

THIS BEAUTIFUL EARTH: PHOTO ESSAY BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA 'POETRY BY THE WATER'

Motionless on the lotus bud, a red dragonfly rested its wings. Perfect stillness. I clicked my shutter five times, and still it did not move. Perhaps it was entranced by the shimmering of the water's surface; or perhaps its wings, exhausted from flight, had not yet recovered; or could it have been waiting for the clouds to part to reveal a ray of sunlight? In any event, this king of flight had turned the peach-colored bud into a fitting throne.

It was July 15, 1991; Tokyo's summer rainy season had yet to end. Under a thinly clouded sky, three planters containing lotus plants lined the edge of a small pond in a corner of the Soka Gakkai Headquarters. The broad lotus leaves completely hid the planters from view. I drew a little closer. The lotus leaves with their thick veins were somehow reminiscent of an insect's wings. On the other hand, the transparent wings of the dragonfly, with their fine network of veins, looked somehow like leaves.

A single essence called life in some instances emerges as a green plant with leaves that rustle in the breeze; at others it forms an insect whose wings slice the wind. But now these two expressions of the same life-force seemed to merge again as one. No artwork could hope to capture this mysterious beauty of creative form. It was a lesson in how all things are connected.

When I was a boy, dragonflies were my friends. In the 1930s, Tokyo still had many green woods and fields. In my home area of Ota, too, the waters of the Tama River ran deep, and along its banks one could enjoy an expansive stillness. Red dragonflies glided about, and in the evenings fireflies danced. On summer vacation mornings, I would stride with friends along dew-covered paths through the rice fields, chasing dragonflies. Soon thunderheads would rise in the distance, and the smell of the grass in the burning heat would be almost stifling.

We had only one aim: to catch the king of dragonflies, the Japanese golden ringed dragonfly. We were not interested in white tipped skimmers. The golden ringed dragonfly far excelled all others in terms of its size and black and golden-yellow striped markings. We would find a likely spot, hide our nets, breath quietly and lie in wait. Then at the right moment our nets would snap out, and when we heard the sound of the wings of a captured golden ringed dragonfly, what joy we would feel. Careful not to be bitten by it, we pinched the wings between our fingers. Then after our moment of pride and triumph, we would release the dragonfly to the sky.

In those days, dragonfly hunting was a kind of children's culture. But those throngs of dragonflies have long since disappeared from the skies of Tokyo. The red dragonflies have become airliners, and the fireflies have given way to neon signs. Sadly it seems that with the dragonflies has gone the people's poetic spirit.

Since ancient times, Japan has been a haven for dragonflies. Some 180 varieties exist in this relatively small group of islands, the most of any country in the world. One of Japan's ancient names was Akitsushima, Island of Dragonflies. Here flies the living fossil known as the Japanese relic dragonfly, found only in Japan and in the Himalayan region. Its form hasn't changed in more than 100 million years—since its ancestors glided and sailed among the dinosaurs. Its original forbears appeared 300 million years ago. Human beings date back only several million years. Among the community of life on earth, dragonflies are by far our seniors. For 300 million years, their lineage has been passed down perfectly

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and without interruption from parent to child, parent to child.

When I think of this, I am struck with the profound solemnity of life's workings. In this small red body before my eyes, resided countless epochs of Earth's history. Everything that strives to live is like a "cell" of this greater life called Earth; each living thing, in itself a living planet. A dragonfly on the edge of the water; lotus leaves fresh with the rich moisture they hold.

In its larval stage, the dragonfly lives in water, and so the water's edge is its childhood home. I am told that the larva of a certain species awaits a moment of calm when it can turn into a winged adult. Some time near dawn or twilight, when the wind has died down and the water still, in that fleeting moment when all is wrapped in silence, the young insect makes its way among the stems and reeds and pokes its head above the water. Then, with great deliberation, gauging its surroundings, it begins to transform.

Such periods of morning and evening calm are related to the rise and fall of the tides. The pulsation of high and low tide is like the breathing in and out of the Earth. How is it that a tiny larva is aware of this rhythm? The birth and death of human beings is also connected to the tidal ebb and flow, it is said. Humans and dragonflies alike play the same melody of birth and death.

Wings glistened. Shiny droplets of dew slipped from the lotus leaves like unstrung crystal beads. Without a sound, the dragonfly launched itself skyward and flitted across the pond out of sight.

One explanation has it that the Japanese word for dragonfly, *tonbo*, comes from the Japanese phrase meaning flying pole, *tobu bo*. The impression it gave as it jaunted away made this seem quite plausible. Without the slightest doubt or hesitation, it darted off as straight as an arrow.

As if nothing at all had happened, the lotus bud quietly kept waiting for its own moment to blossom. In such noble decorum, I could sense the silent music of the heavens.

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