

**CONVERSATIONS ON EDUCATION
WITH FRIENDS FROM AROUND THE WORLD
FOR THE FUTURE OF OUR CHILDREN**

Participants:

SOKA GAKKAI INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT

Daisaku Ikeda

SGI-USA WOMEN'S LEADER

Matilda Buck

SGI-USA YOUTH DIVISION SENIOR ADVISOR

Ed Feasel

IKEDA: At the request of *Todai* magazine's editorial staff, I will be having a series of dialogues with SGI members from around the world to discuss education. Today, we are holding the first in that series of discussions. Joining me are two friends from the United States: Mr. Ed Feasel, an individual of superb intellect who, undaunted by severe circumstances, graduated at the top of his class from Yale, one of America's leading universities; and Mrs. Matilda Buck, who is the SGI-USA's first non-Japanese women's division leader. Regarding Mrs. Buck's appointment, many of her seniors—pioneering leaders of the women's division who came to the United States from Japan and built the foundation for today's SGI-USA—are overjoyed at the news. It is just what they have been praying for and they feel that a wonderful era has arrived.

FEASEL: My mother is one of those Japanese pioneers, and she is very happy about Mrs. Buck's appointment. My mother married my father, who was working for the U.S. Navy in Yokosuka, Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan, and then came to America with him. It was very hard for her, having arrived from Japan newly married and unfamiliar with the English language and American culture. It is easy to understand how Mrs. Buck's appointment symbolizes a new era for those "mothers of kosen-rufu" who overcame great adversity and kept working and struggling to spread this Buddhism for the happiness of American society.

BUCK: Thank you. It makes me feel all the more determined to work hard to live up to the high expectations everyone is placing in me. I owe what I am today to the support of many people: my family, my fellow SGI members and to you, President Ikeda. To my mother I owe an especially deep debt of gratitude. My father died at a young age, and she raised me as a single parent under very difficult circumstances.

IKEDA: When did you lose your father?

BUCK: My father died nine months after I was born. My parents met when my father was staying at a medical care facility where my mother worked, receiving treatment for rheumatic heart disease. By then, my father's illness was already serious and the prognosis was bleak—the doctors said he did not have long to live. Nevertheless, the two fell deeply in love, and they decided to marry. His doctor and others were against it, but my mother married my father nevertheless, fully realizing that his time was limited.

IKEDA: I see. That speaks to the strength of the bond they shared.

BUCK: Yes, I really think so. Just as the doctor had predicted, my father passed away less than a year after I was born. Though my mother had been fully aware of this possibility, his death came as a shock to her. She never overcame her deep grief. At some point she began to rely on alcohol to deal with her pain.

Alcoholic parents often abandon or neglect their children, but not my mother. She maintained her sensitivity, her deep love and sense of responsibility as a mother. She would do anything she could possibly do for me.

On the other hand, to see my mother drinking and suffering was frightening for me as a child. As I grew older it deeply affected how I viewed myself and the world. She worked very hard to make ends meet. Life was difficult; we lived in a series of tiny, bleak apartments. But wherever we were, she would use her wisdom and do whatever she could to make it a charming and cozy environment. I think this is why I grew up feeling embraced by her love and affection. My mother worked as a nursery school teacher until she was sixty—work that was very hard on her physically, especially as she grew older.

Victory for the Child Is Victory for the Parent

IKEDA: Your mother was a wonderful woman. She may have felt at times as if her sorrow would crush her. She may have felt like giving up on everything and laying down in defeat. But she did not fall; she could not fall because of her child, whom she loved. You must have been like a treasure left by her beloved husband. A mother's love is a magnificent thing. A mother's love is the strongest force in the world.

The important thing is whether you, Matilda, are happy or not. If you are happy, then your mother and father, too, will enjoy eternal happiness. That is because Buddhism teaches the principle that life itself permeates the entire universe. From this perspective, your father and mother are definitely with you. Buddhism teaches that the saddest of people can become the happiest. Your mother has won. And you, Matilda, are living proof of this. Victory for the child is victory for the parent. Today, as a leader of women in America, you are giving hope and courage to many people. This in itself describes most eloquently the happiness and fortune enjoyed by your entire family.

BUCK: Thank you for these words, President Ikeda. I am very moved. I think there are many people in the world today who blame their parents for ruining their lives. If I had not encountered this faith, I, too, may have wound up resenting my mother and even living a destructive life.

But I did come across this Buddhism, and with your guidance and encouragement, I have learned the loftiest way of life. Because of this, I can, from the bottom of my heart, thank my mother for everything she has done for me.

IKEDA: Those who can appreciate their mothers are truly happy.

To Serve the People

IKEDA: Speaking of America, next year, on May 3, the Orange County campus of Soka University of America will open. The faculty will comprise top-notch scholars from all over the United States and around the world. And one of those esteemed individuals is Mr. Ed Feasel, who joins us today. Graduating with honors in economics from Yale University, which stands at the pinnacle of American education, Ed went on to earn his Doctorate in Economics from the University of California at Berkeley. Afterward, while still in his twenties, he became an assistant professor at George Washington University. I am very happy to see such a distinguished and world-class scholar come to work for Soka University of America as a professor and dean of students. As the school's founder, I am truly appreciative.

FEASEL: That's really more praise than I deserve. I am the one who is at a loss to express my appreciation for this opportunity to work at the educational institution that, I feel, possesses the most important mission of any in the world. I am going to work to ensure that there will emerge from Soka University of America many leaders of the twenty-first century who have a truly global perspective.

I am determined to use whatever knowledge I have gained to develop able individuals—people who will use their knowledge not to exploit the people but to exhaustively dedicate themselves for the good of the people.

IKEDA: What you have just said, Ed, expresses the grand objective of Soka Education. It hinges on developing people who live not only for themselves, but who can take that extra step in the service of humanity.

FEASEL: This is the way of life I have learned from you, President Ikeda, and from my mother who struggled to raise me in the midst of many challenges and difficulties.

The year I was born, my family moved from Yokosuka, Japan to Chicago. But very soon after that, my father was sent to the distant battleground of Vietnam. I can imagine how lonely and helpless my mother felt, left alone in the still-unfamiliar land of America, unable to speak English well. To make ends meet, she took a job scraping paint from ships—very heavy labor for a woman her size to perform. She devoted herself to her work and to caring for me, her infant son, and awaited my father's return.

My father came back from Vietnam when I was five years old, and our family moved to San Diego. My father retired from the military and our family continued to live in San Diego. Some time later, my younger brother was born, but he suffered from a severe impediment and was unable to move without help. A doctor told my mother that he would never live a normal life—that she'd better give him up to institutional care and forget about him. Nevertheless, my mother decided to take care of him herself.

In the meantime, our financial difficulties worsened; sometimes we even lacked money for food. So my mother went back to work, taking a full-time job as a maid. In spite of all this, I never heard her utter a single complaint. My mother's spirit was as strong as steel. The source of that strength was her faith.

When she finished work each day, she would go to Gakkai activities, giving her all for the sake of others. I grew up watching her live this way.

Never Abandon Your Dream!

IKEDA: Your mother is a wonderful person. Those who never give in to adversity are great. If you refuse to be beaten, you will eventually win. Winning means never being defeated.

When your mother was at work, was there someone who looked after your little brother?

FEASEL: There was only me. Though I wanted to go out and play with my friends in the neighborhood, I had to stay inside. But I used my imagination to find ways to entertain myself. To live up to the expectations of my mother who had been struggling so hard to support me and to bring some joy into her life, I made it my goal to attend a top-notch university. And to this end, I studied very hard. At the time, I simply wanted to be successful and wealthy so that I could buy my mother a house and enable her to live comfortably. The biggest turning point for my family and me came when I was in my third year of high school. That was in 1984, when my dream to enter a first-rate university was getting clearer and stronger. I had just begun to send out applications to leading schools around the country when my father lost his job as a security guard. We had no money in our checking account, and creditors were hounding us for payment. Attending college would cost money. My dream was shattered.

My father had taken great pride in being a provider for our family, so he was extremely distressed by this turn of events. To get us by, my mother began working lots of overtime hours.

One day, after my mother had left for work, I suddenly became aware of my father standing in my room. He said to me quietly, in a loving voice, “There’s no need to worry any more. I will take care of everything.”

Surprised, I looked around and saw that he was holding a bottle of sleeping pills. It was empty. I frantically called for an ambulance.

My father had tried to commit suicide, hoping that my mother and I could collect on his life insurance. His life was saved, but he had to remain in the hospital for a month. It was at that time that you, President Ikeda, came to San Diego.

IKEDA: I remember it well. That was on the occasion of the U.S.–Japan Joint Youth Division General Meeting held at the San Diego Sports Arena. It was a very dynamic meeting, which some twenty thousand youth attended.

FEASEL: I participated in the general meeting as a member of the Brass Band. I would go to school each day and then go to see my father in the hospital. On top of that, I threw all of my energy into band practice and Soka Group activities, staying late at the community center every night in preparation for the meeting. In the midst of all this, Daniel Habuki, who is now the president of Soka University of America, reported to you about my situation. In response, you sent me a gift, a set of prayer beads, expressing your prayer for my success in applying for college. When I received it, my heart again began to glow with hope. A flame of courage was lit inside me. Your message said: “Don’t give up! You will definitely win!”

From that point on, my mother and I began to pray all the more seriously. Crying, we chanted daimoku. Well, actually, I was the one who cried — my mother never cried. After my father got out of the hospital, he chanted with us and began taking steps to find a job.

About one month after your visit to San Diego, we heard from a company my father had interviewed with. He was hired!

And that very same day, we also received word from Yale University that I had been accepted there on a full scholarship. The months leading up to that day had been hellish, but in the course of that one day our family's fortune blossomed. I really feel that our family changed its destiny on that day.

A Strong-Hearted Person Is a Happy Person.

IKEDA: You have really worked hard, refusing to give in to defeat. Because you have endured bitterness and persevered with a strong heart, your family has won. Life isn't all smooth going. At times we encounter pain and difficulty we could never have imagined. However, nothing ever comes of lamenting our fate. Only a strong-hearted person can achieve true happiness. There is no night that does not see the coming of dawn. The night is certainly dark, and that darkness deepens as the dawn approaches. That darkness might give one the feeling that dawn will never come, that the night will last forever. Nevertheless, the strength of a person with faith lies in believing that morning will definitely follow the night.

FEASEL: My family's belief that morning would surely come was due to the encouragement you gave us, President Ikeda.

BUCK: Yes, you have certainly made us aware of how great a power we have hidden within us. You have always recognized the great potential in each of us, respected it, and done whatever you possibly could to develop and nurture it. Through your constant communication to us and the example you have set through your actions, you have empowered us to develop our lives. About six months ago, I was going through a tough period in which I was wondering how I could ever balance my time doing SGI-USA activities with my commitment to my family. I wrote to you, sharing my worries and pain. Then I received a card from you bearing your calligraphy that read, "The Buck Castle of Happiness on the Soka Mountain of Fortune."

When I had someone translate the meaning of the characters, I felt as though my eyes had suddenly opened. The movement for American kosen-rufu, the members' happiness, my husband's happiness, my children's happiness and my grandchildren's happiness are not separate in any way. Through my present actions for the sake of others I am building a castle of fortune for my entire family—a "Buck Castle." The happiness of every member of my family, all of whom I love, is included entirely within that castle. Without this encouragement, I may not have had the confidence to accept the position of SGI-USA women's division leader when I was asked to do so at the end of last year.

IKEDA: There is just one sun in the sky, but when that sun rises all things on earth receive its energy. Similarly, if you become a sun-like presence in your family, every member of your family will benefit from your light. Please cherish and take good care of your husband. He is a wonderful husband who is supporting your activities as the SGI-USA women's division leader. The strongest and most beautiful of bonds is that between a wife and a husband who share the same ideals. Please continue always to enjoy your lives

together in good health, regarding each other with warmth and affection.

The Ability to Make Friends With Anyone

IKEDA: Now that our readers understand a little more about the two of you, I'd like to move to our main topic, which is education in America. But again, maybe you could shed light on the issue by sharing your own experiences. What was school like for you?

BUCK: What I remember most about school was the fact that I was always changing schools. We were always struggling financially, and for this reason among others we moved over and over again. As a result, I never stayed at any one school for more than two years. Though we lived mostly within the Los Angeles area, from the time I was in elementary school through high school I changed schools nine times. I was always the "new girl."

IKEDA: Moving around so much, it must have been very hard for you to make friends. In Japan, students who move from one school to another are often bullied.

BUCK: Whenever I began to attend a new school, I was very apprehensive. What would I do, for instance, if I had no friends to sit with during lunch? The schools I attended were in different environments. I might move to a school in a very poor neighborhood, and then to a school in a fairly affluent area. But if I look back on it now, because I changed schools so many times, I became quite sociable—I gained the capacity to get along with all kinds of people from all kinds of backgrounds. I think the confidence I have now that enables me to talk to anyone comes from that experience, and it has served me well.

IKEDA: It's important to live in such a way as to take everything as a positive influence, moving us in a valuable direction. To this end, it's crucial to develop a lofty state of life.

FEASEL: I attended schools in the same neighborhood from the time I was in kindergarten through high school. It was in a suburb of San Diego, close to the Mexican border. Most of the people there were of modest means. The majority of people were Hispanic, but many other races and ethnicities were represented. So, from the time I was a child, I had to learn to live with people whose backgrounds were different from my own.

IKEDA: It is a unique attribute of American society to cherish and respect diversity. This is also a core principle of Buddhism. A Japanese parent who once lived in Los Angeles and whose children attended school there shared the following: "I was worried that my daughter would be picked on because she is Japanese. But instead, the American students reached out to her, engaged her in conversation and soon became her friends. However, when we returned to Japan, she was treated differently because she had lived in another country, and it was hard for her to feel accepted."

It's a shame that Japan's narrow "small-island mentality" is even seen in children.

BUCK: When I was in middle school, I attended a school in a pretty rough neighborhood. Influenced by my surroundings, I turned into kind of a rebel. Concerned about me, and in spite of our financial difficulties, my mother moved to a nicer neighborhood so I could

change schools. Before the transfer, my grades were bad and I couldn't get serious about anything. But through the influence of my new friends, I became a better student.

Later, I attended the same high school in Los Angeles my mother had gone to. But by that time I had become aware of the opposite sex and again found it hard to concentrate on my studies. So my mother, with the help of an old family friend, arranged for me to attend a private boarding school for girls. That school was very strict and though I wanted to be distracted by boys, there were no boys to be distracted by. Instead, I met and was cared for by some excellent teachers and friends, and I devoted myself to my studies and to sports. Eventually, I even became the student body president.

As a result of all this, I was accepted at and attended UCLA. During this crucial time of my youth, I believe it was my mother who protected me from straying too far off course and enabled me to spend my time in a good supportive environment. It was a great strain on her financially and emotionally to make this possible for me. That was her way—no matter how troubled she was, she always tried her best for me.

A Mother Sheds Tears of Victory

IKEDA: She was a mother who thought seriously about her child's welfare. Nothing could have pleased her more than your growth. If it is for the sake of her child, a mother can summon power and ability no one ever thought she had. It is the same on either side of the Pacific.

Ed, would you share with us some memories of your years at Yale? In Japan it is said that American universities are very difficult to graduate from.

FEASEL: American universities are said to provide the highest quality educational content of any in the world. Students have to study very hard. Yale is a university that gathers some of the brightest students from around the world, and so the competition is intense. It's only by continuing to study with all your might that you can keep up. If you don't, you will soon be forced to drop out. I have never had to study as hard as I did while at Yale. But while struggling I would think of my mother and father who enabled me to attend college. Exhorting myself to try harder, I would throw my whole life into my studies. Eventually, graduation day came. I naturally asked both of my parents to attend, wanting somehow to repay even in some small way the debt of gratitude I owed them, especially my mother.

BUCK: Your parents must have been extremely proud to attend your graduation from Yale.

FEASEL: Yes, but my mother was not really sure where or what kind of school Yale was. When I was accepted and decided to attend, my mother must have thought, "Why does he want to take the trouble to go to school so far away?"

IKEDA: Your parents continued to live in San Diego the whole time you were at Yale?

FEASEL: Yes. Yale is near New York, so we were on opposite coasts. I went to meet them at the airport when they came. The plane they were supposed to be on arrived, but I waited for quite some time and still they did not emerge from the gate. "They missed the flight,"

I thought, extremely worried. About forty-five minutes after their plane's arrival, an airport employee I had asked to look for them found them standing inside the gate.

IKEDA: I can imagine what a struggle it must have been for your parents to make such a trip. Everyone gets disoriented flying for the first time. By the way, how was the graduation ceremony?

FEASEL: Graduation at Yale is a grand affair that lasts three days. Because it is one of the leading universities in the United States, many prominent figures from around the world attend. My parents were simply astounded by the atmosphere.

On Day One of the graduation ceremonies, there were cultural and artistic presentations including a symphony orchestra. On Day Two, the several thousand graduating students gathered for a university-wide ceremony, which included speeches by noted guests.

On the third day, ceremonies were held separately for each college within the university. My parents seemed overwhelmed by a world that they had never before encountered. During the ceremonies, special graduation awards were announced. In front of the entire assembly and in the presence of my parents, who had come to share this moment with me, my name was called to receive an award for outstanding scholarship. I was extremely proud to show my parents such clear proof of my victory.

After the ceremony, I went over to my parents and saw that my father was crying. My father had always been the sentimental type, so I wasn't that surprised. But my mother standing next to him was crying, too. It was the first time I had ever seen her cry. She had never shown a tear even under the most bitter and trying circumstances.

BUCK: What a beautiful image. These were your mother's tears of victory.

Universities Exist To Serve the People

FEASEL: My mother said to me: "I'm very happy! I'm really proud of you!" With these words, the three of us hugged. Surprised at seeing my mother's tears for the first time, I thought: "I've had a dream to become successful so that I could repay my mother for all of her hard work and struggles on my behalf. But that is not what is going to make her happy. It's not simply a matter of my becoming rich or buying her a beautiful house. It's a question of whether I can keep growing and developing myself, and whether I can use the ability I acquire to contribute to people's happiness. This is the way for me to repay the debt of gratitude I owe to my mother, who has devoted her life to helping people and who struggled to raise me."

At that moment I made up my mind. Rather than pursue a career in business, I would follow a course of humanistic education. Also, I would work to become someone who could play an important role in our Buddhist movement of peace, culture and education.

IKEDA: Your decision is praiseworthy. Your story is deeply moving.

To what end do we live our lives? A life devoted to serving others is a life of the highest honor. Just what is the purpose of a university? Universities exist for the people.

It is my conviction that a university exists to serve the good of those ordinary people who could not attend college, though they may have wished to. Who could understand

more deeply the hearts and minds of ordinary people who toil and are tossed about by society's harsh challenges than someone like Ed Feasel? For this reason, as the founder of Soka University, I am truly happy to see you on the faculty of Soka University of America.

Both of you, Matilda and Ed, have endured many painstaking struggles. But as leaders of the SGI-USA, you are giving the light of hope to a great many people. All of your hardships, all of your struggles, must have been tests for you to challenge and overcome so that you could become genuine leaders of the twenty-first century. What has supported both of you along the way has been the deep and expansive love of your mothers. We speak of education, but education is rooted in love. From here on, let us together shine the light of education into the world of the twenty-first century. Let us set aflame, for the sake of humanity, the love our mothers have passed on to us!

To Be Continued