

## THIS BEAUTIFUL EARTH: PHOTO ESSAY BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA MAY AT TAPLOW COURT

May is our season. With the fresh scent of greenery has come a time of growth for all. Poplar, cherry, sycamore, pine and cedar—new May leaves burgeon in place of the old.

In April, Mother Nature is still languid, not fully awake from the slumber of life; her limbs are still sleepy, heavy and unwilling. But in May, Mother Nature grows active, full of life.

May is the month of flora—peonies and tulips in bloom, flame-red azaleas; wisterias rippling in the breeze; irises and poppies; carnations and trefoils; dead nettles and honeysuckles. Roses bloom red and yellow; dogwoods bear white blossoms. White lilies, purple irises, deutzias, paulownias and daisies hold a beauty contest among myriad flowers. Yet even more pleasant to behold is the rich verdure of new leaves.

May opens hearts and puts a spring into our steps. Honeybees, butterflies and birds dance in the pristine air. Pennants and streamers fly in the flower-scented breeze.

Hills and meadows change garb in May. Bamboo shoots, coltsfoot and barley are ready for harvest. Reed-pipe melodies echo through sunny hillsides fragrant with new tea leaves.

In May, heaven and earth stretch, ready to breathe life into something new. The month of May saw the births of Dante, Pushkin, Balzac, Emerson and Whitman. In Britain, Earl Russell, Mill and Pope gave their first cry in May.

May is a golden season in Britain, where winter is long. March and April are not yet fully spring. It is May when days grow long and warm. The English expression “March winds and April showers bring May flowers” well describes this transition.

The momentum of time is unstoppable. Winter, however severe, will eventually give way to spring. The May Day festival is a joyous celebration of this long-awaited season.

On May Day, young women once went into the forest before the dawn to collect morning dew from the leaves, which they would apply to their skin. According to legend, bathing in the May Day morning dew brought beauty and good fortune. Meanwhile the young men would fell a tall tree and set it up in the village square. Around this maypole young men and women danced. Young women would visit each house in the village and bring garlands or branches of hawthorn still wet with morning dew—as if to deliver to everyone the new life of spring.

May is a month of youth; it is a time for all creatures to sing an ode to life. I know the English autumn, as well as her winter; but England is most wonderful in May.

It was also May when I was invited to have a dialogue with Dr. Arnold Toynbee. In 1972 and 73, two years in a row, I visited him in the season of mayflowers. “If I were young, I would seek the essence of Buddhism in the Orient and put it into practice,” said the renowned historian. In May of 1975, Dr. Toynbee lay on his sickbed. So I entrusted his secretary with the newly published collection of our dialogues, *Choose Life*.

In May 1989, 14 years later, Taplow Court, a castle of culture, was opened. Located west of London, the Court stands atop a gently sloping hill overlooking the flow of the Thames.

As I strolled Taplow, my eyes fell on a handmade pine bench beside a bubbling spring, which is said to have been there for at least two millennia. People naturally settled around this secure hill where water was plentiful, as evidenced by a sixth-century burial mound on the grounds.

A 400-year-old legend has it that a youthful Queen Elizabeth I was imprisoned at

Taplow Court at a time of political turmoil. About 150 years ago, the building was remodeled into its current Gothic style. Close to Windsor Castle, the principal residence of the British Royal Family, Taplow Court has over the years hosted many members of British royalty as well as royalty from other nations.

British prime ministers such as Churchill and Chamberlain, and well-known literary figures such as Kipling, Wilde and Wells were fond of this place, and apparently used it as a sort of “intellectual country club.” The Court was also used as a dormitory for nurses of the Royal Canada Hospital and as a girls’ school. During World War II, Taplow Court became an evacuation facility for small children displaced by the air raids.

I am very happy that Taplow Court has now transformed itself into a garden of friendship that is loved by the community.

While I was there, Soka University alumni who live in Britain arrived for a joyful gathering. Wherever I go these days, I encounter my dear Soka graduates. All are advancing along the path of their missions with the same “spirit of May” they had in their youth.

The women of the Rose Chorus performed, celebrating the grand opening of Taplow Court. They sang of their pride that cannot be taken away. Their resounding voices were indeed triumphant: “No one can take away our belief!” “No one can take our love for our friends!”

It was May when President Toda became the second Soka Gakkai president. It was May also when I became the Gakkai’s young third president. Since then, many a May third has come and gone, some bright, some overshadowed by darkness. But our fellow members have overcome everything and won. They have triumphed alongside me.

The spirit of May is eternal hope; it is the heart of youth, a passion for progress. As long as the spirit of May burns in our hearts, a profusion of flowers will always unfold along the path before us.

May is a time to take a step forward on our eternal journey. The spirit of May lives in my heart every day, even amidst the solitude of autumn, the trying hardships of winter or the stormy nights of summer!

In my heart always spreads the dazzling blue sky of May 3.

In my heart always rises the bright sun of May, the sun of eternal beginning!

*Seventeenth in a series*