

## AN ESSAY BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA EVERYTHING BEGINS WITH DIALOGUE

**Passing the State Guest House in Tokyo, SGI President Ikeda remembers the many dignitaries he has met there. ‘Everything begins with dialogue,’ he writes. ‘But no matter how friendly a dialogue may be, it must not stop there....’**

The golden shades of autumn have spread across the trees of Tokyo. Driving from the Soka Gakkai Headquarters in Shinanomachi toward Yo-tsuya, the State Guest House comes into view behind its ornate gates.

Last year, I am told, marked the 90th anniversary of the construction of this imposing edifice in Moto-Akasaka. The land once belonged to the Tokugawa family of Kii (present-day Wakayama Prefecture) but after the Meiji Restoration was donated to the imperial house and called the Akasaka Detached Palace.

In June 1909, the present building was completed and served as the residence of the crown prince, who became Emperor Taisho (after the death of Emperor Meiji in 1912). It was the first Western-style palace built in Japan, executed in French neo-Baroque style, after such models as Versailles and the Louvre.

It was designed and constructed totally by Japanese. The architects of the Meiji period could at last proudly proclaim that they had reached the level of the West, and the palace drew lavish praise. It was so majestic that many Japanese exclaimed that it was like a castle or palace out of a fairy tale. Emperor Meiji apparently had only one remark: “It is too luxurious.”

After World War II, the building was used for a time as the National Diet Library and for other functions. Later, in the spring of 1974, it was renovated and reborn as Japan’s State Guest House.



The State Guest House is less than five minutes by car from the Soka Gakkai Headquarters. On days when I’m based at the Headquarters and have appointments nearby, I regularly drive past the Guest House. Having paid visits there on several occasions, at the invitation of state guests from all around the world, I can’t help thinking how mystic it is that it is so close. I am struck again by the realization that my mentor, Josei Toda, decided on this location for our Headquarters after the deepest consideration.



The first dignitary I greeted at the State Guest House was Madame Deng Yingchao, widow of the late Premier Zhou Enlai of the People’s Republic of China. That was in April 1979. When I had met her in China the year before, she said to me, “I want to visit Japan next year, when the cherry trees are in full bloom, on behalf of my husband, who so loved cherry blossoms.” And she was true to her word.

The fact is, I had once said to Premier Zhou, “Please come to visit Japan again, when the cherry trees are in bloom.” And he had replied, “I would like that very much, but it is

impossible.” He knew that he didn’t have much longer to live. This took place 25 years ago, at our first and last meeting, in December 1974.

When the reopening of diplomatic relations between China and Japan had been decided, a Japanese leader suggested that Premier Zhou should be the first guest to be welcomed at the new State Guest House, after renovations had been completed to the Akasaka Detached Palace. But Premier Zhou had again replied, “I probably won’t be able to go.” Realizing there was little likelihood of him crossing the bridge that he had helped build between China and Japan, he worked tirelessly to consolidate its foundations until his death in January 1976.

Madame Deng carried the spirit of Premier Zhou with her when she came to Japan. In his stead, she visited these shores in the season of the cherry blossoms.

Unfortunately, that year the cherry trees had bloomed early in Tokyo, and the blossoms had been scattered by a spring storm. Wanting her to at least enjoy their fragrance, I had some branches of the later-blooming double-petaled cherry blossoms sent to the State Guest House. The blossoms were arranged in the Morning Sun Room, where our meeting took place, and Madame Deng was very happy.

As always, she wore a plain tunic suit. Smiling warmly, like a dear mother, she said to me: “We are family. If time had permitted, I would like to have met you not in a grand room such as this but in your home.” This was a short time before I stepped down from the position of Soka Gakkai president. When I told her about this at the end of our friendly talk, she immediately replied: “You are too young. You mustn’t quit.” Her determined voice still rings in my ears.



After that, I received many more invitations to the State Guest House to welcome foreign dignitaries. These have included Chinese Premier Hua Guofeng (1980), U.N. Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar (1982), Brazilian President João Baptista de Oliveira Figueiredo (1984), Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi (1985), Argentine President Raul Alfonsín (1986), Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado (1986), President of the Council of State of Poland Wojciech Jaruzelski (1987), Venezuelan President Jaime Lusinchi (1988), Chinese Premier Li Peng (1989), Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev (1991) and General Secretary of the Communist Party of China Jiang Zemin (1992). I met Jiang Zemin again at the State Guest House last year, when he came to Japan as China’s head of state.

Others whom I have met at the State Guest House include Czechoslovak President Vaclav Havel (1992), His Majesty the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Azlan Shah of Malaysia (1993), Polish President Lech Walesa (1994) and South African President Nelson Mandela (1995).



These are all important guests from around the world. Of course, it is my wish as a Japanese for them to return to their countries with good memories of their visit. It would be sad if the only fruits of their visits were political negotiations and economic discussions.

That is why I speak to them earnestly and sincerely about opening new roads of

friendship, culture and peace, at the same time offering them a boisterous cheer of welcome from the people, from our 10 million members in Japan.

The people are like the ocean. Exchange among nations only on the political and economic levels—exchange that is not based on human interaction on the level of the people—will not endure. Only when there is deep exchange between peoples, like the deep-water currents of the ocean, will the voyage of friendship among nations be stable and sure.

There is an old Chinese saying: “When you communicate with a person, communicate with his or her heart. When you want to water a tree, water its roots.”



My mentor, Josei Toda, never judged people by their social status or position. He was concerned with what a person had achieved, what ideals a person had fought for and dedicated his or her lives to. This is what he looked at, and this is what he based his judgments on. He often shared his opinions of the great men and women of history with me, and his insights were always keen and profound.

There was one world leader of whom Mr. Toda said: “I want to meet him. I know that we’d understand each other right away.” That was the great Indian philosopher-statesman Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India.

Nehru made an official visit to Japan in October 1957, just six months before Mr. Toda died. While in Tokyo, he stayed at the old Asakanomiya Mansion (the residence of Prince Asaka) in Shirokanedai, Minato Ward—today the Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum. Before the current State Guest House was completed, this beautiful Western-style building was used for a time as a state guest house.

It was also close to Mr. Toda’s home. I am sure that Mr. Toda, knowing that Prime Minister Nehru was only a short distance away at the State Guest House, carried on a spirited dialogue with the Indian leader in his heart.



In November 1985, I met Nehru’s grandson, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, at the present State Guest House in Moto-Akasaka. I was recovering from an illness at the time. I had been released from the hospital, but my strength still had not fully returned. When I received the invitation to meet the Indian premier, however, I knew I could not turn it down.

By meeting with the grandson of the man my mentor had wanted to meet, I would in a way be fulfilling my mentor’s wish. Also, as an ordinary Japanese citizen, I wanted to welcome Prime Minister Gandhi and express my gratitude to the leader of the nation that was the birthplace of Buddhism.

We met in the Rising Sun Room, which is so named for a painting on the ceiling of the room that shows a mythical goddess riding a chariot against the backdrop of the rising sun. When I entered the room, the prime minister greeted me genially. It was just a year since he had taken over the mantle of leadership from his mother, Indira Gandhi, at the young age of 40. He seemed like a shining prince sent down from the heavens.

I recall fondly how we spoke of bringing peace to humanity through Shakyamuni’s spirit of compassion. Six years later, Rajiv Gandhi, who had devoted his whole being to India,

became a victim of terrorism. I never had another opportunity to meet him.

Still, I am glad that our meeting grew, like a small sapling grows into a mighty tree, into a warm relationship with his family and an ongoing exchange with India in general.



Nor will I ever forget President Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union, a man who changed history. In April 1991, I received a sudden message that he wanted to meet me at the State Guest House. We met in the East Room, which is above the east entrance to the palace. When he came into the room, I noticed how tired Mr. Gorbachev seemed.

He had a packed schedule, and after our meeting he was to rush off to his fifth meeting with the Japanese prime minister.

“Welcome to Japan, Land of the Cherry Blossoms!” I said, and he replied: “At last we meet. I’ve been wanting to see you again for a long time.” The famous Gorby smile shone on his face.

This was the first time a Russian head of state had ever visited Japan, including during the days of the old Russian Empire.

During a meeting I had with Mr. Gorbachev in Moscow the previous year, he announced his planned spring visit to Japan. He kept his word, though there had been many obstacles to overcome.

While our time together was brief, as a friend, I wanted to give President Gorbachev a big welcome. I presented him with the poem that I had promised to write him (“Song of the Noble Spirit”), and I also presented him with these words: “For those who walk the great, untrodden paths of pioneers, there will always be tortuous mountains.” “It is always darkest before dawn.”

As we spoke, the color came back into his face. His eyes began to sparkle with life and energy once more. So intent was I on encouraging him that I apparently reached out both hands to hold him by the arms. Both of us were so engrossed in our exchange that we parted without a handshake. His happy words of thanks rang in my ears long afterward.

The Soviet Union broke up, and Mr. Gorbachev stepped down as president. But our friendship survives. Just the other day, Mr. Gorbachev attended a celebration commemorating the 10th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. I was relieved to see that he had bravely risen above his grief at the death of his wife, Raisa, and become active again.



My second meeting with President Nelson Mandela of South Africa also took place at the State Guest House. It was in July 1995. His smile, bright and clear as a summer’s day, was that of one who had fought and triumphed in the struggle for justice. It was our first meeting since we had met at the offices of the *Seikyo Shimbun* in 1990, a short time after he had been released from his ordeal of 10,000 days in prison.

In the intervening years, apartheid had been abolished and South Africa had been reborn, with the aim of becoming a “rainbow land,” where people of all races could live together in harmony. President Mandela was a symbol of that rebirth.

“I have been looking forward to this meeting,” he said. “I clearly remember our meeting five years ago.”

When I asked what his plans were for a successor, he smiled and noted that I had asked him that at our first meeting. Our second meeting unfolded as a continuation of the first.

Now I know what he was smiling about. Mr. Mandela had a dazzling array of talented leaders that he was cultivating, starting with Thabo Mbeki, who succeeded him and was inaugurated as South Africa's new president in June last year.



Everything begins with dialogue. But no matter how friendly a dialogue may be, it must not stop there. Unless you keep up the contact, it remains an isolated incident instead of a first step toward a lasting connection.

I am a person of action. I have made it my mission to extend that first step toward friendship into a solid road, a great road that links people to people.

This, too, I believe, is an expression of gratitude toward Japan's guests. If there is a road, we can all use it with confidence and assurance. If there is a road, we can connect our hearts to those of people around the world and extend our ties of friendship far into the future.

Let us blaze a trail of friendship and trust! Let us build a rainbow bridge of peace and culture! A new century of hope is opening boldly before us.