

CONVERSATIONS ON EDUCATION WITH FRIENDS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

For the future of our children (2)

Nurturing a Dream,

Living a Vow

In the United States, truancy is becoming more of a problem, as is the occurrence of violence and crime among increasingly younger children. On both sides of the Pacific, a single word of encouragement from a parent or teacher can instill hope and point out the correct direction for a child to follow. In this second of three installments, SGI President Ikeda discusses these and other topics with SGI-USA Women's Division Leader Matilda Buck and Ed Feasel, senior advisor to the SGI-USA youth division and dean of students at the soon-to-be-open Aliso Viejo campus of Soka University of America.

Unaware of Her Daughter's Problem

IKEDA: Today in Japan, many parents worry over the growing problem of truancy. The number of students who stop attending school is increasing. How is it in America?

BUCK: It's a problem. Actually, it's a problem that has affected my own family—my own daughter missed school for a time.

In the beginning, I was completely unaware of it. She never gave me any indication; she never said, "I don't want to go to school." She would get up each morning and leave the house with all her schoolbooks, as if on the way to class. One day, I got a call from the school, "Your daughter has been missing her classes for several weeks," the person said. "What?" I thought. "There must be some mistake!" My mind went blank and I missed most of what the person on the phone was saying. I hung up and tried to imagine where she could possibly be. But I couldn't think clearly. My first reaction was simply denial. I had no choice but to wait for my daughter to come home.

When she did return, she might have sensed that there was something amiss because she quickly headed straight for her room. When I stopped her and tried to talk to her, she just said, "It's my business. Leave me alone!" and shut herself in her room.

FEASEL: It must have been quite a shock.

BUCK: Yes it was. My daughter was already a senior in high school, and the next thing I was concerned with was sending her to college. But because of her attendance problem, the principal told us, "Under the present circumstances, it will be impossible for your daughter to graduate." How could it be? I thought.

I felt hopeless. My husband and I talked to our daughter about it, but she came back with a dismissive answer, "I don't care about school any more. It doesn't matter if I graduate."

I felt my heart and stomach sink. This couldn't be happening to us. After all the effort I've put into raising her! I was miserable and blameful. First I blamed her, then I blamed myself. I must have failed her somehow.

At the end of my rope, I went to talk to a senior in faith. "Your daughter is suffering, not just misbehaving" he told me. "But you don't understand how she feels. You are simply concerned with how it makes you look. Until you truly feel her suffering, you will have a hard time changing this." Ordinarily, this should have been enough to get me to open my eyes. But instead I reacted a bit negatively, thinking, "That person doesn't know a thing about me! He doesn't know how hard I've tried."

But when I finally pulled myself together, I became determined to chant daimoku seriously about this situation. From that point on, I challenged myself to chant for five hours each day until the problem was solved.

IKEDA: Why did your daughter stop going to school?

BUCK: I spoke with her teachers and found out that although she was receiving passing grades, she wasn't really engaged in her classes. She wasn't being bullied or suffering in her relationships with friends. Apparently, some close friends who were ditching class had influenced her, and she just started tagging along. But I was sure that this was only part of the reason; I wondered what the real underlying cause could have been.

One day as I was chanting daimoku, I had a realization. What I realized was that it had been quite some time since I had seen my daughter smile. Perhaps she had lost hope for her life. I reflected deeply on myself and my tendency to be so caught up in the matters at hand that I failed to notice this until now. I was so focused on the externals that I did not perceive what was in my daughter's heart.

From that point on, my prayer changed. Rather than chanting simply to solve the problem of my daughter missing school, I began to pray with the determination, "I want my daughter to be happy." A short time later, my daughter began attending school again.

Nothing Is So Noble as a Mother's Love

FEASEL: Something must have changed in the way your daughter was feeling.

BUCK: Yes that is what I was thinking at the time, too. She was going to school and she was communicating. I was relieved. As a result, I may have slackened a bit in my determination. One day I decided to finish chanting daimoku earlier than usual and lay down for a while on the couch to relax a little. As soon as I did, the phone rang.

It was the high school attendance officer. "Your daughter has been absent from school for the last ten days." No! It couldn't be! I thought everything was getting better. She left every morning with her books. I began to feel very angry. I had been chanting hours and hours for her—how could this be? I felt like Shariputra who had his eye stepped on by a beggar after presenting it to him as alms. I felt such betrayal and disappointment. I really felt like giving up. But unlike Shariputra in the story, who abandoned his bodhisattva practice, I wasn't giving up my faith. I believed that this was a test for me. I thought, "If I give up now, what will become of my daughter?"

So I planted myself back in front of the Gohonzon and began to chant. As I did so, I started to get a clear sense of my daughter's suffering—how she did want to succeed, but lacked confidence and would sabotage any gains she made. That realization made it easier to chant for her again.

IKEDA: There is nothing so noble and so profound as a mother's love for her child. Avoiding school might begin with just a vague impulse on the child's part. But as each day goes by, it becomes even harder to return to school, to the point where, in some cases, he or she can't go back at all. The child suffers as much as the parents, and wants to do something about it. But at that age, young people will tend to resist if directly approached on such matters. They cannot straightforwardly express their feelings, either. It is a mother's love that can grasp her child's suffering and offer great comfort. Even if it takes time, a mother's caring will definitely reach her child. Isn't the most important thing to remain willing to trust our children?

BUCK: Yes, I really think that's true. Even after that, my daughter continued to miss school. But I did not give up. One day after I got home from a meeting, I heard my daughter sobbing in her room. She was saying in a tearful voice to someone on the phone, "What will I do if I can't graduate?" She seemed to be talking to a friend from school. Though she had defiantly told my husband and me that she didn't care whether she graduated from high school, this was not how she really felt. Later when I said to her, "So you're suffering over this too . . ." she didn't answer. Nevertheless, I felt that for the first time in quite a while, our hearts connected. It was from this point on that my daughter really started to change. She decided on her own to return to school. Though she had been told she couldn't graduate, she took it upon herself to negotiate with her teachers. She was told that if she could submit all of her class assignments, she would graduate.

As I watched her trying so hard to catch up, my heart went out to her. I matched her effort with my daimoku.

Her efforts bore fruit, and my daughter was able to graduate. It was the happiest moment imaginable for all of us. I believe the daimoku I chanted for her during that time is still affecting our lives today. She has developed herself into a happy and contributing person. She is the best mother I know; she is totally in tune with the hearts of her children.

The Child Possesses the Power to Progress: Education Brings Forth that Power

IKEDA: She had someone who deeply cared about her, and this must have been what opened your daughter's heart. That awareness became a great support, giving her the courage to take a fresh step forward. First we must try to discern what the child is suffering from. Then, it is crucial to point out the correct direction he or she should take in life. Suppose a plane bound for Europe takes off instead in the direction of Japan. Unless it adjusts its course, it will never arrive in Europe, but instead will wander aimlessly among the clouds. This is unhappiness. Children have the power to take off into the skies of life. We might say that the love of the parents and education serve to bring forth their power and provide it with a direction. Many young people get to the point where they don't know where to apply their energies, and suffer as a result. If that condition worsens, it can even drive them to violence and crime.

FEASEL: I agree. It has been reported that absentee rates for students in some cities in the United States between the first and twelfth grades are nearly ten percent. In some places it is much higher.

Because this number is so large, movements have emerged in some areas that seek to hold parents strictly responsible for their children's truancy. While each state in the U.S. has laws providing for compulsory education, some states have laws allowing imprisonment for parents of children who fail to attend school.

IKEDA: Imprisonment? That's quite harsh, isn't it!

FEASEL: Yes, it is. Of course, most of these laws were established as long as 100 years ago. Their original intent was to guard against parents keeping their children from attending school and instead making them work during the day. Today, such harsh sanctions are rarely if ever imposed. However, as the problem of truancy becomes worse, stricter punishment for parents is being considered in some areas in extreme cases.

BUCK: But I think that such a "solution" would cause even more suffering for both the child and the parents.

“Victory Over Violence”—SGI-USA Youth Aim for a Non-Violent Society

FEASEL: In the United States, in addition to truancy, there is growing concern over the problem of violent crimes occurring among increasingly younger children. It seems that the atmosphere of violence already prevalent in our society is expanding even among its youngest members.

We of the SGI-USA youth division have been exerting ourselves to counter this trend. Since last year we have been promoting a dialogue aimed at creating a non-violent society. As part of our campaign called “Victory Over Violence” we have initiated a petition drive, produced videos and hosted seminars exploring the history of non-violence as exemplified and practiced by such leaders of humanity as Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Last year, we also staged a grand youth culture festival focusing in Los Angeles on the theme of non-violence. The individuals who attended the festival gave very high praise for the efforts that the youth made. For instance, Norma Foster, President of the Los Angeles Interfaith Council for the United Nations said after the performance: “I have met many of the leaders that were part of the era these young people relived for us today. Their performance really drove home the shame of that era. But the way they dealt with it helped me deal with it too. I go away with far more hope and promise for the future. There were seven hundred hearts up there, but they all stood out as individuals. That’s what was so wonderful. You knew they were going to walk away as seven hundred emissaries who are going to change the world.”

BUCK: The women’s division members of SGI-USA also strongly support these activities that promote non-violence. Recently in the news was the case of a six-year-old boy who shot and killed a girl in his first-grade class. I think this news was heard not only throughout America, but also across the globe. The fact that gun violence has spread to children this young is distressing not only to those with young children, but to many people. The high school my daughter attended was equipped with a metal detector at the entrance to prevent students from bringing guns and knives on campus. More and more schools have full-time school police officers assigned to the campus. Many are surrounded by high fences to protect students from being victimized by criminal elements in the neighborhood. For this reason, people have found the youth division’s “Victory Over Violence” campaign very encouraging and have high hopes for its success.

IKEDA: The incident in which the six-year-old boy shot his classmate was reported widely in Japan as well. In Japan, too, knife attacks among teenagers have been an ongoing problem.

School is a place for nurturing the hopes and dreams of young people. When children are instead injured or killed there, it is an immense tragedy. Parents must face the serious problem of how to protect their children from violence. To go a step further, I think it is important that voices be raised calling for a change in society as a whole. In this sense, I believe that the “Victory Over Violence” movement that the SGI-USA youth are promoting has a very important mission. To rescue children from the quagmire of violence and create an environment in which they can feel genuinely secure and at ease is the responsibility of adults.

FEASEL: When we began our campaign, it was the members of the junior high and high school divisions who showed the most interest. They are the ones who are really taking the initiative in this campaign. They have suffered from the effects of violence much more than

I had imagined. They are troubled by the violence they often encounter at school.

This is why they have been so greatly encouraged by the “Victory Over Violence” campaign. I, too, experienced violence when I was in junior high school, so I can understand how they feel.

BUCK: Really? Could you tell us what happened?

FEASEL: Well, the junior high school I attended was pretty rough. The atmosphere there affected me, too, and I got into some trouble. I remember one time, when I was walking down a hallway with four of my friends, all of a sudden we were surrounded by about twenty guys. They locked the doors to the hallway and began attacking us. One of them even started hitting us with his belt. Fortunately, we were able to escape without serious injury. That was when I began to think seriously about how to change my lifestyle.

Fortunately, there was one individual who would become a great influence on my life and help me change things. That person was Mrs. Ochoa, my guidance counselor. Many schools in the United States employ guidance counselors—individuals with training in child psychology with whom students can discuss their problems and goals and seek advice. One day, Mrs. Ochoa asked me if I would like to attend the local high school’s graduation awards ceremony. In our school district, it was common to allow a select group of junior high school students to sit in on the high school awards ceremony.

IKEDA: The necessity of school counselors is now becoming recognized in Japan, and many schools are moving toward implementing such a system. The practice of sending middle school students to observe high school graduations is a very interesting one. In Japan, middle school students sometimes take field trips to their local high school, but they rarely attend the graduation. At the Soka schools, however, students are as often as possible given opportunities to attend events at Soka University. I think that such an experience must be very helpful in instilling in the students a dream for their future.

FEASEL: I agree. Mrs. Ochoa must have been thinking deeply about how she could introduce me to a new environment—a “New World” that would have been hard for me to imagine amid my current circumstances. I was not initially included in the group that was to attend the awards ceremony. However, Mrs. Ochoa got the idea to arrange for me to participate.

At the ceremony, there was a presentation of various awards and scholarships to students of outstanding academic achievement. Among them was a young man whose name was called again and again. Thinking that he must be an excellent student, I watched him closely as he walked proudly to the stage. The emcee then introduced him, declaring, “And he will be attending Harvard University!” At first, I couldn’t believe my ears. Most of the kids in our neighborhood were from poor families, and no one I knew seemed to be academically gifted. But here was a young man from our town going to a top school like Harvard! I was actually more shocked than impressed.

BUCK: This must have been an important experience for you.

FEASEL: It was. Mrs. Ochoa smiled happily as she watched me out of the corner of her eye. As we walked back from the ceremony, I kept thinking of that student as he stood on the stage. I looked up to thank Mrs. Ochoa, but just as I was about to do so, she slowed her pace, turned toward me and said, “Next, it’s going to be your turn.” “Work hard, and you too can definitely do it!”

IKEDA: A single word at the right moment can be so important. That one word can change a person's life. This must be the experience that led you to attend Yale University, which you discussed with us last time.

FEASEL: Yes it was. I was very moved to hear these totally unexpected words from my counselor. I did not really believe them at the time, but it made me very happy to learn of the high expectations she had for me. It was starting to get dark, but Mrs. Ochoa's gentle smile on that occasion will remain etched in my memory forever. I made up my mind to challenge myself to work hard as she had encouraged me to do. Hope began to emerge within me. Mrs. Ochoa had given me a tremendous dream. It was the first time I truly felt hopeful about my future. My lifestyle changed abruptly from that point on and I began to study hard.

Responding to His Counselor's Encouragement: His Dream Realized at his own Graduation

IKEDA: What a wonderful counselor! How gratifying to have someone during your youth, when it is so easy to be distracted, to show you the right way ahead! One sincere word can unlock tremendous power in a person's life. On another dimension, our SGI has been working to develop, step by step, a network of encouragement. What is important is neither money nor power; it is simply our earnest intent and actions to save another person from suffering. Buddhism teaches this most noble way of life. Only honesty and sincerity can truly move people's hearts. When we speak to others and act with such sincerity, something will definitely remain with them—something that will definitely blossom and bear fruit with time.

FEASEL: I really don't know how my life would have gone if I hadn't met Mrs. Ochoa. She gave me lots of emotional support during my high school years as well. There was a deep bond that existed between us. When I entered high school, she was transferred to the same school. As I mentioned previously, during my high school years my family faced one period of hardship after another, which included financial difficulty and my father's illness. I don't know how many times I thought, "There's just no use." On such occasions, I would always head for Mrs. Ochoa's office. There were times when, feeling depressed and hopeless, I would be in tears as I talked with her. She would listen intently to every word and then tell me with a smile, "You have a very important dream, don't you? You mustn't give up!"

"Yes! I do have a dream!" I would remind myself, and suddenly things would become very clear. I regained the determination I had made on that day after attending the awards ceremony, which I had lost sight of.

BUCK: What an encouraging story! Mrs. Ochoa was always there to support you whenever you felt like giving up.

FEASEL: If I look back on it now, it is clear that the SGI is playing the same kind of role in society. It has not merely been giving people a dream—it has also been giving them the courage to never be beaten even by the severest of circumstances and to never let go of their dreams. Mrs. Ochoa always watched over me, and I never gave up. I simply continued to study as hard as I could to realize my dream and to respond in some way to the great hopes and expectations she had placed in me.

Finally I found myself attending my own high school graduation awards ceremony. Just

as I was vaguely thinking that this is what it must have been like for those graduating students three years earlier, I heard my name called over the loudspeaker. They were announcing the names of scholarship recipients. I was called on many times to receive commendations and certificates on the stage. It gave me an indescribable sense of satisfaction. I hadn't been informed that my name would be announced, so I was surprised; but no one was as surprised as my mother. Until that time, my mother had never been able to attend school functions such as open houses or parent-teacher conferences. However, a few days before the ceremony, she received notice from the school to "please be sure to leave that day open. There is something we want to tell you at that time . . ." My mother worried that I was in some kind of trouble.

BUCK: I know exactly how she must have felt. Whether things are going well or poorly, it is always a mother's job to worry.

FEASEL: That's really true. In the meantime, my mother adjusted her work schedule to attend. Hearing her son's name called again and again, and seeing me standing up on the stage—whether it was from happiness, surprise or relief, she seemed a little bit flustered. Afterward I learned that it was Mrs. Ochoa again who had intervened to make sure that my mother could be there.

Up on the stage, I too was overwhelmed with emotion; and just then, the emcee pointed in my direction and called out to the audience: ". . . and he will be attending Yale!"

I recalled the scene at the awards ceremony I had attended three years before. My turn had really come, just as Mrs. Ochoa had promised! She had lit a flame of hope in my heart and helped me nurture my dream. And now, at this moment, that dream was being realized.

Victory for Educators is the Growth and Success of Their Students

IKEDA: A person with a dream is strong. Those with a dream will never stray. A dream is like a lamp that never loses its brightness, even amid the darkest of nights. It always enables us to look forward, to set our minds on what lies ahead.

The American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson records the following anecdote about Sir Isaac Newton, the "father of modern physics" who made such important discoveries as the principle of universal gravitation: Someone once asked Newton, "Why were you able to discover all that you did?" to which Newton plainly replied, "By always intending my mind."²

It is human nature that, once we set our minds on something, we can tap energies and abilities we never thought we had; we can open the door to a whole new world of possibilities. To tap this great potential, we need to be directed along a correct and reliable course. Providing such direction is the first step in the process of education. Ms. Ochoa's encouragement created the Ed Feasel we see today. Such an accomplishment in itself is the crowning victory for an educator. To grasp the hearts and minds of one's students and offer encouragement along with a concrete goal and direction will inspire those students' power and ability beyond calculation.

BUCK: That is the spirit of Soka Education that first Soka Gakkai President Makiguchi taught, isn't it?

IKEDA: Exactly. Mr. Makiguchi had held the post of principal at a number of elementary schools and for a period was assigned to a school in one of Tokyo's poorest districts. For

those children whose families were too poor to let them attend school regularly, Mr. Makiguchi quietly arranged to provide them with meals and other support. Also, he would make the time to visit with the family of each child, one by one, and work tenaciously to uplift that child's spirits.

Even amid the worst of circumstances, he would put forth his best effort for the children, determined that they become happy. President Toda frequently shared with me details of Mr. Makiguchi's efforts in those days. Following Mr. Makiguchi's lead, Mr. Toda even had himself transferred to one of the worst schools so that he could be with Mr. Makiguchi and assist him in his work. The struggles of these two bore fruit, and an elementary school that had been doing very poorly achieved a rebirth before everyone's eyes. Mr. Makiguchi thus honed and perfected the principles of Soka Education by putting them into practice himself. He certainly had the ability and opportunity to establish himself as a scholar in his field. However, he rather chose not to remove himself from the elementary-school environment, which he considered to be the front lines of education. This speaks of how great an educator he really was. Mr. Makiguchi writes, "We must not allow the miseries of this age, in which ten million children agonize amid a cruel and heartless society, to pass to the next generation" (*Soka kyoikugaku taikei*) These words express the true soul of an educator.

FEASEL: It is of great concern that while the United States boasts the highest standard for university education in the world, its primary through high school education is plagued with many unresolved problems that need to be addressed. For this reason, Mr. Makiguchi's struggle to enrich elementary education and create a pioneering example of Soka Education is extremely significant.

The Founding of Soka University: The Fulfillment of a Pledge Between Mentor and Disciple

IKEDA: I have heard that the English version of Mr. Makiguchi's book on value-creating education, *Education for Creative Living*, is attracting much interest. I can only think that this is because people sense in Mr. Makiguchi's view, that everything must begin with children's happiness, a solution to many of the problems facing today's schools. How can we instill a dream and ignite a flame of hope in the hearts of children, who are the treasures of the future? A dream is not just something that makes clear what lies immediately ahead. It becomes nourishment for living, a guidepost by which to live one's entire life. The other day [Feb. 28, 2000], I posed for a commemorative photo with graduating students from Kansai Soka Schools. There I had a discussion with the students, and they really asked lots of questions. Among them, one girl asked very seriously, "What is your dream, President Ikeda?"

"My dream," I answered her, "is to realize every one of President Toda's dreams." And, "Beyond that, my greatest dream is for each of you to become excellent scholars and excellent leaders, in every respect." The driving force in my life has been the dreams of my mentor, and my pledge as his disciple. For ten years, I studied under and received excellent training from President Toda. That experience determined the course of my entire life. Every occasion of guidance and instruction I received from him is indelibly etched in my life. I have decided that it is my mission in life to limitlessly spread and expand upon my mentor's every word, and to bring each to fruition. There is nothing more for me than this.

BUCK: And you have done exactly that.

IKEDA: Even Soka University has its origins in a single statement President Toda once shared with me: “Daisaku, I want to build Soka University. I hope it can be completed while I am still alive and well, but that is probably impossible. When the time comes, I’m going to leave it to you, Daisaku. Why not make it the greatest university in the world!”

President Toda’s ideas were also the ideas of his mentor, Mr. Makiguchi, with whom he shared a relation of oneness as a disciple. Mr. Makiguchi often would say to him, “I’m counting on you to build a Soka University!” That is why I have continued to work to fulfill that dream, and why, sensing how President Toda would have wanted it, I founded Soka University in 1971, the year marking the 100th anniversary of President Makiguchi’s birth. The opening ceremony was held that year on April 2, the anniversary of President Toda’s passing. On New Year’s Day of this year, which marks the centennial of President Toda’s birth, I headed directly for the new administration building of Soka University where, thinking deeply about the future, I made a vow to redouble my efforts for the sake of education. Next year, the Aliso Viejo campus of Soka University of America will be opened. I hope to ensure that from this campus there will emerge a stream of individuals who are willing and able to wage a persistent struggle for world peace and for the people’s happiness.

To that end, I will continue to be active. I will do this so that I may realize the vision of President Makiguchi and fulfill the vow I made to President Toda.

To be continued

1. The story of Shariputra and the Brahman begging for his eye appears in Nagarjuna's *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* (Jpn Daichido ron). According to the story, in a previous existence in the distant past, Shariputra had already striven in bodhisattva practice over many lifetimes (for 60 aeons). Then, when Shariputra was practicing almsgiving, he met a Brahman who begged for his eye. In response, Shariputra gouged out his eye and offered it to the Brahman as alms. Instead of thanking Shariputra, however, the Brahman sniffed at the eye and complained about its foul smell. He then threw the eye to the ground and stomped on it. When Shariputra saw this he was deeply discouraged and discontinued his bodhisattva practice.

2. “Conduct of Life: Power,” in *The Complete Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 2 vols. (New York: Wm. H. Wise & Co., 1929) vol. I, p. 542.