

DIALOGUE OF HOPE THE HUMAN BRAIN—A COMPLEX NETWORK

‘The more you use your brain, the stronger and more complex the communication network of your brain becomes,’ says SGI President Ikeda. ‘As a result, your responses become faster and more readily adaptable to changing situations.’

The conclusion of a discussion on the meaning of the word smart among SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai junior high school division leaders Kenji Shiratsuchi (young men’s leader) and Keiko Maekawa (young women’s leader). Part 1 appeared in the Nov. 10, 2000, World Tribune.

SGI President Ikeda: Do not forget, there are plenty of people whom society regards as smart but who end up as criminals. How much more wonderful it is to become a genius at encouraging and inspiring others than to use your intelligence to harm society! How much more wise and smart that is!

I ask adults to have faith in young people and treat them with respect, with the conviction that “this youth is going to make a great contribution to the world. He or she is going to accomplish much more than we ever did.”

Each and every one of you, our junior high students, is the hope of the 21st century. You are precious treasures of the future.

Keiko Maekawa: I think people’s expectations of us have a powerful influence. We should never label anyone as incapable. We leaders of junior high and high school divisions must be careful about this, too.

Kenji Shiratsuchi: An interesting experiment was conducted in the United States. As students moved up from one grade to the next, the new teachers were intentionally given a reverse evaluation of each student’s scholastic performance. In other words, the new teachers were told that the good students were bad and the bad students were good.

The experiment found that the students came to match the teachers’ expectations. The previously bad students became good students, and the previously good students became bad students.

You have already accomplished the impossible many times.

Ikeda: Self-confidence encourages us to expand our minds, that is for certain. Once, my mentor, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda, explaining the difference between someone who is smart and someone who is not, took a piece of paper and drew a single line on it. “This is the difference — the difference between being above and below this thin line,” he said.

What is the difference between being above or below the line? There could be many answers, but I think essentially it is the spirit of challenge and the desire to learn. “I’ll try my best!” “I’ll study hard!” If you have that spirit, you can count yourself smart, no matter what others think.

Maekawa: Still, I think there are some students who will remain unconvinced of that.

Ikeda: The truth is, you have already all accomplished the impossible time and time again, though you have forgotten it. If you do not know what I am talking about, ask your parents. They remember.

When you were born, you could not do anything, and look at what you can do now! The first time you laughed, the first time you stood up on your own, the first time you talked, the first time you sat down at a desk to study, the first time you read a textbook aloud in a big voice. Each of these was impossible, until you made them possible.

For instance, the student we spoke of earlier had the courage to write a letter and succeeded in eloquently conveying his problem to others (see the Nov. 10, 2000, *World Tribune*). This is an incredible achievement.

Such efforts are the result of your developing your mental abilities.

The cerebral cortex is said to have a staggering 14 billion cells. Each of those cells is connected to the others by nerve fibers, or “cords,” creating a complex network.

But this network is not connected at birth. You connect the cells, you build the network, through your efforts. When you show a newborn infant a rattle, at first it stares at it. After a while, it looks at the rattle and smiles. Then it learns to reach for the rattle, then to hold it, then to play with it and rattle it. Finally, it grows bored with the rattle and will not even look at it anymore!

Maekawa: When we learn to do something new, it means our brains are growing.

Ikeda: That is right. The reason a child keeps on changing and evolving is because new cords in the brain reach out, linking cell to cell, like electric cords being plugged into power outlets.

The same is true of all of you. When you try hard to do something new, there is a moment when you say to yourself, “I did it!” Or when you study hard, and finally exclaim, “I got it!” These are the moments when your brain’s cords are connected, so to speak.

Each time this happens, the pathways connecting your brain cells get fatter and stronger. The more you use your brain, the stronger and more complex the communication network of your brain becomes. As a result, your responses become faster and more readily adaptable to changing situations.

Shiratsuchi: That allows your brain to accurately process more complex information.

Your brain loves to learn and study.

Ikeda: What is the brain’s greatest enemy? The thought “I cannot do it!” When you think you cannot do something, your brain puts on the brakes. When you give up, that negative thought interrupts your brain’s attempt to make the all-important connection. Then you reach a dead end, and you never understand the thing you were trying to understand.

Shiratsuchi: That does not mean you are stupid. It is just that you are not giving your brain a chance to make the necessary connection.

Ikeda: The brain loves to learn. It loves to study. But when you decide “I cannot do it,” you are limiting the potential of your brain.

Shiratsuchi: That means that people who say they were born dumb and use that as an excuse not to make any effort cause their brains to rust and fall into disuse. It is a self-

fulfilling prophecy.

Ikeda: If you look carefully at people who seem to be born smart, you will see that they are making an effort to learn, even if others do not always see it. When it comes down to it, a smart person is a person who does not give up, no matter what. When he finds something he does not understand, he does not let that stop him. He keeps pushing himself, determined to grasp it. A person with that mental strength is smart.

The same is true beyond school, in society. The person who does not try to escape from things he does not understand, who does not try to escape from difficulty, will always win in the end.

You are all training your minds and your spirits for that time.

Maekawa: When you run up against something you do not understand, you can either give up or keep trying.

Ikeda: The student who wrote the letter we were discussing earlier is worried that his classmates are leaving him behind. The very fact that he is worrying is important, I think. He is trying to move forward, and that is why he has run into a wall. A person who is not trying to move ahead will not hit any obstacles. He does not worry about anything, and that is why he does not grow.

When you do not understand your classes, it is painful, it is hard. But that is the time to persevere and keep challenging yourself, not to escape.

The important thing is to start from what you can do. If possible, find one thing you are good at and start from there. The self-confidence that “I can do it if I try!” is the best medicine for improving your brain.

It can be sports, music or some extracurricular club activity. The human brain is built so that if you accomplish one thing, you will naturally adapt that ability to accomplish other things.

Be brave, and ask your teachers about what you do not understand. Ask them for advice on how you should study. If you cannot do it during class, do it during recess or after school.

You may feel embarrassed at first, but the other students will be impressed, even if they do not say so. Teachers like students who ask questions. They like them a lot better than students who just sit there and pretend to understand.

Maekawa: Even if you think you pretty much understand something, if you ask the teacher you may get a much better understanding and make surprising new discoveries.

Suffering and joy are always linked.

Ikeda: Study is hard, very hard. That is why it is so enjoyable when you finally understand what you are studying. Suffering and joy are linked. This is true in all things.

Your parents and teachers may get mad at me for what I am about to say, but I think that if you make your best effort and your grades still do not improve, that is OK. Because far more important than any short-term results is getting into the habit of trying your best, the habit of always putting in 100 percent — be it in your studies or whatever.

If you succeed in that, you will find yourself growing stronger and developing your ability. And you will eventually come to discover your mission in life.

The habit of always trying your hardest and doing your best is the shovel for mining the rich store of your potential as a human being. If you acquire the habit of persevering, you will succeed in the end—even if it takes time. The important thing is not to give up until you succeed.

And remember, studying is not a duty, it is a right. There are many children around the world who want to go to school but cannot.

Shiratsuchi: If you think of it as a duty, you become passive, and it becomes a burden.

Maekawa: If you think of it as a right, you become active, and it is fun.

The person who perseveres always wins in the end.

Ikeda: Anyway, during the years of junior high school, you will experience many things. The enjoyable things seem to flash by in an instant, and the unpleasant ones seem to drag on forever.

But when you look back, everything in these years will seem to have flown by as quickly as lightning. The important thing is to just hang in there. Please know that the person who perseveres will win in the end.

Never compare yourself to others. In the story of the tortoise and the hare, the reason why the tortoise won had nothing to do with the fact that the hare was his opponent. The tortoise just ran the race in his own way, without haste, at his own speed, doing his absolute best, without stopping, one step at a time. The person who wins in the end is like this.

I hope you will always say to yourself: “Today, I advanced one more step than I did yesterday. Tomorrow I will try to move forward a little further than I did today.”

May you live each day of your life this way.