

Monday, January 26, 2009

SGI President Ikeda's Essay

THE LIGHT OF THE CENTURY OF HUMANITY

By Shin'ichi Yamamoto¹

The Wise Members of the Men's Division, Champions of Kosen-rufu—Part 1 [of 2]

I watch on
as you grow
into a towering tree
undaunted by storms
or blizzards.

I once sent this poem to a young friend who had fallen ill. When I first received word that he was battling illness, I immediately took up my pen and wrote a note of encouragement for him. This particular young man overcame his sickness, and has grown to be as resilient as a towering tree. He has become an excellent and compassionate leader.

In the beautiful pageant of the four seasons, perhaps the ginkgo tree is second only to the cherry in the vivid impression it makes on us. Its golden leaves shining in the cold winds of early December announce the completion of the year. When I gaze up at the ginkgo trees, I am reminded of the noble and stately presence of our men's division members. The avenue of ginkgo trees in Tokyo's Aoyama neighborhood (near the Soka Gakkai Headquarters in Shinanomachi) is one of the city's popular sights. This year [2008], those ginkgo trees greeted their 100th year.

Every day, people pass along the road beneath these venerable trees, talking together and looking up at the ginkgos as they go about their daily business. For me, this road is filled with unforgettable memories—indeed, it is a road of unforgettable significance in the history of kosen-rufu.

The 146 trees lining the avenue were planted there by the pioneering park and

¹ Shin'ichi Yamamoto is a pen name of SGI President Daisaku Ikeda.

landscape designer Yoshinobu Orishimo (1881–1966). The trees are trimmed to match the gentle slope of the road, employing the principle of perspective to create a world-famous view.

In 1999, a cutting of one of these ginkgo trees was grafted onto an old tree at Humboldt University in Germany as part of the effort to green up Berlin, the new capital of the reunified nation.

The eminent German author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) once wrote that the ginkgo leaf “uplifts the one who knows.”² Apparently, Goethe’s garden included a ginkgo, a tree that was introduced to Europe from Asia.

At present, construction is proceeding smoothly on the new Soka University Silk Road, an avenue that will be lined with cherry and ginkgo trees at the school. Soon, youthful Goethes of the 21st century will talk together as they walk along this path, gazing up from time to time at these splendid trees.

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Ginkgos are said to have a powerful life-force—one that has enabled the species to survive for over 200 million years. They flourished from the days of the dinosaurs, and weathered the ice ages. As one of the world’s oldest species, they’ve been called “living fossils.” They are vigorous trees with a strong resistance to insect damage and disease, as well as many pollutants. What impressive and magnificent trees they are!

I fondly recall someone telling me in my youth, that placing a ginkgo leaf between the pages of a book would prevent bookworms from destroying the pages. One day soon after the end of World War II, I took three fallen ginkgo leaves that I had picked up in Aoyama and used them as bookmarks in a collection of poems I was reading, Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. Those ginkgo leaves, together with that favorite book, were always close at hand.

Japan’s ginkgos originate from China. In Japanese, there is another word for *ginkgo* that is written with Chinese characters that literally mean “grandfather-grandchild tree,” because the fruits of a ginkgo tree one plants will be harvested by one’s grandchildren. I read this explanation once long ago and never forgot it. That name, to me, seems to say “I’m not living for myself, but for the sake of the generations that will come after me. I’ll bring forth my life-force to the fullest and achieve great things!” When I look at a tall ginkgo tree, I think about the people of previous generations who planted and cared for it.

I was born in Tokyo. From the time of my youth, I was proud of the fact that the

² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Poems of the West and East*, translated by John Whaley (Bern: Peter Lang, 1998), p. 261.

ginkgo is our official city tree. I was later delighted to learn that the ginkgo is also the official tree of both Osaka and Kanagawa prefectures, places with which I have close ties.

Ginkgo-lined Yamashita Park Avenue in front of our Kanagawa Culture Center, which overlooks the harbor in Yokohama, has been chosen as one of the 100 most beautiful streets in Japan. A row of tall ginkgo trees also adorns the site of our Tohoku Culture Center in Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture.

As the Japanese poet Takuboku Ishikawa (1886–1912)—who hailed from the Tohoku region—wrote: “A towering ginkgo tree raises its golden arms up into the clear skies, like a mighty giant.”³ This verse makes me think of my friends in the men’s division who also stand tall, like golden pillars, triumphing over storms and blizzards, in every corner of the world.

I once wrote to a men’s division member from Tokyo’s Minato Ward, where the ginkgo trees in Aoyama are: “Like the ginkgo tree, standing firm and resolute against the winter winds, live proudly, firmly rooted in bold and resolute faith.”

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“More valuable than treasures in a storehouse are the treasures of the body, and the treasures of the heart are the most valuable of all” (WND-1, 851). Nichiren Daishonin wrote these words to his disciple Shijo Kingo, who was persecuted because of his faith and struggled valiantly against the hardships that assailed him in the turbulent society of his day.

“Treasures of the storehouse” refer to money and economic power. “Treasures of the body” refer to health and occupational skills, as well as social standing, trust in the community, and recognition. For several years, Shijo Kingo had been facing challenges on all of these fronts.

Shijo Kingo fully persevered through the harshest of adversities that, in terms of his career, entailed a battle deciding life or death, victory or defeat. For him, each day was a do-or-die struggle permitting no lapse in judgment or effort.

For his part, the Daishonin pointed out to his beloved disciple how to live wisely and, at the same time, heartily encouraged him, as if to say: “You possess the treasures of the heart. What have you to fear? You can triumph through the strongest force of all, the shared faith of mentor and disciple!”

The treasures of the storehouse and the treasures of the body ebb and flow with time, but the treasures of the heart—gained through upholding the eternal Mystic

³ Translated from Japanese. Takuboku Ishikawa, *Kumo wa Tensai dearu* (Cloud Is Genius) (Tokyo: Kin no Hoshi-sha, 1997), p. 165.

Law—can never be destroyed. That is why SGI members have accumulated the greatest treasures of the heart in all the world.

In these last busy days of the year, I am sure that many of our members are urgently grappling with problems brought on by the “once-in-a-century” financial crisis we are now facing. I am painfully aware of how difficult this is. The anguish felt by members who are fighting with all their might to survive these hard times strikes to the very depths of my own heart. My empathy comes from the experiences I had working for Josei Toda when his businesses fell into dire financial straits, a time when I valiantly strove alone to support my mentor and resolve that desperate situation.

“I am praying that, no matter how troubled the times may become, the Lotus Sutra and the ten demon daughters will protect all of you, praying as earnestly as though to produce fire from damp wood, or to obtain water from parched ground” (WND-1, 444). With this passage from the Daishonin’s writings firmly in mind, my wife and I are earnestly chanting daimoku for the sake of all our precious members.

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The English poet Robert Browning (1812–89) wrote: “I was ever a fighter,”⁴ and “We fall to rise, [buffeted] to fight better.”⁵ I have treasured these words since I was a youth.

As you know, I have adhered to the challenging path of kosen-rufu since the age of 19. Over those long years, I’ve faced harsh and bitter times. But one who is dedicated to the mission of spreading the Mystic Law will be protected by all of the benevolent forces in the universe. No way of life could be more exhilarating than this.

There is no defeat for those who practice the Mystic Law. One who is not defeated is an eternal victor, a monarch of happiness, and a master of life. This is what our Buddhist faith is for, and this is why we proceed along this path. A veritable mountain of treasures and innumerable benevolent deities joyfully await all who push ahead.

[To be continued]

(Translated from the December 17, 2008, issue of the *Seikyo Shimbun*, the Soka Gakkai daily newspaper)

⁴ Robert Browning, *The Complete Poetical Works of Browning* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1895), p. 395.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1007.