time. I'm sure there are students who dream of what freedom they would enjoy if there were no rules, and if they had plenty of money and time and no parents nagging them. But that is a very shallow view of life, a very superficial perspective of human society.

There are wealthy people who seem free of all constraints because they can travel around the world and buy whatever they want without having to work. But appearances can be deceptive. While their lives may seem enviably unfettered, many suffer feelings of emptiness and lack of fulfillment. The freedom they enjoy is only superficial, and they feel boxed in and restricted.

An American businessman and his wife once said something very interesting. They remarked that they knew some of the richest people in the world, but they had seen many people whose lives were really very sad: widows who had lost all sense of purpose after

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their husbands died and people who felt hollow and without purpose even though they had amassed huge fortunes and achieved all their ambitions.

Real freedom ultimately hinges on what you decide to dedicate yourself to with all your heart. It doesn't mean loafing around with nothing to do. It isn't spending money like water. It isn't having all the free time in the world. It isn't taking long vacations. Doing only as you please is not freedom; it is nothing more than self-indulgence. True freedom lies in the ongoing challenge to develop yourself, to achieve your chosen goal. This path is paved with the glittering gold of freedom.

Kimura: It's true that we tend to think of leisure as freedom, but the two are quite different.

Ikeda: Actually, it's only because you enjoy great freedom that you can study and attend school; that you can do gongyo and participate in high school division activities. Regarding these things as unpleasant chores that keep you from doing what you want is a terribly misguided way of looking at life.

Do you look at going to school as a right or something that you're being forced to do? Do you see school as liberating or stifling? It all depends on your personal philosophy, on your wisdom. If you're passive, you'll feel trapped and unhappy in even the freest of environments. But if you take an active approach and challenge your circumstances, you will be free, no matter how confining your situation may actually be. As Nichiren Daishonin writes:

Each character [written word] of this [Lotus] sutra is without exception a living Buddha of supreme enlightenment, but we ordinary people, viewing the sutra with the eyes of common mortals, see it as a mere succession of characters. Hungry spirits perceive the Ganges River as fire, human beings perceive it as water, and heavenly beings perceive it as amrita. The water itself is the same, but it appears differently according to the karmic capacity of individuals. (The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, vol. 5, p. 163)

Children who are suffering from serious illnesses or living in war-torn countries can't go to school even when they want to. On the other hand, many children in more fortunate circumstances who do have the opportunity to attend school don't appreciate how free they really are. Being able to go to school is in fact a sign of the most incredible freedom. And it's a mistake not to realize it.

Ueda: Being able to go to school is truly a great fortune, isn't it?

Ikeda: Yes. In the United States there was a young man with multiple myeloma, a disabling and painful form of bone cancer. In the last two years of his life, with his entire body encased in a cast because of multiple bone fractures, he visited local high schools in his wheelchair to talk about the terrible effects of drug abuse. He would say to the students: "You want to destroy your body with nicotine or alcohol or heroin? You want to smash it up in cars? You're depressed and want to throw it off the Golden Gate Bridge? Then give me your body! Let me have it! I want it! I'll take it! I want to live!" [For more information, read Julius Segal's *Winning Life's Toughest Battles: Roots of Human Resilience*.] His words are said to have made the audience shiver.

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And during the war in the former Yugoslavia, children talked about their dreams. One said, “I had many dreams, but the war robbed me of all of them.” And another said, “Our dream is to live an ordinary life with our friends, to be able to go to school.”

Recently, in Rwanda in Africa there has been a bitter and cruel civil war. In one particular family, the children lost both parents; only they and their grandmother survived. Somebody had to work to support the others. Ultimately, one of the older boys dropped out of school to care for the rest. He was so sad that he couldn't attend school anymore that he often cried all through the night. Today, his other siblings who are still in school share their lessons with him when he comes home from work in the evening.

Kimura: Compared to children in these and many other countries, Japanese high school students have a great deal of free choice.

Ikeda: Exactly. But if that was the whole story, we'd have to conclude that everything depends completely on our environment. That's not the case. The human condition and life aren't so simple. In Buddhism, true freedom can be correlated to one's life-condition. Someone with an expansive life-condition is free even if confined to the most restrictive prison on earth.

Argentine human rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel once told me that prison taught him to have a conscious appreciation of freedom.

Natalia Sats, the late president of the Moscow State Musical Theater for Children, who fought against oppression, also turned her prison cell into a place of learning. She encouraged her fellow prisoners to share their special knowledge with one another. One could lecture on chemistry, another could teach medicine. Mrs. Sats, who herself was a singer and entertainer, sang songs and recited poetry by the Aleksandr Pushkin, striving to infuse everyone with courage and hope.

The same was true of the Japanese educator Yoshida Shoin (1830–59; Japanese scholar, teacher and writer whose students later played key roles in the Meiji Restoration), who was active toward the end of the Edo period. When he was arrested and incarcerated one time for opposing the policies of the military government, he presented lectures to the other prisoners, raising their spirits. In the end, even his jailers came to hear him speak.

And we can see the same spirit in the first and second presidents of the Soka Gakkai, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda. Championing the causes of freedom of religion and peace, neither leader would give in to the forces of oppression, even if it meant imprisonment. Each possessed a state of mind of complete freedom, expressed in the Daishonin's words: “Since I have been born in the ruler's domain, I must follow him in my actions. But I need not follow him in the beliefs of my heart” (MW-3, 171).

Ueda: Those who refuse to be defeated by circumstances, no matter how harsh, are truly free.

Ikeda: Yes. I'm sure you know the story of Helen Keller (1880–1968). At the age of 18 months, she lost her sight and hearing. Her deafness also made it difficult for her to speak.

But by working together with her teacher Anne Sullivan, she eventually learned to read, write and speak, and graduated from Radcliffe College in Boston.

Surely no one could have been as restricted as she was — unable to speak, hear or see. Her world was one of darkness and silence. But she drove the darkness out of her heart. At 9 she finally spoke her first sentence: “It is warm.” She never forgot for the rest of her life the astonishment and joy she experienced at that moment. She had succeeded at last in breaking out of the prison of silence that confined her.

As a result of unimaginable hard work and effort, she later went on to travel the globe to lecture and offer encouragement to other people with disabilities. She came to Japan several times. She brought courage to the entire world. She refused to be beaten. She always turned her face to the sun, seeking the bright light of hope.

Being human, however, at times she would feel forlorn and disheartened by the long hours she had to spend studying, having all of her textbooks painstakingly spelled into her hand, while other students were singing and dancing and enjoying themselves. She wrote:

I slip back many times, I fall, I stand still, I run against the edge of hidden obstacles, I lose my temper and find it again and keep it better. I trudge on, I gain a little, I feel encouraged, I get more eager and climb higher and begin to see the widening horizon. Every struggle is a victory.

Ueda: “Every struggle is a victory.” Those are very moving words.

Ikeda: She also wrote, “In the wonderland of Mind I should be as free as another.” This was Helen Keller’s declaration of victory. She reached the summit of freedom, liberating herself through her own arduous struggle.

Kimura: She lived her life with incredible strength and courage.

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(Part 2 will continue in next week’s issue.)