

**CONVERSATIONS ON EDUCATION WITH FRIENDS FROM AROUND THE WORLD
FOR THE FUTURE OF OUR CHILDREN (3)
SHOWING CHILDREN LOVE AND TRUST**

A Father's Love

IKEDA: The other day I had the opportunity to meet with Mr. Zhou Haiyi. He is the son of the great Chinese literary icon, Chou Shu-jen, known by his pen name, Lu Xun. Mr. Zhou is currently advisor to the Lu Xun Museum in Beijing. In a lecture during his visit to Japan, Mr. Zhou shared a recollection of his father in response to a question from the audience. Lu Xun would take pains each day to create an atmosphere in which his son could study comfortably. While an elementary school student, Mr. Zhou passed a test with the highest score of any student in his school. He then showed his father the grade he had received. He refrained from giving his son a typical parental response such as admonishing him to remain the best in his class. He worried about the burden it would put on his son if he pressured him to maintain a top grade. His was the compassionate love of a father who simply wanted his child to be at ease with his studies.

BUCK: Lu Xun showed his humanity this way—he was concerned with the whole child, not just results.

FEASEL: More than simply wanting his child to excel in his studies, he wished him to develop into an outstanding human being.

This is why Lu Xun is regarded as the “soul of the Chinese people.” But this kind of warm connection between parent and child is being lost in today’s world. For instance, the tradition of gathering happily as a family around the dinner table is changing. It’s increasingly the case that children eat meals alone.

IKEDA: This is becoming a problem in Japan, as well; there is even a new word in Japanese to describe it, meaning “solitary dining.” It conveys the image of a child quietly eating alone in front of the television set, rather than while enjoying pleasant conversation with the family.

BUCK: In the U.S., many families eat their meals while watching TV. I think the number is particularly high among those of Ed’s generation. Some can’t sit calmly and enjoy a meal unless the television is on. For working mothers especially, meal times provide a precious opportunity for communication, a valuable time to spend with their children. But I know that for busy mothers who hold down full-time jobs meals can often be on the run. Even if they are too busy to cook, they can still talk with their children in the car on the way to the drive-thru or maybe prepare a simple meal together.

IKEDA: Yes, I agree. No matter how busy we are, it is important to be resourceful and think of ways to spend time with our children.

BUCK: Speaking of family communication, our family spends time together each summer at the beach in La Jolla, a place where I spent my childhood.

It’s a well-known resort town, about fifteen minutes by freeway north of San Diego. It is also a special place for me because it is where I first met you, President Ikeda. I have formed many important memories there.

IKEDA: People with a place they call home—a place to which they can always return—

are happy. In this sense, we can say that the family functions as a spiritual home for human beings.

Embracing Buddhism to Build a Happy Family

BUCK: My reason for joining the SGI was to create a happy family. Originally, I had no interest in Buddhism at all. From time to time, the owner of a clothing store where I shopped, who was an SGI member, would talk to me about the Daishonin's Buddhism, but I didn't listen very seriously. One day, however, I took a friend of mine who was interested in Buddhism to one of this person's SGI discussion meetings. My husband came along, too. The image I had of Buddhism had been of some sort of Oriental mysticism, but this SGI meeting was totally different. I wasn't sure if this really was Buddhism because it didn't seem esoteric and mysterious. What impressed me more than anything was how bright and lively the members looked. Everyone talked of the benefit and happiness they had gained through their Buddhist practice. Someone even claimed to have found a lost cat through chanting! As the meeting drew to a close, the emcee suddenly asked, "Is there anyone who would like to join?" I immediately raised my hand and said, "I would!"

FEASEL: Your friend and your husband must have been surprised!

BUCK: They were. More than anything, the bright and happy demeanor of the members had touched my heart. If I do this practice, I thought, then maybe I can change my life. At the time, something was missing from my life—I felt empty. I had been raised in an environment that was anything but happy, and my first marriage had failed. With two children from that marriage, I met and married my present husband, Carl. I was now financially and physically secure, but something was still lacking. This sudden security, rather than bringing me peace, seemed to have the opposite effect. I began to feel more anxious and more critical. At the deepest level of my life I wasn't able to accept the love and security my husband brought me. I wanted to be happy, have happy children, but in the conflicted environment I was creating, it seemed impossible. For this reason, I found the way of life and philosophy of the SGI members I encountered very attractive. They told me I could change myself and create a happy family. Today I deeply realize how correct my decision to join that day was.

IKEDA: So that's how you joined! We never know what kind of connection may lead a person to embrace this Buddhism. Your serious search for family happiness may well have led you to encounter those members. We can never gain true happiness by only pursuing our own well-being.

FEASEL: I think the traditional image of the family is changing, as are modes of family living. For various reasons, single-parent households are increasing. Divorce has become more commonplace in the U.S., and birth out of wedlock is by no means rare. As a result, the percentage of single mothers is surprisingly large.

BUCK: The number of families in which both parents work is growing as well. In many families, both parents must work to support the family. In America, we have many mothers who are raising children alone and working full time.

All in all, there is less time available for parents to spend with their children. When parents come home from work, they have little energy left. Sometimes even a small amount of "quality time" with their kids is hard to find.

Feeling burdened by guilt about this, some may tend to try to compensate by spoiling

their children. On the other extreme, they feel pressured by their circumstances and may become unnecessarily strict.

IKEDA: I see. I think the same tendency is developing in Japan. The family does not exist apart from society. It is natural that when society changes, family life also changes.

Some may long for the past, trying to turn old family values into ideals for the present. Because society is changing, the pursuit of past ideals won't get us far. I don't think that the importance of the family will ever change. Rather, in a turbulent society, the family's function as a grounding point—as an anchor in stormy seas—becomes increasingly important.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. — Acting for People's Happiness

BUCK: Television is one thing that was never part of family life in the past, but plays a big role now. For better or for worse, I think that the impact of the media today, especially the electronic media, is stronger than ever. I believe it influences family life. Watching television causes us to tune out our real environment, isolating the self. This isolated self identifies with images on the screen. For example, women portrayed on television are most often young, thin and beautiful. They seem free to pursue their personal wants and desires. But these aspects are overemphasized. Continually exposed to such images, an average girl or woman might think, "I want to be like her," and even feel herself inadequate. Many people long for the kind of romantic, exciting, or opulent lifestyles they see on TV or in the movies.

IKEDA: I think it's fine to watch television from time to time; there is much we can learn from doing so. However, much of what it depicts is an illusion. Influenced by such false images, one cannot live wisely. The media tends to focus on people with wealth and fame. True human worth, is not found in material wealth or popularity. Everyone wants to live a healthy and prosperous life, but we should not forget that the highest form of value is a richness of heart. How have we lived our lives? How have we contributed to the world—what kind of role have we played? Though they may remain unknown and may never live in a big, expensive home, those who sincerely and honestly expend their energies for the well being of others will accrue genuine treasures of the heart. Such people will enjoy true happiness. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the American warrior of human rights, spoke about how he wished to be remembered in the event of his death. He did not ask that his winning of the Nobel Prize or hundreds of other awards be mentioned at his funeral. He simply said, "I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to give his life serving others . . . I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity . . . If I can help somebody as I pass along, if I can cheer somebody with a word of song, if I can show somebody he's traveling wrong, then my living will not be in vain."

A tape-recording of these words was played at his funeral, deeply moving those who were hearing them for a second time.

How much have we loved others? To what extent have we helped people? That is the only value that remains at the end of our lives. Dr. King's words teach us this. "When you light the way for others, the way ahead will be lit for you"—this is what Buddhism teaches. We must not pursue happiness only for ourselves. We must take action for others' happiness. That is the way of life of a Bodhisattva, which Buddhism expounds. All our efforts for others go to create happiness for ourselves. It is happiness for self and others. That is also what real education teaches, and it is why those who dedicate their lives to education

invariably glow with wisdom and nobility. I have always advocated that special recognition be given those teachers who have fostered many outstanding young people.

Students Must Not Be Prejudged

FEASEL: When you visited the United States in 1990, President Ikeda, an educator's group was formed in SGI-USA. Today many able educators who belong to that group are contributing substantially to their field and to their students' development. One such individual is Maura Malarcher, an SGI-USA member in New York. New York City can be a difficult and even dangerous place to teach. Maura has had the encouraging experience of achieving great success with two of her most troubled students. Both of these young men had been labeled and treated as problem students. The parents, were at their wits end wondering what could be done, but Maura did not lose hope. She talked with her students repeatedly and kept trying to encourage them. At first, they didn't respond; their hearts remained closed. But gradually, they began to trust her. Then, one of the two students had to stay at home due to an irregular heartbeat. Maura gave him her home phone number and began to communicate with him so he could continue his studies at home. In the United States it is very unusual for a teacher to give a student her home phone number. As a result, the young man called Maura frequently and when he returned to school he continued to work hard and do better, even staying after school to get help.

BUCK: She really cared about the boy's future.

FEASEL: Yes, and the other student, as a result of Maura's encouragement and his own efforts, continued to improve in his school work to the point where he received an "A" on one of his tests. He asked Maura to sign his test paper so his parents would believe it. Through this experience, Maura learned the value of never giving up on anyone.

She said, "We must not judge students based only upon their outward behavior or on test scores. We must not view students with prejudice. Also, when students get into trouble, we must never just leave them to themselves. A teacher must always be close to her students, and be ready to warmly approach and encourage them."

IKEDA: She is a wonderful teacher. A school is far more than just a building. A school is its teachers who altruistically devote themselves for the good of their students. Only human beings can develop human beings. This was the theme of a speech I gave at Columbia University's Teachers College in 1996.

FEASEL: Maura is a graduate of Teachers College. She attended your speech that day, and was delighted to see her former professors listening attentively to your words. She was moved by your definition of a global citizen, which you shared that day:

"I have many friends who could be considered quite ordinary citizens, but who possess an inner nobility; who have never traveled beyond their native place, yet who are genuinely concerned for the peace and prosperity of the world," you said. You pointed out that such people, who care about the well-being of even those they have never seen or met, are genuine global citizens. Maura has been striving to raise true global citizens in the classes she teaches.

IKEDA: Excellent! It's gratifying to know that. Maura's struggles will definitely bear fruit in the 21st century. Education can never be accomplished through technique alone. It always comes about through an interaction of the heart—the spirit of one person sparking the spirit of another.

Educators Can Awaken Students' Great Potential

FEASEL: The current national leader of the SGI-USA high-school division, Steve Mortan, is a high school teacher. Now 26 years old, he teaches at a school in one of the most difficult areas of Southern California. It is a place where poverty and violence are the norm. It is also where Steve grew up. Actually, he had an opportunity to work at a school in a relatively affluent and safe area, not that far from where he lives. But he had no desire to work anywhere else. Expressing his deep conviction about this, he said, "Somehow, I wanted to repay the debt of gratitude I owe to the community that raised me. Because I grew up in the same environment, I felt I could relate to the students there, that I could understand how they feel."

IKEDA: The most important quality for an educator is the ability to understand the students' hearts. This is a point that both Mr. Makiguchi and Mr. Toda emphasized and they themselves put into practice as educators.

FEASEL: As a teacher, Steve always tries to bear in mind something that he learned from you, President Ikeda. It was years ago, when you visited Los Angeles in 1990. Steve, who was then a high-school student of sixteen, attended a youth division meeting where you spoke. He remembered that everyone seemed tense and nervous as they awaited your arrival. But when you entered the room, you addressed everyone in a warm and engaging manner, dispelling the rigid atmosphere. Expressing your great expectations for the young people present, you told them again and again, "You are the leaders of the future!" Steve cannot forget what he felt at that time. Whenever he interacts with students, he puts formality aside and tries to convey his heartfelt hopes for their future, just as you did for him on that day.

BUCK: Students who encounter teachers like Maura and Steve are truly fortunate. I, too had a teacher who stands out in my memory. That was Mr. Boswell, who taught me in the fifth and sixth grades. As I've mentioned before, my father died soon after I was born. We were never well off financially, and though my mother loved me dearly, she became an alcoholic. There were times when I felt very lonely. Mr. Boswell saw this and found ways to encourage me. My mother would still be at work when my classes were over. Understanding my situation, Mr. Boswell often stayed after school and helped me improve in sports, as a father might have done. Sometimes he would buy some snacks and share them with me. In the U.S. it is rare for teachers to visit students at home, but Mr. Boswell, concerned about our living situation, came by to see how we were doing. He always listened well to what I had to say, and sometimes told me about his life, too. More than a teacher, he was a good friend. "You are not insignificant. You never have to be alone! You are someone very important, precious and special!" This was Mr. Boswell's message to me. His care and guidance during that critical time in my childhood made a great difference in my life.

IKEDA: He could not have done this without deep concern and love for his student. Because this was his heart, he could awaken your self-respect. Children who are overwhelmed with suffering tend to lack self-confidence; they lose sight of the magnificent treasure that exists within them. If left to themselves, they may become mean-spirited and self-destructive, eventually engaging in behavior that is harmful to themselves and others. Because they do not understand the preciousness of their own lives, they cannot respect

the value of others' lives. The greatness of our lives; the unfathomable potential we each possess—it is the essential mission of education to make children aware of this, to awaken them to it.

A Single Mother's Hope for Her Children's Growth and Success

BUCK: I wish I had the opportunity to meet Mr. Boswell again and thank him for all he did for me. If he is still alive today, he'll be in his eighties. In fact, I've asked a friend who is familiar with the Internet to try to locate him.

IKEDA: It would be great if you could meet him again. Matilda, do you use the Internet yourself?

BUCK: No, I'm not good at all with computers. Among the national leaders of the SGI-USA, I may be the only one who doesn't have a computer and can't use e-mail. I'm afraid I'm better at cooking or working in my garden than using a computer. As a matter of fact, I've just used our garden for a fund-raising event. I live in Brentwood (a suburb of the city of Los Angeles between Santa Monica and Beverly Hills), and in our community there is a program by which the public can view private gardens. Tickets are sold to those who wish to tour the gardens of about five homes and the proceeds from these ticket sales are donated to charity. Our family garden was selected for the program, and last year more than 400 people came to see it. My husband Carl's vegetable garden was the highlight of the tour. It's something I never could have imagined when I was a child and it makes me happy to think that my garden, which I love so much, is serving some purpose. In this case, the proceeds went to the Los Angeles Children's Hospital.

IKEDA: That's wonderful! The culture of charity in America seems to be more deeply rooted than in Japan.

FEASEL: I'd like to share the experience of another SGI-USA member, Veronica Ehrenreich. She has overcome many obstacles as a single mother and succeeded in raising her children to be outstanding individuals. Veronica has three boys, Ian, who is 20; Ryan, 19; and Kevan, 11. She had the two older boys with her first husband. It was when she was pregnant with her third son, Kevan, that the father left her alone to care for the baby and the other two boys from her previous marriage.

Struggling financially, Veronica moved from Los Angeles to Sacramento, California, where the cost of living was lower. There she lived with her children in a trailer home. Veronica wanted her sons to grow into capable individuals who could contribute substantially to kosen-rufu. Her dream was to send her sons to the prestigious Stanford University. However, the public schools in the area where they lived were not the greatest academically. She was determined to get her sons the best education, whatever sacrifice she would have to make. She found out that the private school with the lowest tuition in the area was a Catholic high school, and she enrolled her two eldest sons, Ian and Ryan, there. The brothers had some difficulties initially. They were sometimes teased because they were poorer than other students and because they were Buddhists. It was around that time, in 1993, that you, President Ikeda, came to San Francisco. This was the occasion on which the SGI-USA high school and junior high school divisions were formed. I was also appointed as the first high school division leader at that time. Ian and Ryan both attended that meeting.

Nourished by a Mother's Confidence

IKEDA: That time represented a historic new beginning for the SGI-USA.

FEASEL: Yes, it did. Veronica participated in the meeting, too, in a supporting role. She was actually one of those on hand at the entrance to the San Francisco Culture Center to greet you when you arrived. She then entered the meeting place right behind you. Veronica shared with me her memory of that day: “When President Ikeda arrived at the entrance, a number of children, cute boys and girls between the ages of four and twelve, were there to greet him. President Ikeda then bent down so that he could speak to them at their eye level. Looking directly into each child’s eyes, he politely greeted them saying, “All of you, thank you! I will never forget you!” I was very moved to see the interaction between him and the children. President Ikeda then entered the auditorium where many junior high school and high school students were waiting. The first thing he said to them was, ‘Your father’s here!’”

This was exactly how I felt, too. I was very happy to be there with my two sons.”

BUCK: To have a teacher or mentor with whom you can share your worries when you are faced with life’s bitterness, and who can offer you direction and encouragement when you are confused—someone who helps you live for an ideal—this is truly to have a “father of the heart.”

FEASEL: I agree. From that day on, the two brothers confidently participated in SGI-USA high-school division activities. And in school, their classmates and teachers began to really show respect for the family’s efforts. Eventually Ian, the eldest son, was accepted at Stanford. There were still many problems, including financial difficulties and Ian sustaining a serious leg injury. However, they beautifully overcame each challenge, and finally Ryan, too, was accepted at Stanford.

BUCK: It’s hard enough to send one child to a school like Stanford, but to have two go is really astounding!

FEASEL: I asked Ian and Ryan when it was that they first decided to attend Stanford. This was their answer: “Ever since we can remember, it has been our mother’s dream that we attend Stanford. But more than a dream, it was her confidence that we would go. Our circumstances were very hard, but because our mother had such confidence, we became confident too. Neither of us is attending Stanford because we are particularly smart. What we’ve learned is that when there is someone who really believes in you, it’s easy for you to believe in yourself.”

IKEDA: That’s right! Believing in a child is what enables that child to believe in his or her own potential. The love and trust of people in the child’s environment help bring forth the child’s inherent capability. In this connection, I once offered six points of advice to SGI-USA concerning what we should teach our children in the home.

BUCK: Yes, I think there were six points:

1. Faith is a life-long matter. For school-aged children, faith is expressed in their studies, which are most important.
2. Find ways to get together and talk with your children.
3. Parents should never argue in front of their children.
4. Both parents should not scold children at the same time.

5. Be fair. Don't compare one child to others.
6. Make sure your children can understand and respect your beliefs, your way of life and your dedication. We must make a conscious effort to verbalize and communicate our thoughts and feelings to them.

These points are easy for me to understand because they are clear and practical. I think the parents in SGI-USA are trying to put them into practice.

Bright Hope for the Future

FEASEL: Veronica also made the following point: "It is very hard for a single woman to support and raise a family. There are a great many problems. It's easy to lose sight of your goals. If that happens, it's not a simple thing to put yourself back on track. I have been able to persevere until now because of this faith, because of President Ikeda's guidance and encouragement, and because of my fellow members—our warm SGI family."

BUCK: I really understand how she feels. Since I became a member of the SGI, there have been many people who have shared my worries and struggles, people who have encouraged me and whom I have encouraged. What makes me the happiest is when I hear a fellow member's experience of challenging and winning over a problem or overcoming suffering. America today is facing a variety of problems. When we look at the news, we often come away with a very bleak feeling. But at SGI activities, I meet people who are experiencing some of the problems that are portrayed on the news, yet they are winning. Through their efforts in faith, they are making a difference. This gives me hope for the future of humanity. Our members are not only overcoming their own problems, they are also reaching out to help others.

FEASEL: Because of his experience with his injury, Ian is majoring in medicine at Stanford. He hopes one day to work to relieve people's suffering as a medical doctor.

Ryan, as a freshman, has decided to study computer science. Both are active members of the SGI-USA student division. In 1993, when the junior high and high school divisions were formed, you said the following, President Ikeda: "I believe that the SGI-USA junior high and high school divisions will give birth to many humanistic leaders who will shine like glistening stars. I strongly believe this!" Ian and Ryan are each an irreplaceable shimmering star in a future galaxy of capable people.

IKEDA: This makes me very happy. Please convey my best regards to that family. The efforts of the two boys to attend the college of their choice are truly admirable. Even more praiseworthy is their having learned the spirit to work for the good of society and for people's happiness. This, even more than attending a top-rate university, is a victory for education. Because of this, their mother has won. It is the growth of young people like them that gives light to a world now veiled in darkness. This is what makes a mother smile; it is her happiness and her victory in life!

As Matilda just mentioned, the darkness of today's world is deep. However, this is where America's challenge lies as a model for the entire world. The key to winning this challenge is education. To the extent that we give children our love and our trust, they will shine with brilliance and the world will be a brighter place. For the sake of SGI-USA's and America's future, I am praying that you, Ed, Matilda, and all of the members of SGI-USA will play an even more active role in this regard. □