

Discussions on Youth Reading Makes You Strong

This is the 13th installment of a series of discussions on youth among SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai high school division chiefs Hidenobu Kimura (young men's chief) and Kazue Igeta (young women's chief), representing the high school division members.

Kimura: This time we'll discuss the joys of reading.

Ikeda: OK, but I think many people nowadays find reading a chore rather than a pleasure!

Kimura: Yes, that's true. Perhaps it's because computers have become so popular that many young people have an aversion to books.

Igeta: And if they do read anything, it seems to be mostly lightweight, entertaining reading matter, stuff without much substance. But I guess that's better than not reading at all.

Ikeda: I'm sure there are all kinds of young people — some like reading and some don't. Even so, one thing is clear: Those who know the great joy of reading have richer lives, broader perspectives, than those who don't.

Encountering a great book is like encountering a great teacher. Reading is a privilege only human beings have. No other living creature on this planet has the same ability. Through reading, we come into contact with hundreds and thousands of lives, and commune with sages and philosophers who lived as long as two millennia ago.

Reading is a journey. You can travel east, west, north and south, and become acquainted with new people and places.

Reading transcends time. You can go on an expedition with Alexander the Great or become friends with people like Socrates and Victor Hugo and hold dialogues with them.

In his *Essays in Idleness*, Yoshida Kenko (1283–1352) writes, "The pleasantest of all diversions is to sit alone under the lamp, a book spread out before you, and to make friends with people of a distant past you have never known." How sad to not know this joy! It's like standing before a mountain of precious jewels, all there for your taking, and returning home empty-handed.

Almost without exception the great people had a book that they held dear during their youth — a book that served as their guide and source of encouragement, as a close friend and mentor.

Books introduce you to the fragrant flowers of life, to rivers, roads and adventures. You can find stars and light, feel delight or indignation. You are set adrift on a vast sea of emotion in a ship of reason, moved by the infinite breeze of poetry. Dreams and dramas evolve. The whole world comes alive.

To gain true satisfaction and pleasure from anything requires some kind of practice, training and effort. You can't fully enjoy skiing without working at it. The same goes for playing the piano or using a computer. It also takes effort, perseverance and patience to appreciate reading. Those who have tasted this joy, who have looked on books as friends, are strong.

Reading gives you free access to the treasures of the human spirit — from all ages, from all parts of the world. One who knows this possesses unsurpassed wealth. It's like owning countless banks from which you can make unlimited withdrawals.

Kimura: That sounds great! How exactly can you cultivate such an appreciation for books?

Ikeda: The first step is getting in the habit of reading. Those who have, you'll find, will utilize every spare moment to read, whether while commuting by train or before going to bed.

As a youth, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda had a job in which he had to transport goods on a large cart. Reminiscing about that time, he once said, "I would finish my work as quickly as possible and hurry to an open field nearby where I would toss the cart aside, lie down on the grass and read."

According to the French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623–62), people are "thinking reeds" (*Pensées: Notes on Religion and Other Subjects*). Basically, reading is essential to thinking. Perhaps we can even say that reading is a sign of our humanity.

Igeta: President Ikeda, many students are wondering how on earth you have found the time to read as much as you have despite your busy schedule.

Ikeda: The foundation for everything in my life was forged during my youth. I devoted every spare minute to reading.

One summer I even went down to the Zoshigaya Cemetery [in Tokyo's Toshima Ward] occasionally to read. Sitting outside on a straw mat under the moonlight, with a flashlight I would read books such as Hugo's *Les Misérables*. It was cool and quiet there. We had no air-conditioning in those days, you see. The mosquitoes were quite a nuisance, though!

Kimura: You really got into the habit of reading!

Ikeda: I was a voracious reader. I devoured every book I could get my hands on.

From a young age, probably because I was sickly, books were my greatest treasure. During World War II, there were times when I would take them into the air-raid shelter to shield them from the bombings.

When the war eventually ended, I was 17. As far as the eye could see, Tokyo was in ruins. The only serenity to be found among the destruction, on the rubble-filled streets of a defeated land, was the sprawling clear blue sky overhead. I still remember vividly the color of that sky.

Though we had nothing, lacking even basic necessities such as food and clothing, I had boundless hope — peace had finally been restored! Now I could study as much as I wanted. I could read at last, and books were a wonderful feast.

Around this time, 20 or so of us youth living in the same neighborhood formed a reading group. We would meet to discuss books like Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and topics such as the German economy.

Japan's defeat had completely shattered everything we had believed in. Young people were desperately searching for the truth, the real meaning of life, an understanding of the world. Books were our only reliable guide.

Whenever I had spare time, as though I were in my own personal library, I would browse through the secondhand bookshops in Tokyo's Kanda area, asking myself, "I wonder if there are any good books today?" or thinking, "I hope they still have that one I had my eye on."

Often I rushed down there with money I saved from my meager wages. I can still clearly remember the exhilaration I felt when I finally purchased a book I long hankered for, which

the store still had when I got there.

Igeta: Nowadays there is an overabundance of books, but many people just aren't reading. How spoiled we've become!

Ikeda: You can't imagine how strict Mr. Toda was when it came to reading. Seeing youth engrossed in sensationalist materials, he would become furious, sternly rebuking them: "How can you enjoy that garbage? Do you want to be nothing more than a third- or fourth-rate person? You must read epic novels, you must read the classics! You can never hope to forge your character if you don't read them while you are young! You will never become a leader in the future!"

Mr. Toda was also always checking on me, asking, "What are you reading now?" If I were to answer, "Rousseau's *Emile*," for example, he would ask me about it — there was no way I could pretend to have read something I hadn't!

Even a month before he died, Mr. Toda was still inquiring about my reading. He said: "A leader must never forget the importance of reading, no matter what may happen. I'm up to the third volume of the ancient Chinese work *Compendium of Eighteen Histories*." Even in his weakened physical state, Mr. Toda devoted every spare moment to reading and contemplation.

At our young men's division Suiko-kai meetings [a training group which met twice a month to discuss great works of world literature], Mr. Toda would lecture on leadership and human character through such classics as *The Water Margin*, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Count of Monte Cristo* and Nikolai Gogol's *Taras Bulba*. He would stress: "Study while you are young. Otherwise, as you get older, you will be ridiculed not only by your peers but by children. What you read while you are young will remain with you throughout your life."

I feel the same way. I want each of you to savor the great joy that reading brings. I hope you will work at reading until it becomes something you can't live without. You are the only one who will lose out if you don't try your hardest.

Kimura: People often complain that they just don't have time to read.

Ikeda: Mr. Toda said, "Youth, make time to read and think seriously about things!"

It's a matter of setting your mind to it. Those who claim they have no time haven't really tried. If the desire to read is there, there is no way you can't find 10 or 20 minutes.

You don't have to be sitting at a desk to read. An old saying goes that there are three places suitable for writers to mull over their ideas: in bed, on horseback and in the bathroom. The same can be said about reading if we substitute transportation today for horseback.

When you're head over heels for someone, for instance, you want to see him or her whenever and wherever you can — even if it's only a brief glance or just for five minutes, right? That should be our attitude toward reading.

If you make the time — for example, 10 minutes in the morning, 10 in the afternoon and 10 at night — you'll be reading a total of 30 minutes each day. And you'll often find that you read with much greater concentration in those precious moments set aside in a busy schedule. It usually leaves a deeper impression than reading done at a more leisurely pace.

I'm sure there are some of you who at the moment think you haven't the time to do anything other than study for exams, but reading actually serves as the foundation for all your studies. Your results in school will surely reflect your reading in the long run.

Naturally, you have to use your wisdom to decide when your time is best spent reading a book.

Kimura: Do you have any advice for people who want to read, but don't know where to begin?

Ikeda: Rather than worry about what to read, it's probably best just to read even one page of something. Indecision will get you nowhere. At least if you read one page, you'll have made progress.

Igeta: Many students find epic novels and the classics rather daunting.

Ikeda: Just as there are good and bad people, there are good and bad books.

All of us live in an intricate web of interrelationships. If we associate with good people, our lives will be positively affected. If we hang out with bad people, our lives will be negatively affected. Even a person who is essentially good stands a 20 to 30 percent chance of being corrupted if he or she spends enough time in a dishonest environment.

Reading good books cultivates and nourishes one's life. A classic never grows old; it is always refreshing and new. And its message will be just as valid in the 21st century as today. Encountering such a work is a lifelong treasure.

There is an episode involving the British playwright George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) that I'll share. Upon discovering that he was unfamiliar with a certain popular novel of the time, an acquaintance said to him: "Mr. Shaw, this book has been a bestseller for five years! How can you not know it?" He calmly replied: "Madame, Dante's *The Divine Comedy* has been a bestseller throughout the world for more than 500 years. Have you read it?"

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82) said that a book that's been in print for less than a year isn't even worth reading. Basically, a book that is still read decades or centuries after it was published is a masterpiece. As such, it can be considered a good book.

Life is short. So we should make a point of reading good books. The only way to find the time to do so is simply to stop reading bad books. In terms of Buddhism, bad books are those that bring forth the lower of the ten worlds — the life-conditions of Hell, Hunger, Animality and Anger. They are like poison or drugs that produce misery.

On the other hand, good books point your life toward happiness, wisdom and creativity. They possess a sound substance that enables you to think and grow.

Igeta: Some people have said that they've read some of Goethe's or Tolstoy's works, but couldn't make heads or tails of them. Or they were left feeling unimpressed.

Ikeda: At least they're honest! But it's not Goethe's or Tolstoy's fault if their works don't impress you. Reading classic literature is like striking a large bell. A weak stroke will produce a weak sound, but if you pound that bell with all your might, you will get a resounding response. It all depends on the reader's capacity.

If when reading the classics you reach a part that seems over your head, it's perfectly fine to skip 20 or 30 pages until you get to a section that's easier. Once you've figured out the story, you can always go back and reread those pages you jumped. I stress that if you have the desire and the will to learn, you will definitely find some gem in whatever you read.

Reading is like mountain climbing. There are high and low mountains. Ascending a

steep summit is quite difficult, but how great is your exhilaration when you've successfully conquered it. Vast vistas stretch before you. From your vantage point, you can see how low the other hills and mountains are.

The greater the struggle, the more enriching the experience is for your life. That said, if you immediately set out to climb a high peak without any preparation, the challenge could be beyond you. You may be forced to abandon your ascent, losing your way or suffering altitude sickness! It might be better to first attempt a goal suited to your level.

You could start with a book about something that interests you. Once you've mastered the basics of reading and developed some degree of confidence in your ability, then you can go on to bigger challenges, heftier books.

If some books are beyond you right now, try reading them in college or later in life. Learning is a lifelong process. Crucial is the determination to make the wisdom passed down through the ages your own. "I'm going to read thousands of books" — that's the kind of enthusiasm I want you to have.

You all have a mission in the 21st century. No matter how talented you may be, without culture, wisdom and rich character, you will never be respected in the world arena. In fact, like many Japanese today, you might be dismissed as a money-driven automaton.

Reading makes us human. We mustn't limit our lives to one field of narrow specialty to the exclusion of all else. No matter how high people's positions are, if they haven't read great novels by the world's renowned authors, they can never hope to become outstanding leaders. To build a humanistic society where people live with dignity, we must have leaders acquainted with honest-to-goodness great literature. This is extremely important.

People in other countries tend to read far more than the Japanese, who for the most part just pretend to be well-read.

Kimura: Are there any other pointers you could give us?

Ikeda: "Read thoughtfully, not mindlessly!" I jotted these words down in the reading notebook I kept in my youth.

I diligently wrote my thoughts and impressions about books I had read in a notebook made of cheap, coarse paper over the period of about a year, between 1946 and 1947. In those days, paper was an extremely precious commodity. How I treasured that humble notebook! When I read something that touched me, I would write it down immediately.

Unfortunately, because the paper was so cheap, the ink would run easily, rendering parts of my notes illegible. I constantly told myself, "Read thoughtfully, not mindlessly!"

We must read in a way that nourishes and cultivates us. Food will not nourish us or contribute to healthy bone and muscle growth if it is not digested and absorbed properly. In the same way, digesting what we read requires serious reflection and contemplation.

President Makiguchi said: "Don't read carelessly. You must ponder everything you read. It seems that many young people read but fail to think about the content. Thinking about what you read makes it part of you."

And President Toda offered more specific advice, saying: "There are many ways to read a book. One is to read only for pleasure, simply following the plot — this is a very shallow way to read. Another is to think about the author's motivation for writing the book, its historical backdrop, the societal elements of the time, the characters in the story, and the ideas and intention that the author is trying to express. And yet another way is to try to understand through the work what kind of person the author is or was, his or her true character, his or her views on life, the world and the universe, and his or her ideals and beliefs. If you don't take it this far, it can't be called reading."

In any case, it's important to have a good book always at your side. A friend once suggested that I read *A Teacher Called Takezawa* by Yoshiro Nagayo (1888–1961). That book taught me many things. My friends and I chose good books and then recommended them to one another.

Igeta: In order to internalize what we've read, do you suggest that we, too, keep a reading notebook like you did?

Ikeda: For those so inclined, I highly recommend it. It will serve as a record of your spiritual development. If you don't wish to keep a full-length journal, perhaps you could just jot down your impressions in three or four lines on the inside back cover of the book.

If you thought it was interesting, what made it so? If it was boring, why? You could also underline the parts that struck you and write down your thoughts or counter arguments in the margins.

Of course, this wouldn't go over too well if it's a borrowed book! Anyway, taking notes on what you read sets the wheels of your mind in motion.

I understand that Napoleon (1769–1821) also kept a reading journal. A saying goes that genius derives from study. Napoleon was certainly an avid reader. As a child, one of his favorite books was Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, and he dreamt of growing up and becoming just like those heroes whose lives were depicted. A biography of some famous person would be a good place for you to start, too.

In later years, when on expedition to Egypt or Spain, Napoleon always took along books covering a wide variety of subjects. It's been said that he even had a bookshelf built into his horse carriage. Reading was Napoleon's driving force, giving him the energy to press onward.

Incidentally, Stendhal (1783–1842), a French writer who held Napoleon in high esteem, said something to the effect that just as a locomotive could not run without fuel, he could not get into the right frame of mind without reading at least a few hundred pages first thing in the morning.

For both of them, reading was fuel for the mind and soul. It gave them the inspiration to generate new ideas, challenge their obstacles and continue forward.

In the same way that having a healthy body requires nourishing food, having a healthy mind requires reading. You will become ill if all you eat are sweets and soft foods that don't require much chewing. And it is unhealthy to turn one's nose up at nutritious food or just eat the same foods all the time. Likewise, we shouldn't avoid good books that enrich our minds.

Someone once described bad books as “messengers of degeneracy, guides to delinquency, traps to misery and an insidious poison.” Good books, on the other hand, are as wonderful as an amazing teacher, a trusted confidant or a parent. They contain a wellspring of wisdom, a fountain of life, bright illumination and human goodness.

Igeta: By the way, some students were wondering if they should steer clear of comic books.

Ikeda: If you read nothing but comics, of course it would hardly be beneficial! The most important thing is to develop yourself. Some comic books do have positive messages that could change your life, open your eyes or move you.

Sometimes a comic book has a more profound message than a dull, monotonous book. One I've mentioned before is the Japanese comic book *Tomorrow's Joe*. This was the

inspiring story of a young boxer who gave his absolute best, pushing himself to the limits of his being in order to achieve his dream.

There is also the argument that comic books, along with television, stifle one's imagination. Both media provide the viewer with a prepackaged image. The strong point of literature, however, is that it lets you develop your imagination and ability to think.

There is a fundamental difference between the way you receive information from television and from books. Reading something in a book engraves it in your mind, in your life. It provides you with sustenance to grow. Just looking at something leaves you with only a surface impression — it's easy to do, and it gives you the illusion that by merely seeing something you know all about it. This is only superficial understanding, though; it hasn't become a living, breathing part of you.

Taking shortcuts has become the undercurrent of Japanese culture, as indicated by the many convenient instant foods on the market. Getting swept up in this kind of social trend — and turning your back on the challenge of really reading literature — leads you to a shallow and empty existence. That is a terrible tragedy!

I was once asked if I had any regrets. I replied, "Only that I didn't read more books during my youth."

Kimura: If you feel that way, President Ikeda, there's not much hope for the rest of us!

Ikeda: No matter how much we study, it can never be enough.

I hope all of you will develop into great individuals in the 21st century. Now it's time for you to cultivate your mind through reading. That will decide everything.

There is no limit to your potential if the earth of your mind is cultivated and well-nourished. Within each of you lies a vast field of infinite possibility. And reading is the hoe with which to till that boundless frontier.

I hope you will all become people who can wholeheartedly, honestly say of your youth that you read as much as you could and gave your all to your studies!

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