

## DISCUSSIONS ON YOUTH YOU ARE THE HOPE OF THE WORLD!

**In the return of his ‘Discussions on Youth,’ SGI President Ikeda tells U.S. youth that ‘your victory will open the way to victory for the youth of the entire world. It will also illuminate the path along which humanity must advance in the 21st century. You are the hope of America and the world!’**

*A discussion among SGI President Ikeda, SGI-USA Youth Division Senior Advisor Ed Feasel and SGI-USA high school division leaders Steve Mortan and Nobuko Kobayashi.*

**SGI-USA Youth Division Senior Adviser Ed Feasel:** The high school division members in the United States have been very encouraged by the “Discussions on Youth” series. There are some specific issues that the youth of America want to ask you about.

**SGI-USA High School Division Leader Steve Mortan:** These are universal issues faced by youth in America today. We are talking about juvenile delinquency and violence, relationships, and drugs and alcohol.

**SGI-USA High School Division Leader Nobuko Kobayashi:** Our members are grappling with these issues themselves, or they are wondering how they can encourage others in similar situations.

**SGI President Ikeda:** The fact that you are seriously thinking about and trying to find a solution to your problems and those of your friends is in itself a sign that you are moving forward.

Of course, each person has his or her own unique set of problems. And given that I cannot meet with you in person and hear the details of your individual situations, it may be difficult for me to fully appreciate what you’re going through and offer satisfactory advice. In addition, what I say may not apply specifically to your particular problem. Nevertheless, in the hopes that it may be of some help in solving your problems, I will share my thoughts with you.

In any case, when it comes to getting specific advice on individual problems, please talk to someone close by whom you can trust.

I am ready to do anything for you, if it will lift your spirits even a bit. In fact, I wish I could fly to America right now and relieve you of your problems and encourage you. This is how I truly feel.

America is a land of freedom. But along with the sometimes dizzying freedom that can be found there, there is also a deep, impenetrable darkness. America is a microcosm of the world. This is where you live.

In a way, we could say that your problems represent the problems of all humanity. In that respect, your victory will open the way to victory for the youth of the entire world. It will also illuminate the path along which humanity must advance in the 21st century. You are the hope of America and the world!

## **Violence is an absolute evil.**

**Feasel:** Thank you, President Ikeda, for your high expectations.

Our members are struggling hard in situations that can be pretty tough. One problem in particular has been the upsurge in violence among youth. Because violence is rampant in their schools and communities, many young people have no hope and are living in fear.

**Mortan:** I was shocked by the shooting that took place last April at Columbine High School in Colorado, in which 13 students were shot and killed by two classmates. The two students who committed the crime were apparently motivated by a desire to get even with their fellow students who had made fun of them.

**Kobayashi:** A student at another school complained that vandalism and violence is rampant on campus, and that there had even been a bomb threat. She said she found going to school very depressing.

**Feasel:** Some members have said they have friends who are into violence, and that they are saddened when they see some of those people boasting about having beaten someone up.

**President Ikeda:** Nothing pains and saddens me more than young people, who possess such infinite potential for the future, physically harming and killing one another.

When I was around the age you who are in the high school division now, I lost my eldest brother in World War II. He was a kind, gentle person. Harboring grave personal doubts about the validity of Japan's invasion of China, he said: "Japan's behavior is abominable. What we are doing to the Chinese is unforgivable."

I will never forget how my mother took the news of his death. It was unbearably painful to look at her small back turned to us in silence, stifling her sobs. At that time, I vowed to fight to eliminate war and violence from the world.

Violence is an absolute evil. You lose if you resort to violence, regardless of the reason. You may think you have beaten your opponent, but ultimately you have lost. For when you harm another, you actually harm yourself. When it comes down to it, people who readily use violence and have no respect for others' lives have no respect for their own lives.

**Feasel:** The Columbine shooting ended with the two gunmen killing themselves. Following the tragic incident, President Clinton issued the following statement: "We must reach out to our children and teach them to express their anger and to resolve their conflicts with words, not weapons."

**President Ikeda:** I agree. The essence of violence is cowardice. It is because they are cowardly that people rely on brute force. They lack the courage to pursue dialogue.

Nonviolence is an expression of real courage. It takes more courage to pursue the path of nonviolence than it does to use violence. Mahatma Gandhi stated: "Nonviolence is not a cover for cowardice, but it is the supreme virtue of the brave.... Cowardice is wholly inconsistent with nonviolence.... Nonviolence presupposes ability to strike." A willingness to engage in dialogue is a sign of a thinking person.

Of course, responsibility for the prevalence of violence in our world today falls on society's leaders—on adults, including politicians, educators and people in the mass media. But nothing will change by simply criticizing them. It is up to you, the youth, to

stand up with the determination to create a different society from now on. The important thing is that you begin to take nonviolent action, starting in your immediate environment.

What do you do, for instance, when you see a friend heading down the wrong path? If you really care about that friend, then you should stand by him or her. I hope you will be a good friend who not only listens attentively to what your friends have to say, but who can come out and tell them when needed “What you’re doing is wrong,” or “Don’t throw away your life.” In the Gosho, Nichiren Daishonin cites the famous words: “If one befriends another person but lacks the mercy to correct him, one is in fact his enemy” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 287).

Of course, you’ll have to use wisdom in getting your message across. There’s no other way. And to find the wisdom, you have to chant earnestly for your friends, praying that they will change their ways and get back on track. When you chant daimoku, courage will rise within you, and wisdom will well forth, enabling you to think of different ways to encourage them.

More importantly, you will become a person who genuinely wishes for your friends’ happiness. If you are truly sincere, your friends will one day understand your intentions. Even if they resent what you say and stop being friends with you for a time, your deep concern for their well-being will stay with them. Your sincerity will bear fruit some day, and your friends will realize that what you were saying was true.

### **Violence stems from the animality that is inherent in life.**

**Kobayashi:** I was asked by a student about what she could do to stop her friend from stealing. She knows a number of students who steal.

**Mortan:** I also knew many students in high school who stole from others. They broke into people’s cars and houses. Some of them did it simply to prove they had the guts to. They always urged me to join in. When I told them what they were doing was wrong, they just laughed at me.

One day in high school, I finally gave in to the pressure from a friend of mine, and we broke into a video game arcade after all the employees went home, hoping that we could play some games for free. Unfortunately, an employee returned to the store just as we were about to leave. We quickly hid behind one of the machines, afraid that he would find us. We stayed there for about 15 minutes, but it felt like an hour. After he left, we made our escape.

When I got home, I chanted desperately that I wouldn’t be arrested. I also chanted for the courage never to do such a stupid thing again and for my friend to quit doing such things. I then talked to him about it and urged him not to break the law anymore. I think he may have felt bad about pressuring me into going that night and nearly getting me into trouble. After that, he stopped breaking into places and even helped me persuade others to stop doing the same.

I am now a high school teacher, and based upon that experience, I always tell my students that efforts to encourage others are never wasted.

**Feasel:** Friendship halves our suffering and doubles our joy.

I was once discouraged when I felt that I was being treated unfairly. At that time, a friend of mine encouraged me not to get sidetracked and reminded me of my goals. Supported by this friendship, I felt I could overcome my difficulty and achieve my dreams. Above all, my

greatest source of strength was my resolve to live the way of mentor and disciple.

**Mortan:** When I was going through a hard time once, a senior in faith sent me a postcard. All he wrote on it was “Keep fighting for your dream!” Those words filled me with fresh determination.

**President Ikeda:** Friendship is the most beautiful of human bonds. It is a relationship that transcends gain and loss. It is not something superficial, nor is it merely to feel sympathy or pity for another person. It is a relationship where, no matter what happens to the other person, you still care about him or her from the bottom of your heart. Friendship is a precious, irreplaceable human treasure.

I hope that you will forge such friendship with one person after another. It may seem like a small thing, but war and violence can be banished from the earth when a network of such friendship enfolds the world.

Of course, efforts to control violence by external measures such as the elimination of weapons of destruction, the establishment of more adequate laws, and the signing of treaties between nations are also important. But violence stems from the animality that is inherent in life. Even if we eliminate all weapons from the face of the earth, violence will never disappear unless we successfully control the animality within us. That is why transforming ourselves from within is so important.

Nuclear weapons embody the ultimate form of violence. Back in 1957, my mentor, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda, called on us youth to fight against the use of nuclear weapons. He not only insisted that all such weapons of mass destruction must be abolished but taught us about the need “to rip out the claws of the demonic nature inherent in human life.”

The Daishonin says: “Life is the foremost of all treasures. It is expounded that even the treasures of the entire major world system cannot equal the value of one’s body and life. Even the treasures that fill the major world system are no substitute for life” (WND, 1125). Our lives are more precious than all the treasures in the universe. The sanctity of life is the basis of Buddhist philosophy. It is vital that more and more people in the world embrace this fundamental belief.

**Feasel:** Based on the ideals promoted by the SGI, the SGI-USA youth division has been carrying out the Victory Over Violence campaign, calling on the youth of America to put the following three-point pledge into action: “I will cherish my own life; I will cherish everybody’s life; and I will give hope to everyone.”

As we each become able to cherish our own lives, we will naturally value the lives of others around us as well. Many young people are supporting this campaign. A number of schools have requested that SGI-USA youth give lectures on nonviolence to their students.

**President Ikeda:** That’s wonderful. In any event, the important thing is that you do something, that you start something. Nothing comes from nothing: Zero remains forever zero. But one step can lead to infinite growth: One can become two, three and even tens of thousands. There is a saying in the East that one is the mother of tens of thousands.

**Nothing is more despicable than violence against women.**

**Kobayashi:** We also must bring an end to sexual violence against women, which inflicts

immeasurable pain and suffering on its victims.

**President Ikeda:** Nothing is more despicable than violence against women. It is absolutely unforgivable. I want all men to remember this.

Unfortunately, there is a general trend in society today that encourages sexual promiscuity and violence. Such a trend also exists in Japan. But the thing is not to fall victim to it. I hope men will be gentlemen at all times. They are a disgrace, if they behave otherwise. It's also important that women exercise wisdom and caution, taking utmost care to protect themselves.

I can only imagine the incredible physical and mental agony that women who are victims of sexual assault must suffer. Though you may perhaps lose trust in others, or feel defiled and broken, please remember that no one can destroy who you are. No matter how badly you have been hurt, you remain as pure as fresh snow.

Buddhism teaches that the lotus flower grows in muddy water. What this means is that our supremely noble lives continue to shine even amid the harshest of life's realities, just like the pure white lotus flower that blooms unsoiled by the mud.

Having gone through what you have, there is pain and suffering in others' hearts that only you can notice. Having suffered what you have, there is true love and affection that only you can find. There are definitely people out there who need you. If you give up on yourself, it is only you who will lose.

Nothing, no matter what happens, can change your inherent worth. Please have courage. Please tell yourself that you are not going to let this ordeal defeat you.

Those who have suffered the most, those who have experienced the greatest sadness, have a right to become the happiest of all. What would the purpose of our Buddhist practice be, if the most miserable could not become happy? The tears you shed cleanse your life and make it shine.

To live with this conviction and keep moving ever forward is the spirit of Buddhism. It is also the essence of life.

You may not want to tell someone else about your pain and anguish, but I strongly recommend that you consult with someone — even just one person — whom you can trust and whose confidentiality you can rely on. You should not suffer all by yourself.

The Daishonin states, "Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo means to enter the palace of one's own life" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 787). The precious palace of life is nothing other than the life-state of the Buddha. Even an atomic bomb cannot destroy this inner palace. Please use life's painful experiences to open up this palace of happiness within your life.

**Mortan:** You're talking about the palace of Buddhahood, aren't you?

**President Ikeda:** Buddhahood is an inexhaustible wellspring of infinite potential. You can draw from it and draw from it, and it will never run dry.

Buddhism expounds the principle of 3,000 realms in a single life-moment. This principle holds that each life-moment is endowed with 3,000 different functions, which influence not only our own lives but those of all around us; they also influence society, our natural environment and the earth. They encompass the entire universe.

Therefore, once you have decided to do something, the 3,000 functions and your entire being start working to help you reach your goal. The entire universe also starts moving toward the fulfillment of your goal. If you pray, "This is how I want to be," and continue

to work toward your dream, you will gradually realize the future you have envisaged.

An ascending life, where you keep striving to grow and improve — this is what we mean by human revolution. Human revolution doesn't mean becoming something special or different from who you are; it simply means striving to improve yourself, no matter what challenges you face.

Your future self does not exist in some far-off place; it exists in the heart and mind of your present self. That is why you have to face and tackle the realities that confront you. Just wishing to be a certain way and not making any concrete efforts will get you nowhere.

**Feasel:** Faith enables us to turn our dreams into reality.

**President Ikeda:** What is true success in life? It is winning in the struggle against oneself. Those who hold fast to their beliefs, even though they may be persecuted or thrown in jail by unjust authorities, are victors in life — just as we see in the examples of first Soka Gakkai president Tsunesaburo Maki-guchi and his disciple, Josei Toda, who were imprisoned for their opposition to Japanese militarism during World War II.

People who are successful in society are not necessarily the ultimate winners in life. Money, fame and position — all these things do not last. Human worth cannot be judged by such superficial criteria.

There are many people who, though not rich or famous, are living their lives honestly and sincerely for the benefit of their families and society at large. Many of your mothers and fathers are such great ordinary people. I hope you will remember this.

**Unwanted pregnancy is a tragedy.**

**Kobayashi:** I think that women need the wisdom to protect themselves in intimate relationships with men.

A member once asked me: “What can I do to help my friends? One recently got pregnant, while another is having sex with her boyfriend without thinking about the fact that she could get pregnant or catch a sexually transmitted disease.” I grew up in an area where there are many teen pregnancies. When I was in junior high, I knew three girls who got pregnant. One of them was an excellent student with good grades. I wish these young women could have had access to proper sex education and someone they could talk to frankly about anything.

**Feasel:** When I was in high school, two of my classmates also got pregnant. One of them had an abortion. It was a traumatic experience for her, both physically and emotionally. The other girl gave birth to her baby, and she ended up quitting school. Young people tend to feel invincible, thinking that no matter what they do things will be all right. But no one can escape the law of cause and effect.

**Mortan:** When I was in junior high as well, one of my classmates had a baby. At first, everyone offered encouragement and fussed over her baby. But eventually they drifted away, because their parents feared that they might follow the same path. The girl who had the baby found herself all alone.

**Kobayashi:** This kind of thing happens all the time. A member told me that her boyfriend wants to have sex with her and asked me what she should do. I don't think love means doing

whatever your partner wants. Love can easily make us blind. So I'm worried that some teenagers will become carried away by the passion of the moment and wind up deeply hurt.

**President Ikeda:** Your stories make my heart ache. Unwanted pregnancy is a tragedy.

In your teens, you become curious about many things. And it's only natural for you to develop an interest in sex. But if you just go wherever your curiosity takes you, you could end up having lifelong regrets. Not only do you risk being hurt physically and emotionally, but you may lose many of the opportunities of youth.

Your teens are a time to build the foundation of your life. Your body and mind are still flexible, and you can readily absorb all sorts of things. It is a time when you can acquire all kinds of learning and skills. If you so desire, you can open the road to any future you wish.

It would be a terrible pity if you were to cast aside this freedom. You would also be doing a great disservice to your parents and to all who have come before you, who made it possible for you to have the opportunities that you do today.

The American civil rights heroine Rosa Parks makes the observation: "Our school system in America makes it very easy to get an education. Even if the buildings are old and the textbooks worn, the opportunity to learn is there. There were people who fought and died, even before the modern Civil Rights movement began, so that all of you would have had that opportunity. We must not let their struggle and sacrifice be in vain" (*Dear Mrs. Parks: A Dialogue with Today's Youth*, p. 52). I totally agree with her.

So, bearing this in mind, if you start going out with someone, I hope you will have a relationship that is appropriate for your age. I hope you will strive for a relationship in which you both encourage and support each other in reaching your future goals and help each other grow and develop.

**Kobayashi:** Helping each other grow and develop is important, isn't it?

**President Ikeda:** I ask men to always treat women with respect and women to possess the resolute strength not to be swept away.

If your boyfriend truly loves and cares for you, he will not force you to do anything that you don't want to. Quite often, by firmly saying no, you can discover whether or not your partner's feelings are genuine.

As for the question about the young woman who found herself with an unwanted pregnancy, I think it's important that her friend stand by her in true friendship. Offering sympathy is easy, but sympathy only goes so far. It may make her feel better for a while, but it won't help her get back on her feet and rebuild her life. Remember that your friend is probably hurting badly and feeling lost. So, while being careful to respect her wishes, please continue to warmly support and encourage her.

**Mortan:** I think one of the reasons that teenagers become sexually active is that there is a general thinking in society that premarital sex is a good way for couples to find out whether they are compatible before marriage, rather than discovering later that they aren't and ending up in divorce. Teens are also influenced by the pleasure-seeking culture in which they live and which is manufactured by self-serving adults.

Another factor is commercialism that operates on the belief that there is money to be made by exploiting people's baser urges. Even many adults are confused about where they should place the highest value.

## **Alcohol and drugs represent the greatest trap you can fall into.**

**Feasel:** The fact that alcohol and drugs are a serious problem in American schools is also a reflection of the problems in adult society. Many students think drinking alcohol is cool. Many start drinking because all their friends do and end up becoming alcoholics.

**Mortan:** When I was in high school, some of my classmates drank. One of them was always drinking orange juice spiked with vodka. He was a popular guy in class, always joking around and even making the teacher laugh. We all thought he was a really cool guy. Some time later, we stopped seeing him at school. After graduation, I found out that he had become an alcoholic.

**Feasel:** One of my high school friends nearly died in a car accident. He had taken a ride with a friend who had been drinking and driving.

On the subject of drugs, there is a misconception in society that marijuana is less harmful than other drugs, so people think that there's no problem in using it. Often people start smoking marijuana casually but later find themselves in over their heads.

**President Ikeda:** I can understand young people wanting to be adventurous and do something different from their everyday routine. But drinking and drug taking is definitely not a “cool” adventure, nor are they the epitome of freedom. Far from it, they in fact represent the greatest trap you can fall into and ultimately deprive you of freedom. Why? Because you become a prisoner of your impulses, emotions and desires. It is an animalistic way to live.

A Buddhist teaching urges, “Become the master of your mind rather than let your mind master you” (WND, 502). It encourages us to be the boss, exercising control over our minds, our thoughts and feelings—not to simply act on every impulse. People who blindly follow their desires may appear to enjoy freedom, but ultimately they lose their freedom altogether.

**Feasel:** When I was in college, I knew a guy who was a talented classical guitarist. When I first heard him play, I was deeply impressed. I remember thinking, “Wow, this guy is the same age as me and so talented!” At that time, I was struggling, trying to figure out which direction I should pursue in life. In contrast, he seemed to shine with brilliance and promise.

I later found out that he had a drug problem. By the time graduation rolled around, he was not the same person. He had lost his drive and energy, as well as his dreams for the future. I, on the other hand, was on my way to graduate school, filled with a sense of purpose and determination. How our situations had changed in only a few short years! I can clearly say that drugs were his downfall. From that experience, I resolved to help others avoid the same tragedy.

**President Ikeda:** When you're under the influence of alcohol or drugs, it's like you're dancing in a dream. But when you wake from the dream, harsh reality awaits you. In addition, no matter how cool people who drink or take drugs may look, any strength or ability they show is not their own; it is the work of the alcohol or the drug.

In my opinion, the truly cool are those who continue to make steady efforts to fulfill their dreams, even if their dedication goes unnoticed and unrecognized by others. A person

of self-control is a person who is free in the truest sense. It is therefore vital that you continue to challenge your goals.

**Feasel:** Yes, I feel that one of the reasons for the upsurge in violence and other serious juvenile problems is that young people don't have specific goals in life. Or, even if they do have goals, the goals tend to be extremely short-term and mainly focused on gratifying immediate desires. Many young people make no time to reflect on themselves or ask themselves questions such as "What do I want to do before I reach 20?" "What can I achieve?" or "How can I contribute to society?" Because they have no long-term goals, their actions are governed by their moment-to-moment emotions.

**If you have a big dream, it can prevent you from being swayed by trivial things.**

**President Ikeda:** That is simply living on impulse and animal instinct. One of the things that sets humans apart from other animals is that we cherish dreams and hopes for the future. If you have a big dream, it can prevent you from being swayed by trivial things. Even if you should experience a temporary setback along the way and think you can't go on, the important thing is to keep moving forward without giving up.

What is failure in life? Making mistakes does not signal failure, but giving up on yourself when you've made mistakes or are feeling discouraged does. Not getting back on your feet when you've suffered a setback or disappointment—that is failure. True victors are those who get up again each time that they fall down.

I believe you all know Orlando Cepeda, who was a major league baseball player. Last year, in what was a great personal victory, he was finally inducted to the Baseball Hall of Fame.

**Mortan:** Mr. Cepeda played professional baseball for 17 years, mainly with the San Francisco Giants. He gained fame as a great power hitter.

*In 1958, Mr. Cepeda was named the Rookie of the Year. In 1967, he was voted the Most Valuable Player of the National League. He hit a total of 379 home runs during his playing career and was an 11-time All-Star. He was one of the most feared hitters in major league baseball in the 1960s.*

Everybody thought he would easily make the Hall of Fame. But things took a turn for the worse after he retired from baseball and was arrested on drug-related charges.

**Kobayashi:** You can't gain entry into the Hall of Fame just by having a superb baseball record. You must also possess an exemplary record off the field. When Mr. Cepeda was arrested, he lost everything.

However, in 1982, when his life hit rock-bottom, he encountered the Daishonin's Buddhism. From that moment on, he began to challenge himself anew. He devoted himself not only to changing his own life but also to helping young people get back on the right track. His efforts and contributions to society were taken into consideration and, in what many have described as a miracle, he was finally inducted into the Hall of Fame last year.

**Feasel:** Mr. Cepeda sent a message to the youth division of Japan last year. He states:

“Because of President Ikeda’s guidance, I have always been able to live my life dedicated to the pursuit of a noble human goal. As I continued to break through my inner darkness, I learned to work not only for myself but also for others. Please devote yourself to SGI activities, study President Ikeda’s guidance and chant abundant daimoku. Your potential is limitless. Please don’t give up, no matter what. As long as you embrace this faith, you can make the impossible possible. I have been telling myself the same thing. I had nothing when I first began to practice the Daishonin’s Buddhism. Now I have gained so much. I have become a much broader person. I have won over myself. We are indeed most fortunate to have a mentor in life like President Ikeda.”

**President Ikeda:** When I met Mr. Cepeda, I was impressed by his strong faith and conviction.

Answers and solutions to the problems and sufferings of youth do not suddenly appear. But it’s vital that you do not run away from your problems, and that you have the courage to continue facing them. Even though you may not find an answer to your problems right away, please continue to tackle them squarely.

By doing so, you will find some day that you already have the answer. Therefore, the important thing is your sense of mission and the causes you decide to champion.

When I met with Dr. Allen Sessoms, president of Queens College, University of the City of New York, on Jan. 18, he commented that American youth used to have clear causes to fight for, “enemies” to fight against. They had targets to focus on, such as the Vietnam War or bad government or racial discrimination. But today, he noted, the causes which youth should direct their energies toward are getting harder to identify.

As a result, the youth lack positive outlets for expressing their passion. In reality, there are many causes—quite large ones in fact—that they should take up, such as environmental degradation, overpopulation and poverty. But it is not easy for youth to recognize them as causes without good knowledge of them, Dr. Sessoms said.

All sorts of injustice and evil still exist in the world. It is the mission of youth to fight against them. Strong are those who have resolved to create a better world than the one in which they now live. Such a sense of mission elevates your life.

In 2001, the Orange County campus of Soka University of America will open. Its mottoes are: “Be philosophers of a renaissance of life,” “Be world citizens in solidarity for peace,” and “Be the pioneers of global civilization.”

I hope that young people will gather from all over the United States and the world to study on this campus, and that from this campus they will set out into the world once more. I hope that many future Nobel laureates will appear from among their ranks. I also hope that those of you who may not be able to study at this school will somehow support those who do.

It is my hope that you, the youth of America, will appreciate the significance of having this university in your country—a university that will serve as a great center for peace in the new millennium.

Please remember that your fellow members in Japan and the entire world—and all the members of humanity—are waiting for you, the youth of America, who embrace the great philosophy of the Mystic Law.

Youth of the world! I call on you to take care of everything in the 21st century!