

DISCUSSIONS ON YOUTH THE THREE LEVELS OF FRIENDSHIP

IN THIS DISCUSSION, SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA OUTLINES WHAT HE CALLS THE THREE LEVELS OF FRIENDSHIP: 1) PEOPLE SEEKING TO ENJOY THEIR LIVES TOGETHER; 2) PEOPLE ENCOURAGING ONE ANOTHER AS THEY WORK TOWARD THEIR INDIVIDUAL DREAMS; AND 3) PEOPLE SHARING THE SAME IDEALS AS TRUE COMRADES, TRUSTING ONE ANOTHER COMPLETELY.

SATORU MIURA: One student writes: "I like to be by myself. I really don't enjoy doing everything in a group. Is that all right?"

SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA: Yes, of course. You're free to enjoy your own company, if you wish. Being together with many people and friendship are two different things. It's perfectly all right to make friends in your own way, with people whom with you can share your thoughts and feelings.

Please remember that friendship remains one of the most important foundations of life. There are many famous sayings about it all around the world. Cicero says: "Friendship is closer than kinship." "A life without friendship is like a world without sunshine." Aristotle says, "A friend is like another self."

Character and integrity are indispensable for making friends. True friendship cares nothing for social status or rank.

You can only make real friends when you open and share your heart with others. A selfish, egotistical person cannot make true friends.

As you grow older, it becomes harder to create friendships untainted by self-interest. That's why it's so important to make good friends while you're young. Your friends from elementary school, junior high school and high school are like your fellow actors appearing on the stage of life with you in the same play. You will never forget them for the rest of your life.

The relationship between parent and child is a lifelong one, as the relationship between husband and wife is probably meant to be, too. I think that friendship should also be a lifelong bond.

That said, perhaps we can distinguish among friendships, dividing them into three groups according to their depth.

MIURA: What would those be?

IKEDA: Have you ever heard of the three levels of devotion to one's parents from traditional Eastern philosophy?

YOSHIKO UEDA: Yes, I think I have.

IKEDA: The first level of devotion to your parents is obedience, doing whatever they tell you to. Now, this might please your parents, but it is completely passive on your part.

The second level of devotion to your parents is to make a positive effort to serve them.

This might include giving them a gift or doing something that delights them. The third level is to introduce them to what you know is right and beneficial for them — even if they oppose it.

MIURA: From our perspective, I guess, the third level would mean teaching parents who aren't Soka Gakkai members about Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. Even if they oppose it, it's the means by which they can achieve indestructible happiness, not only in this life but throughout eternity.

UEDA: What are the three levels of friendship, then?

IKEDA: I think we could call them the three levels of human relationships. In the first level of friendship, we see people forging bonds of mutual affection and empathy with one another in the course of ordinary day-to-day activities. They seek to enjoy their lives together. It's a friendship based on mutual enjoyment, on having a good time together.

The second level of friendship is a little more advanced. The friends have their own goals; they each have a clear vision of the kind of person they want to become, the kind of future they want to build, the kind of contribution they wish to make to humanity. So they encourage and support one another as they work to realize their dreams and make something of themselves in the world. This is a friendship of mutual encouragement.

UEDA: I see, the friends don't just hang out together and have fun, but they encourage and support one another in achieving concrete goals. Many of our high school division members write about that kind of friendship: "We worked together and built an incredible display for our school festival." "Before every exam, we've been setting ourselves study goals and encouraging one another in our studies." "As members of the school's swimming team, we all challenged ourselves to swim six miles, and all of us did it! It was exhausting, but I know it's something I'm going to remember with great pride." "All of us became really close through working together on preparations for the high school division general meeting. I'm so glad the meeting was a success."

MIURA: Another student writes: "They say studying for entrance exams is a lonely struggle. My feeling is that it's a battle where you have to win against yourself. Studying for the exams, I've come to realize how important friends are in staving off feelings of isolation and loneliness."

Another writes, "My friend and I are striving toward our dreams for the future, and we're both determined to give them our best shot."

Many, many students have recognized that they are not alone — that knowledge has given them the strength to overcome tough challenges. That's why I'm sure most of our readers can deeply appreciate this kind of friend-to-friend encouragement and support.

What is the third and highest level of friendship?

In the highest kind of friendship, people are even willing to give their lives for one another.

IKEDA: The third level of friendship is the bond of comrades who share the same ideals, a friendship in which each would willingly give his or her life for the other. This is the kind

of friendship that exists in the realm of faith.

Many people who have achieved great things in history have had this kind of friendship. It's the friendship of people of like mind, people who give their lives to realizing a common cause.

This kind of friendship demands absolute trust. True comrades can never betray one another, not even under the threat of death. They can never betray themselves, their friends or their ideals.

There are many examples of this kind of friendship, but one wonderful depiction of it is the friendship of Rossi and Bruno in *The Eternal City* by Hall Caine. The story is set in Rome at the turn of this century. Italy is threatened by foreign powers, and its government is corrupt. The people are suffering greatly.

The hero of the novel is a young revolutionary, David Rossi. His dear friend is Bruno Rocco.

They feel the pains of the people as their own, and they rise up, speak out and fight against oppression. The government strikes back, and Rossi is forced to flee into exile. But Bruno is caught and imprisoned. He is tortured but refuses to succumb.

Then, the authorities try to deceive Bruno. They show him a letter allegedly written by Rossi, the contents of which suggest Rossi's betrayal of Bruno. It is, of course, a forgery.

The prosecutor insinuates, "Your friend has left you here to suffer while, behind your back, he has secretly betrayed you." But Bruno refuses to believe these demonic whisperings. Drowning out the lies of his captors, he shouts with all his might, "Long live David Rossi!" He dies calling out his friend's name, continuing to believe in his friend's integrity.

Rossi, his comrade's spirit alive in his heart, eventually opens the way to the realization of their cherished ideal: an eternal city, where all people live together in happiness and peace.

Mr. Toda gave me a copy of *The Eternal City*, when I was young. It is a book I will always remember.

"Read this and then pass it on to a dozen or so of your good friends," Mr. Toda said. "When you've all finished reading it, let's get together and discuss it." He taught us a noble kind of friendship that would withstand the fiercest storm. He taught us never to betray our comrades, no matter what attacks and hardships we faced. He taught us to move forward with iron unity until the victorious day *kosen-rufu* is achieved and the happiness of all humanity assured.

UEDA: That's friendship on a grand scale. It's humanity at its best, hearts burning with selfless commitment.

The human heart, at its best, is stronger than anything.

IKEDA: Yes, our heart is what matters most. The human heart can be very weak, fickle and ignoble. But it can also be stronger than anything, unflinching, supremely noble.

The great writer Victor Hugo was forced into exile during his struggle with the dictator Napoleon III. He was exiled for 19 years. But he was determined that, no matter what persecution he endured, he would stick to his ideals with a vibrant, resolute spirit.

Likening Napoleon III to Sulla, an ancient Roman tyrant, Hugo writes in the poem "Ultima Verba":

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*Even if only one thousand are left, I will hold my ground!
If only one hundred survive, I will still cross swords with Sulla.
When only ten remain, let me be the tenth.
When only one is left, that one will be me!*

People not afraid to stand alone for their beliefs gain the support of true, steadfast friends.

If you persevere on the path you've chosen, your true friends will definitely appear.

MIURA: Today, many people lack ideals and beliefs. Because of this, sincere, hardworking people who are really making an effort get called show-offs, and those earnestly trying to achieve something of value are denounced as impostors.

IKEDA: "We are all born under sentence of death," it has been said. All of us will die someday. None of us can avoid that fate. The question, then, becomes how we spend the limited time we have. This is what counts.

Some people waste their lives worrying and fretting about trivial, inconsequential things. Some even take their own lives. Nothing is more foolish, or sadder, than that. Suicide is terribly wrong.

If we are going to give our lives to something, surely we should give it to a noble cause, the cause of eternal truth and justice.

If we keep up our efforts, even when the going is tough, we will earn respect. The important thing is to persevere on the path you have chosen, irrespective of how difficult circumstances may become or how others around you may change.

Those who can do this will emerge as champions and victors in life. They will win in the end. Such people also make true friends.

I have such friends. I have them all around the world. Your mothers and fathers are among them. My very reason for living is for the sake of all these unforgettable comrades.

The SGI is strong because of these bonds of genuine friendship. I want all of you to inherit the noble spirit of these comrades working for a common cause.

MIURA: We talk lightly about friendship, but really it's a profound thing.

IKEDA: Friendship is one of the main foundations of what it is to be human. It gives sustenance and impetus to world peace and the betterment of society. By expanding our circle of friendship, we create the foundation for a peaceful society.

Even the most ambitious undertakings begin with one-on-one relationships.

UEDA: It would be wonderful if all people were friends.

IKEDA: All people are equal. Human beings therefore seek to forge friendships and build an ideal world — an eternal city, where all coexist in peace and harmony.

When expounding his teachings, Shakyamuni Buddha always addressed all living

beings. I think the term *all living beings* incorporates this universal spirit of friendship — this spirit to treat every person and every living thing as equally precious and worthy of respect, this spirit to bring happiness to all.

While all people becoming friends is the ideal, we know that this is, unfortunately, not the case in the world today. That's why it's so important that we forge friendships with as many people as we can. We must face the challenges of reality and make what changes we can, small as they may be. The accumulation of such efforts will gradually lead to lasting world peace.

MIURA: You, President Ikeda, have built bridges of the heart all over the world through promoting cultural and educational exchange as well as grass-roots exchange among ordinary citizens. I feel as if our efforts are paltry in comparison.

IKEDA: Even the most ambitious undertakings actually come down to one-on-one relationships accumulating over the years. I have friends all over the world because I have always valued each encounter and sincerely treasured each person. It's always one-on-one, always. Don't be tricked into thinking that people who talk big and make flashy gestures are truly great.

A drop of rain from the sky, a drop of water from the river and a drop of water from the ocean are all just that: drops of water. The friends we make in our own small circle contribute to the spread of friendship around the world. Our individual circle of friendship is part of the global circle of friendship; these are one and the same.

Making one true friend is a step toward creating world peace.

The conclusion of a discussion on the importance of friendship among SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai high school division leaders Satoru Miura (young men's chief secretary) and Yoshiko Ueda (young women's leader). Part one appeared in last week's issue.

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