

THIS BEAUTIFUL EARTH: PHOTO ESSAY BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA A MOTHER AND HER CHILDREN IN NEPAL

My first visit, but for some reason it seemed familiar.

The landscape that spread out around me, Nepal's tranquil countryside, reminded me of Japan decades ago.

Cows grazing with their calves; children playing, covered with mud and dirt.

It was the autumn harvest. After threshing, rice straw could be seen piled everywhere in the yards of farmhouses.

Nov. 3, 1995. I had just received an honorary doctorate of letters from Nepal's Tribhuvan University. After the ceremony, we headed away from the city to a hilltop from which I could get a good picture of the Himalayas.

After an hour's drive beyond the bustle of the capital, Katmandu, a completely new scene emerged. The poetry of the landscape framed in the car window refreshed my travel-weary spirits. We finally arrived at our destination.

Just as our car pulled up, a young girl, her back laden with rice straw, walked before us. My wife and I alighted from the car and called out to her, "*Namaskar!*"—"Hello!"—pressing our palms together in Nepalese fashion.

The girl nodded and returned our greeting with a smile. She was wearing a pretty pink overcoat. Even the belt over her head, with which she supported the load of rice, looked like a hair band.

Soon, a little boy came running over, as quick as an arrow. "What's my sister up to," he seemed to be thinking. He held a small piece of carrot in his little hand, probably a between-meal snack.

A moment later, their mother appeared. She, too, carried a full load of straw on her back. Nepal was entering its dry season. Soon the grasses that livestock grazed on would wither and die, and so rice straw was cut as fodder.

As I smiled and pointed my camera toward them, the mother whispered something to the boy: "He's going to take our picture, so smile!" she seemed to be telling him.

I am particularly fond of this picture of a Nepalese mother and her children.

In that essential human gathering called the family, one finds the brightness of spirit, the warmth of heart to survive together, to strive together.

The girl was smiling as if to say, "I can't help it if I'm happy. I can carry as much straw as my mother can!"

"Mom, soon my brother will get big too and it will be much easier on you!" I could imagine their conversations.

The newly cut straw had a fresh scent. It was the smell of sunshine, fragrance that comes from breathing in abundant light. The children of Nepal are hardworking. By the time they turn 5, they are looking after the younger children and starting to do chores they can manage.

The children grow up watching their parents at work; as they lend a hand, they are taught about the principles of nature and society and learn the skills they need to live. Later, when they get older, if they ever feel like giving up, they need only recall the sweat gleaming on their mother's brow, and they surely will be inspired to stand up again.

If, when they get bigger, they lose their way along the path of life, they need only recall the load their mother carried, and they can start walking ahead once more with confidence.

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“When I think of her bearing that burden, I know I can endure any hardship!”

As long as they remember their mothers, people will not go astray. If they forget their mothers, however, the road of life becomes perilous.

My mentor, in the spring of his twentieth year, made up his mind to leave his boyhood home of Hokkaido. With snow still covering the ground, he set out for Tokyo.

At that time, his mother gave him an unlined topcoat called an *atsushi*. This gift carried her wish for her son, “As long as you have this, then no matter what suffering you may have, if you wear this and work hard, you can accomplish anything!”

It bore a dark-blue pattern on a white background. Each stitch of its intricate design embodied his mother’s profound effort and care. My mentor kept this coat with him until the end of his life.

Released from imprisonment in his struggle against militarism, my mentor returned home to find the *atsushi* his mother had given him untouched by the ravages of wartime bombardment. Overjoyed, he told his wife, “Because this *Atsushi* is unharmed, I will be fine. Everything is going to be all right. Don’t worry about making ends meet or about anything else!”

Those who keep their mothers in their hearts are strong; they are happy. Even for those without a mother, or for those who grew up without knowing a mother’s love, there is the wonderful Soka family.

In Nepal, the festival of Mata Tirtha Puja — Mother’s Day of Reverence — is held each year toward the end of April and the beginning of May. On this day, families show their appreciation and respect for their mothers by celebrating with an exquisite meal.

To celebrate this day, children break open piggy banks to buy their mothers presents, daughters who have married and left home return, and joyous laughter enfolds the entire household.

On Mata Tirtha Puja, daughters and sons bow down before their mothers in a gesture of veneration, and mothers reach out and touch their children’s foreheads to give them her blessing. A life of respect for one’s mother is a life that is happy and fulfilled.

“Mother, thank you!” These words blossom with happiness like a spring bouquet. They express our gratitude for having been born; our thanks for living here today; our gratitude for our mothers who, though we may have been poor, turned our homes into a palace of enjoyment.

Mother! Even on those wintry days, your smile had a mysterious power to warm us, like the summer sun!

In addition, if you saw a bully, you would always side with the one being picked on, leaning over and saying, “Don’t worry about it. Just do your best!”

Moreover, whenever you wrote to us, you would always say, “Take good care of your health!”

Now it is our turn to send our love and affection!

Mother, thank you!

When people’s appreciation for their mothers enfolds the planet, peace will come; a century of respect for life will arrive. I took my leave of this warm family, and stood atop a hill with a commanding view of the villages below where plumes of smoke floated skyward from dinnertime fires. From a distance, the Himalayas watched over these happy homes like a great protective father.

Eighteen in a series