

SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA'S ESSAY THE TRUE REWARD OF LIFE

The SGI president recalls the many great writers he has known, sharing their perspective on life and death, and their determination to contribute to humanity through writing. 'The only true way to live, the true reward of life, is to accept the challenge of dedication and commitment to one's beliefs,' President Ikeda writes.

BY DAISAKU IKEDA, SGI PRESIDENT

In one of my recent essays (Dec. 18 & 25, 1998, *World Tribune*), I wrote about writers and illustrators I met in my youth. Since then, I have received many requests to write something about the people I met later on, so I want to say a bit about some of the literary figures who left an especially deep impression on me, figures whom I met in my 30s and 40s.

But first, I want to mention Eiji Yoshikawa, a writer whom I very much admire but unfortunately did not have the pleasure of ever meeting. Mr. Yoshikawa died in 1962, two years after I became Soka Gakkai president.

My barber in those days, a Gakkai member, told me that while hospitalized at Keio Hospital in Shinanomachi (where the Soka Gakkai Headquarters is located), Mr. Yoshikawa came a couple of times to his shop, which was just across the street. According to the barber, Mr. Yoshikawa was very much interested in the Soka Gakkai, read our publications and had heard much about our organization from his friends.

Twenty-five years after his death, in May 1987, I visited the Eiji Yoshikawa Memorial Hall in Ome, on Tokyo's outskirts, and met his wife, Mrs. Fumiko Yoshikawa. I saw on display there a piece of his calligraphy: "All others are my teachers." I was deeply impressed by those words and by Mr. Yoshikawa's profound dedication to seeking the truth throughout his life.

With that in my heart, I composed a poem about him, "Like Mount Fuji," and presented it to Mrs. Yoshikawa.

Sawako Ariyoshi was another writer with a strong commitment to seek the truth. I first met her in the mid-60s. She told me that she had participated in a Soka Gakkai meeting in the United States and was very moved to witness the bonds uniting the members, bonds that transcended cultures.

Mrs. Ariyoshi was also well acquainted with many leading Chinese writers, including Ba Jin, and helped forge the initial links between the Soka Gakkai and China.

She was by no means physically strong, and she used to collapse from exhaustion every time that she finished a novel — she had poured her entire life and being into it. Yet she would invariably spend her convalescence working on the plot for her next book.

I will never forget how she once said to me, when we were having a dialogue for a magazine, that she hoped I would continue to be Soka Gakkai president for another 50 years.

Another time, she told me that we were entering the age of the comic book novel. She sent me about 20 such works. Among them was the famous *Tomorrow's Joe* with story by Asao Takamori and illustrations by Tetsuya Chiba. The hero, Joe, dedicates his youth to boxing, and he is determined to keep fighting "until he is burned down to white ash." I

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couldn't help being struck by the similarity of Joe's fighting spirit to Mrs. Ariyoshi's.

She died at 53, but she continued writing to the end. In her last years, she authored several works dealing with social problems like the graying of society and environmental pollution.

No doubt, she was aware that she didn't have long to live. That motivated her to her writing as her mission — a mission to which she had to devote every ounce of her energy, as long as it would last.

Great writers face death head on.

Hideo Kobayashi, known as one of Japan's foremost literary critics, once confessed, "Since 60, I have been preparing for death."

I met Mr. Kobayashi in the spring of 1971, when he was 68. We had a pleasant, interesting talk over lunch with the writers Ton Satomi and Mitsuo Nakamura. Mr. Kobayashi said that he was attracted to Tendai Buddhism and had read T'ien-t'ai's *Great Concentration and Insight*.

The writer Yasushi Inoue also said that it is only when we take a hard look at death that we really see life for what it is.

Mr. Inoue and I exchanged letters for a year, starting in April 1975, which were later published as *Letters of Four Seasons*. At the time, Mr. Inoue was in his late 60s.

In one letter, I expressed the hope that he wouldn't find the fierce summer heat too trying. But in his reply, which actually came during the hottest part of summer, he said that since entering his 60s he found himself developing an ever-greater fondness for the blazing sun.

He also wrote, "When one is my age, the only things that remain bright and distinct in the memory are times when one has burned to accomplish something, those past times that prove one has lived" (*Letters of Four Seasons*, p. 43).

The only true way to live, the true fruit and reward of life, is to accept the challenge of dedication and commitment to one's beliefs.

The Nobel Prize-winning writer Mikhail Sholokhov, whom I met in 1974 on my first trip to the Soviet Union, said: "A person without beliefs can accomplish nothing. We are, all of us, forgers of happiness. The strong of spirit, believe, no matter what circumstances may befall them, they are to a certain extent master of their own lives."

At the time he told me this, Mr. Sholokhov was 69. Although he was ill, he heartily welcomed me, insisting that I drink cognac with him. I can't drink at all, and I still remember with some nostalgia the quandary his kind invitation put me in.

Nichiren Daishonin writes, "First study death, then study other matters" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1404). Once you have properly understood death, you will naturally live a life that is fully, completely alive. You will continue moving forward, facing challenge after challenge your entire life.

At 71, I, too, am determined to keep up my efforts and burn as bright as the blazing sun, day after day.