

Discussions on Youth What Does Individuality Mean?

What is individuality? It's your uniqueness — your unique mission. 'Life is about expressing and developing that individuality as fully as possible,' says President Ikeda. 'In other words, it is about self-realization.'

This is the second installment in the new series of discussions on youth among SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai high school division chiefs Hidenobu Kimura (young men's chief) and Yoshiko Ueda (young women's chief), representing the high school division members. (The second half of this installment will appear in next week's issue.)

KIMURA: Today's theme is "individuality." When we asked our members "What kind of person would you describe as having individuality?" we got various answers: "A person who isn't afraid to dress or look different from others." "An interesting person, someone who does the unusual or daring." "Someone who knows how to be themselves, who isn't influenced by others." And "It isn't a matter of their appearance but an air or quality they exude."

People have their own ideas about what individuality is, but I think most would agree that it is a good quality. It seems contradictory, then, that there is a tendency in Japanese society to pick on those who do not conform to the "norm." People who dress or look different or who don't own the "right" or "in" things are often treated as outsiders. Consequently, they become afraid to express their individuality. This, at least, seems to be the situation in Japan today.

IKEDA: Individuality has been described as a unique treasure that we each possess. Just as no two people have exactly the same face, we all have our individual characteristics. We each have a treasure that belongs to us alone. We have a mission that only we can fulfill. Everyone has his or her unique character, his or her identity.

Because of our individuality, we have a way of life and mission that are ours alone. Our individuality is something special and singularly our own; no one else can possess it. It is part of our very being, something we exude naturally, without thinking about it.

Life is about expressing and developing that individuality as fully as possible — in other words, it is about self-realization. In the SGI, we call this *human revolution*.

The fact that we have been born into this world means that we each have a unique mission to fulfill. If we didn't, we would never have been born. The universe does nothing in vain. Everything has meaning. Even plants that we spurn as weeds have a function to fulfill. Each living thing has its unique identity, role and purpose — the cherry as a cherry, the plum as a plum, the peach as a peach, the damson as a damson.

UEDA: You're referring, of course, to the well-known Buddhist principle of cherry, plum, peach and damson.

IKEDA: Yes. There's no point in a plum trying to be a cherry. The plum should bloom like a plum, revealing its unique potential to the fullest. Not only does doing so accord with reason, but it is the right path to happiness and fulfillment in life. Each of us has a distinct identity — that's what makes life interesting. How dull things would be if we were all alike!

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KIMURA: Yes. Human society is filled with diversity. There are people who are logical, intuitive, scholarly, athletic, scientific, humanistic. There are eloquent people and quiet people, impatient people and easygoing people. There are those who are highly methodical and those who are very casual. There are those who are impulsive and those who are cautious, those who bloom early and those who bloom late. Everyone has different talents and aptitudes, too.

Believe in Yourself and Work Hard

IKEDA: That's absolutely right. But there is also an important thing that we mustn't forget. True individuality never comes to full flower without hard work. Therefore, you're making a big mistake if you think that who you are right now represents all you are capable of being. Also, it's natural, especially in your teens, not to have a clear idea of who you are.

We are always changing. If you decide passively, "I'm a quiet type now, so I'll just go through life being quiet," then you won't fully realize your unique potential. On the other hand, you can challenge yourself to become someone, who, though quiet and reserved by nature, will nevertheless say what needs to be said at the right moment, clearly and completely, someone who has the courage to speak out and stand up for the truth. Through such effort, you'll come to develop your distinctive way of communicating that is refreshingly different from your more talkative peers. That is what is meant by individuality.

The same can be said about study. Simply deciding from the outset that you're not good at studying, without making any effort, is nothing but escapism.

Each of us is different, but we are all alike in that we possess tremendous potential. The truth is that you can do almost anything if you set your mind to it. The worst thing is to lose confidence in yourself and limit your potential.

Generally speaking, one person is about as smart as the next. Your grades at school right now are not a measure of your full potential. They don't define you. No matter how tough things get, it's important to remember that, if others can do it, so can you, and to be determined to challenge the limits of your potential. You have to believe in yourself 100 percent. Constantly comparing yourself to others, swinging between feelings of inferiority and superiority, is a sad way to live.

Only those who are determined to give their all, to try their very best and make effort upon effort, sparkle with true individuality. Such people can also respect and appreciate others' individuality. They never try to sabotage others' success or pick on people because they're different.

The Character and Strength To Help Others

UEDA: One of our readers writes: "I have many friends who excel at sports or studies and the like and show a lot of individuality. But I'm not particularly good at anything and think I'm really boring. Is individuality dependent on one's talent?"

IKEDA: Talent and individuality are two different things. Our individuality is an indivisible part of us that we nurture and develop throughout our lives. It encompasses our whole self, including our character and our way of life. It is developed and refined as we struggle against the surging waves of life and society. By living true to ourselves, our individuality

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shines and grows stronger.

People who are good at sports or bright at school tend to get all the attention, while those who work hard but don't achieve spectacular results tend to go unnoticed. But in their persistent efforts, the individuality, the special qualities, of the latter shine brilliantly.

Faith in the Mystic Law enables us to channel our individuality in the most positive direction. Those who possess the most lofty individuality are people who cast aside self-interest to dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to serving others; people who work for the happiness of their fellow human beings, the welfare of society and the propagation of the Mystic Law, indifferent to whether they are recognized for their efforts. Their greatness of character makes such actions possible.

True individuality is not a superficial, external phenomenon. That kind of individuality is shallow, an ephemeral creation of the mass media. Individuality, in the best sense of the word, is synonymous with character, with human integrity. A person of true individuality is not self-centered but a well-rounded individual working for the benefit of humanity and the world.

Does Individuality Mean Eccentricity?

KIMURA: When we speak of a person having “individuality,” it often has the nuance of a person who is eccentric or stands out from the crowd. Some of our readers said that it makes them think of trendy, fashionable people or people in show business. But, as you've just pointed out, that's a superficial definition of individuality.

IKEDA: True individuality is not something as superficial and artificial as merely *trying* to be different. Rather, it is something that shines from the depths of your life as a result of discarding your attachment to shallow pretensions and devoting all your energies to achieving something of value.

As the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) said: “Each one tries to make his own Self observable, and to exhibit it as much as possible to the world. This false tendency is shown everywhere.... Everywhere there is the individual who wants to show himself off to advantage, nowhere one honest effort to make oneself subservient to the Whole.”

People who allow themselves to be controlled by appearances, popularity or fashion don't have a strong sense of self. They lack individuality in the truest sense of the word. Being obsessed by such things can make for an empty kind of individuality.

Someone in the entertainment industry once said that some big-name actors treat people like dirt, and that some glamorous stars of stage and screen don't even have a single real friend to invite to their weddings.

Appearances are deceiving; it's reality that counts. Individuality is not a matter of how you look but what you really are inside.

UEDA: Another reader writes: “In Japan, the media defines the image of high school girls as having dyed hair, wearing trendy loose socks, Ralph Lauren sweaters, and carrying Hello Kitty mobile phones. They try to stereotype us, and I think that's wrong. I feel like we're being manipulated by the media.”

IKEDA: The influence of the commercial media is indeed very powerful. Fads are often engineered and then launched on the public. In that sense, sporting the latest fashions or

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must-have items is really the opposite of individuality.

Naturally, everyone should be free to wear what they wish. It's only normal for people to want to look nice and to be attractive. I'd like to stress, however, that youth has its own radiance: all of you are already beautiful without wearing a lot of makeup and faddish clothes.

During a visit to Japan, Natalia Sats, the founder of the Moscow State Children's Theater, went out to do some shopping in a department store. When she came to the jewelry department, she turned to the Japanese interpreter accompanying her and said in jest: "You are still young. You are beautiful just as you are, without wearing such expensive things. But I am no longer young, and the beauty of youth has gone, so I have to compensate by wearing beautiful things!"

The point is, true individuality has nothing to do with how we dress or look. It is something we emanate from inside.

Scolded for Dressing Loud

UEDA: Another of our readers has written to us: "I want to be free to express my creativity through music and fashion, and in the future I'd like to work in one of those areas. But whenever I wear clothes that are a bit loud or unusual, my parents say, 'You're a Soka Gakkai member, so please dress more appropriately.' I appreciate their point of view, but I just can't agree with them."

IKEDA: There are various reasons why parents might react this way. Sometimes it could be because they lack understanding or are worried about what other people will think or are genuinely concerned for their child's best interests.

I can well imagine that you might feel your individuality is being suppressed if you are forced to do what others tell you. However, expressing your individuality and simply rebelling for rebellion's sake are two different things all together.

As part of a larger whole — be it a family or social group — it's important for us to have the spirit and wisdom to harmonize and get along with others. The ability to be flexible and to accommodate different views is itself a sign of a solid sense of self. We should neither be lazy, blindly following the crowd, nor self-centered, blindly rebelling against it. Rather, we should seek balance and harmony. Being able to demonstrate such wisdom shows a strong self-identity.

We mustn't allow ourselves to become self-absorbed and insensitive to those around us. No one is an island. We live surrounded by our family, our friends and the rest of the world. We are all connected. The key is to display our individuality within that web of relationships.

True individuality is not self-centered. It is a way of life, a way of being, that leads ourselves and others in a positive direction in the most natural of ways.

Respecting Others' Individuality

KIMURA: Some people care a great deal about keeping up with the latest fads and fashions and others don't. The problem is that there is the tendency for people to be singled out for criticism and attack if they are different from the rest. Several of our readers have commented that there is strong peer pressure to conform. If you don't dress like everyone else or hold the same opinions as everyone else, you end up as the target of general disapproval.

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IKEDA: This is a deep-rooted problem in our society. For better or for worse, Japanese people have traditionally placed great value on conformity. This sets us worlds apart from Western culture. The Japanese viewpoint on individuality and the individual is completely different. This national character of suppressing individuality has greatly hindered Japan's progress.

What we see at work here is so-called group fascism, where people's actions are curtailed as if they were prisoners, the purpose being to deprive them of their individuality. It is a truly tragic abuse of human rights. In truth, if we respect and treasure the individuality of others while at the same time working to develop our own individuality, we can realize valuable progress for both ourselves and others.

To judge people by their appearances is an insult to humanity. It is the exact opposite of the spirit of treasuring individuality.

Rosa Parks, one of the pioneers of the American civil rights movement, is an esteemed friend of mine. She is very gentle and kind, but she also has amazing inner strength and determination. Mrs. Parks said: "[My mother] taught me not to judge people by the amount of money they had or the kind of house they lived in or the clothes they wore. People should be judged, she told me, by the respect they have for themselves and others."

To be continued next week

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