

## Treasuring Every Child

*(From an essay published in the September 29, 1996, issue of the Seikyo Shimbun newspaper [1](#))*

Many people talk about philosophy, but few people actually apply it to their life. The late Dr. David Norton, professor of philosophy of the University of Delaware in the United States, was a person who practiced what he preached and who lived according to his convictions.

Speaking of education and the educational theories of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–1944), founding president of the Soka Gakkai, Dr. Norton's words resonated with extraordinary depth:

"Mr. Makiguchi is working with the profound truth that all human beings have an innate desire to learn and to grow. We see this in young children. When infants first learn to walk, for example, they take their first steps and their faces light up with joy. And from then on, we can't stop them from walking. They are trying to improve, they are trying to learn, they are trying to improve their skills. . . .

"What Mr. Makiguchi recognized is that it is imperative that education not kill or stifle this innate desire to learn and to grow, but that it nurture and encourage it. . . . Unfortunately, education in Japan in his time did, and American education today does, I think, crush that innate desire to learn and to grow."

Dr. Norton refrained from criticizing modern Japanese education but, as many have quite accurately pointed out, Japan's tightly regulated educational system is very destructive.

### All Children Desire to Improve

I would like to share the following story conveyed by an elementary school teacher.

One young girl in his class was completely unable to keep up with the other students. She sat at her desk every day, her gaze turned downward. She was expressionless and her eyes were lackluster. She moved sluggishly, too, and her classmates ignored her.

The teacher wanted to do something to help her, but after a while he gave up. Naturally, he had been angered by one of his fellow teachers, who had callously told him: "Human beings are just like fruit; twenty to thirty percent is always worthless, and there's nothing you can do about it." But in his heart, he wondered if it wasn't in fact beyond this girl's innate abilities to study, as her scores on intelligence tests were extremely low.

Then, during one recess period, he noticed her playing with a puzzle that required putting the plastic pieces together in such a way that they fit neatly into a box. He watched her through the window, and she seemed to be finding the puzzle quite a struggle.

Just as he was about to offer to help her, she fit all the pieces into the box perfectly. She stood up and yelled "Hooray! Hooray!" Her face sparkled with an expression of delight he had never seen before.

Tears filled his eyes. So she could smile, she could shine! She wanted to understand, to succeed so badly!

The teacher felt remorse over his previous attitude. How dare he give up on her! Wasn't he a teacher? Wasn't he a professional? Wasn't it his job to make sure that when each child graduated, they could walk out of his classroom with the confidence that they could accomplish anything if they really tried?

But no, he had planted a feeling of inferiority in this little girl. He had decided that it was her fault that she couldn't keep up, and he had abandoned her. He had never once thought about how painful it must be for her to sit there for six hours a day, not understanding any of the lessons.

The teacher had been a bright student from his earliest years in school. He had never experienced the panic, the embarrassment and the despair of a student who didn't understand what was being taught. He never knew how bad it felt to be so lost and confused that he didn't know what he understood or didn't and was forced to remain silent when the teacher said, "Just ask me about the parts you don't understand."

Though he knew these things intellectually, he simply assumed that some students were just not very bright, and nothing could be done about it. But he found out that was not the case. He discovered that the girl's parents, both graduates of leading universities, were always calling her stupid at home. "I counted, and I've been called 'stupid' about twenty times a day," the girl confessed. No wonder she had decided she was worthless.

The teacher resolved to praise her at least fifty times or more each day to make up for that. He would keep saying, "Smart girl, clever girl" and "Excellent job!" until he had washed away the stain of all that criticism from her heart. He also spoke to the parents, persuading them to change their attitude toward their daughter. For every little accomplishment, he went out of his way to praise her lavishly.

After a year of very hard work on everyone's part, the girl was transformed. It had been tremendously difficult but, proceeding at her own pace, she finally came to experience the joy of learning. A very important factor was her realization that if she made efforts to achieve something, she could indeed accomplish it. Later, she graduated from university, and today she is a pharmacist.

The teacher reflected: "The smallest failure can destroy a child's confidence, and the smallest catalyst can trigger explosive growth. The challenge for the teacher is to believe in each child's potential.

"Test scores only show whether a student can answer certain questions in a certain way and quickly. But some children think more slowly than others; and some excel and even surpass adults in areas in which they have a special interest. It is hard to decide just who is really 'intelligent.'

"If our schools evaluate students solely on test scores, turning their backs on those who don't 'measure up,' if they undermine students' confidence and destroy their special individuality, what good are they for?"

How true! Children are filled with an eager desire to learn and to grow. Dr. Norton describes the joy that lights up infants' faces when they take their first steps. Surely this joy of accomplishment is the perfect symbol of a child's spirit. Mr. Makiguchi called this joy "the happiness of value-creation." Dr. Norton described it as "the happiness of self-fulfillment."

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The door to happiness can only be opened from within. The flowering of the human being's inner potential is the goal of Buddhism and, at the same time, the aim of humanistic education. The true meaning of education lies in the drawing forth of this inner potential. The essence of Buddhism, too, is to cultivate the inner goodness in each of us.

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## **The True Purpose of Education Is People's Happiness**

For Dr. Norton, the study of philosophy was not an abstract intellectual pursuit; rather, he saw it as a means to help people become happy.

Because of this belief, Dr. Norton deplored those who merely handed down orders and tried to control others, while themselves remaining in a safe haven and giving nothing of themselves for others. He was critical of any authoritarian behavior, be it in an educator, politician or religious leader.

He viewed favorably the fact that the Soka Gakkai has fought, since its founding, against all oppressive powers in Japan. And it fights today, he said, against forces that seek to return Japan to the authoritarianism of fifty or sixty years ago. In his view, the Soka Gakkai has been a powerful impetus in the strengthening of Japanese democracy after World War II. He defined this support of democracy as the nurturing of inner motivation and the spirit of independence among the people.

He asserted that those in power feared and hated any movement that encouraged people to think, see and decide for themselves. It was the very superiority of Mr. Makiguchi's philosophy that led the authorities to suppress him. The essence of Mr. Makiguchi's educational philosophy was to teach children to develop an independent spirit so that they would never blindly follow the dictates of authority.

Dr. Norton looked on the continued persecution of the Soka Gakkai as a reaction of the forces who oppose any movement for the independence of the people. This was clear, he said, from an American perspective. He acknowledged that an inner-motivated and global organization such as the Soka Gakkai might be beyond the realm of comprehension given the current Japanese mindset. It is, nevertheless, a mistake, he said, to judge people or a group as being a threat just because they are different and don't fit into fixed preconceptions. The real problem, he noted, is the closed and self-righteous minds of those who judge others in this way.

Education, government, religion and learning--all exist for the sake of people's happiness. What use are such things if they do not bring happiness to people? This was Dr. Norton's belief. He was a brilliant standard-bearer for humanism.

When he taught at the university, the students were attracted by his character and used to bring their personal problems to him. He never treated them condescendingly, and therefore they could talk to him freely about anything. Just as surely as water does not run uphill, people never reveal their true feelings to those who they feel look down on them. Dr. Norton had perfected the art of placing himself in his students' shoes and seeing things from their perspective.

Last year in July, Dr. Norton was suddenly diagnosed with cancer. It was already too late, and nothing could be done.

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He was sixty-five when he passed away.

## Value-Creating Education and the Joy of Learning

Dr. Norton chose to walk a different path from other scholars. Perhaps that is why he was able to penetrate the essence of humanity as deeply as he did. His learning was at one with his personal experience and his character.

The same was true of Mr. Makiguchi. The latter pursued his studies under adverse conditions and never graduated from one of the prestigious imperial universities, which was so vital in those days if one wished to gain scholarly recognition in Japan.

Thus, when he first tried to publish his theory of value-creating education, he was attacked for his boldness and arrogance—how dare a mere elementary school principal offer a theory of education, which was no easy feat even for world-renowned scholars! Government educational officials told him scornfully that he should leave his research as a hobby to pursue after his retirement.

But Mr. Makiguchi would not be dissuaded. He declared: "I am driven by the frantic desire to prevent the present deplorable situation where ten million of our children and students are forced to endure the agonies of cut-throat competition—perpetrated by the difficulty getting into good schools, the 'examination hell' and the competitive struggle for jobs after graduation—from continuing into the next generation."

That was his motivation—one filled with the deepest love and concern for the children of Japan—for pursuing "a type of education that will make all children happy." Mr. Makiguchi formulated an educational technique, a tried and tested path that could be described as the "Way of Education," not just for the sake of children's future happiness, but to allow them to savor the pleasures of learning in the present.

The words that my beloved mentor Josei Toda said to Mr. Makiguchi when he met him for the first time contain the essence of Soka education: "I will make even the poorest student into an excellent one."

That affirmation was based on Mr. Toda's conviction that no child started out as a poor student, and that if one taught a child the basics of thinking, how to deduce and reason for themselves, any child could become an outstanding student. It was an expression of invincible faith in human potential. It was also a burning indignation at the deep-seated tendency toward standardization, ranking people according to academic grades and callously cutting off and discarding those students who could not keep up—all things that were the very antithesis of the pluralistic philosophy of "cherry, plum, peach and damson."

Dr. Norton described the phrase "You will need to know this," which was so often used by educators when teaching children, as the "deadliest phrase in the world." It does nothing to attract children's interest; it only forces something on them. It is a crime. We should offer children the joy of learning, Dr. Norton insisted. We must try to preserve the happiness of learning, the beaming faces of children when they took their very first steps in infancy.

Dr. Norton believed that our value-creating movement was committed to that challenge. He was impressed when he visited our Soka schools. "The eyes of every child are shining," he said. He loved the name "Soka," or value creation, and he regarded his encounter with the Soka Gakkai as the greatest honor in his life. And until the very end, he wore his Soka University pin, received along with an honorary doctorate from that school, with deepest pride.

<sup>1</sup>Ikeda, Daisaku. 1996. "Sekai no shidosha to kataru (Dai ni bu) Go ko Noton hakase," (Recollections of My Meetings with Leading World Figures: Part 2—[5] Dr. David L. Norton, Late Professor of Philosophy of the University of Delaware). *Seikyo Shimibun*, September 29, pp. 1–2.