

'MAINICHI SHIMBUN' INTERVIEW WITH SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA PEACE BEGINS WITH EMPATHY

'Buddhism is based on empathy, sharing another person's suffering as your own,' says SGI President Ikeda. 'When you see that someone is suffering or in pain, the most humane path in life is to share that pain, to work to help one another. Empathy is crucial.'

On Sept. 25, SGI President Ikeda was interviewed by Masato Kitamura, editor in chief, and Takao Iwami, special advisor, of the Mainichi Shimbun, one of the three major Japanese daily newspapers. The following is a translation of excerpts from this interview.

Takao Iwami: In its capacity as an ally country, Japan has to support the United States. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has promised such support. How do you view recent political developments?

President Ikeda: Frustrating in the extreme. Japanese politicians are always behind the beat and reactive. The Japanese government should take the lead in proactively promoting international public opinion for peace. They could make this appeal at the United Nations, for example. The United Nations is important now as never before. I would like to propose that the member states join together and consider holding a special session of the general assembly devoted to responding to international terrorism. That is the direction in which Japan also should work.

Christianity and Islam share a long history of peaceful coexistence. I think that at heart the conflict is much more political than religious in nature. The whole of human civilization is being put to the test. Now, more than ever, I call out for truly committed and sustained dialogue.

Masato Kitamura: The terrorist attack in New York can be considered the most recent tragedy indicative of the current of the times. The contemporary trend, in my view, may be characterized by a disregard for life. This is not necessarily limited to terrorism but is also evident in various aspects of Japanese society. The circumstances, thus, give rise to the question of why people can so mindlessly, so easily take another's life — even a child's.

President Ikeda: I think it stems from a lack of hope. There is a pervasive sense of having come to a dead-end, of being trapped in a tunnel from which there is no exit. Philosophy and religion exist to give life a sense of meaning. But those in positions of responsibility lack the conviction necessary to earnestly condemn war and violence. Everything is left up to someone else. People act as if these matters didn't impact them. They have lost their sense of purpose and responsibility.

Kitamura: Not considering such heinous crimes an attack against themselves, simply being relieved that they and their community was not directly involved — they don't see that peace and society itself are being threatened, so they are slow to perceive it as an assault against themselves.

President Ikeda: That is precisely the point, the attitude of “Let someone else take responsibility.” In contrast, Buddhism is based on empathy, sharing another person’s suffering as your own. When you see that someone is suffering or in pain, the most humane path in life is to share that pain, to work to help one another. Empathy is crucial.

Kitamura: How can we encourage people who can’t really understand one another to feel empathy for each other?

President Ikeda: Education has an indispensable role to play. People should be educated in a way that encourages them to feel the sufferings of others as their own—those suffering from misfortune, from poverty, in war...How can we learn to see the world through their eyes, to extend support, to treat them as equals? In this regard, Japan lags far behind.

Iwami: Over the decades, successive Japanese administrations have all called for educational reform. Various government agencies have looked at the issue, but have failed to come up with a truly effective plan. I would like to ask you about Japan’s Fundamental Law of Education, which some are saying should be revised. It is my understanding that you take a “go-slow” attitude toward any revision.

President Ikeda: This is because it is so clear that those advocating reform have a strong nationalist agenda. I think it would be much better, for example, to have the issue discussed and debated by forward-looking scholars, people with new ideas. This feeling that everything needs to be done by political institutions reflects the strong prioritization of politics over people. Over the course of history, education in Japan has been made subservient to national goals. The role of education has been defined narrowly in accord with these national goals and priorities, whether military or economic.

The Fundamental Law of Education upholds as its objective “the full development of personality.” I think that this could be rephrased as the happiness of children, of learners. This was a view stressed by an educator whom I hold in great respect and who died in prison for his views during the war.

Iwami: In theory, I believe the role of religion in education is immense. In actual practice, however, religion is disregarded in Japanese education.

President Ikeda: That’s true. At the same time, however, it is also a fact that in the West to this day most families embrace some faith or creed. The situation in Japan is the fault of the religious authorities here. Religion, basically, is one of the necessities of human life, like air or water.

Kitamura: Seventy years after its founding, how would you describe the current phase of the Soka Gakkai? And what are your thoughts on having taken leadership for many years?

President Ikeda: The Soka Gakkai’s membership has grown to become approximately 10 percent of the population. I believe the foundations of the organization have been consolidated. Naturally, leadership is necessary to keep an organization moving in the

right direction. At the same time, unless the membership is given responsibility and efforts are made to foster youth, no organization can achieve continued stability and development. Dictatorship is an anachronistic impossibility. The administration of the Soka Gakkai is carried out democratically through the board of trustees and the central executive committee. All efforts are made to respect and reflect the views of the members. It is my basic policy not to attend such meetings, in order to promote the exchange of opinions without unnecessary reservations due to my presence.

Iwami: That gives me the sense of a new form of dictatorship! [Laughter.]

President Ikeda: Others are free to view or interpret this any way they wish. You absolutely have that freedom. But as honorary president, I carry out my duties in accord with the bylaws of the organization.

People don't develop or grow in a dictatorial regime. Nor would development of the organization outside Japan be possible. Dictatorship is cowardice and it inevitably collapses.

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