

Sermon from the October 2016 issue of “Konkokyo-ho: Ametsuchi”

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Step by Step

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Importance of Continuing to Work Hard

I started to learn calligraphy when I was a kindergartener and attended a calligraphy class once a week until I graduated from elementary school. My handwriting was pretty bad, and it didn't show much improvement despite much practice. Because of this, I didn't like the calligraphy class very much. Moreover, the calligraphy teacher was an acquaintance of my parents, so I knew my parents would quickly know if I missed class even once. Because I didn't want to get scolded by my parents for missing the calligraphy class, I made sure I'd diligently go to the school each week.

But there was once an occasion when I wanted to leave the class at any cost. It was when a classmate of mine began attending my calligraphy class. I had already been a student at the class for a few years when the classmate joined us. Unhappily for me, the

boy advanced in his calligraphy very rapidly, and he got ahead of me quite soon. At that time, I felt practicing meant very little.

During that time, a school teacher once told us a memorable story about the winter solstice and the summer solstice:

“On the day of the winter solstice, we have the shortest daytime of the year. And on the day of the summer solstice, to the contrary, we have the longest daytime of the year. Despite these facts, the day of the winter solstice is NOT the coldest day of the year, and the day of the summer solstice is NOT the hottest day of the year, either. Do you know why? You may see the reason if you remember a kettle on a gas stove. You turn the knob of the gas stove to its maximum level, but the water in the kettle does not boil in a second. It takes the sun much time to warm the ground and then make the temperature rise up. Because of this, there will be inevitable time differential as to the length of sunshine time in a day and the change of temperature. And due to this time differential, we usually have the coldest day of the year about one month after the winter solstice day. Likewise, we usually have the hottest day of the year about one and a half months after the summer solstice day. As for the change of the sea water temperature, there will be a greater time differential worth one more month. It’s true that the sun is warming us up today, but it is also warming up each of us in future.”

I remember this tale from time to time. I usually do so when I make up my mind to engage in something on a long-time basis. Whatever thing we may engage in, it usually takes us much time to confirm our development in what we are engaging in. If we do not see any progress in what we do, we often feel impatient and/or worry if we are doing a meaningless thing. However, we need to understand that as long as we continue to strive, our situations are changing, though the change can be so subtle that we may hardly perceive it. I think that *Kami*, our Divine Parent, kindly teaches us the importance of continuing to work hard at what we engage in even if we do not perceive any remarkable progress. *Kami* does so through the workings of the Universe. The story of the sun and temperature still encourages me a lot when I do not see a remarkable progress in what I do.

Thanks to this story, I kept attending the calligraphy class until I graduated from elementary school. When I graduated from elementary school, I was recognized as a four-grade calligraphy writer on second stage of calligraphy. Since this is a fairly high rank, you may assume that my calligraphy was quite beautiful. But my handwriting then

and, in fact, even now, is still not so good. I wondered why and contemplated about this situation.

The calligraphy class gave its students- promotion tests, in which, we were supposed to write certain letters with a writing brush. In order to pass the exam, I conscientiously practiced those letters, copying the model letters our teachers had shown us. Because of this, I cannot write letters beautifully with a writing brush unless I have models to follow. Even if I try to write beautiful letters, all I can do to write those letters as carefully as possible, taking my time. In this way, I believe having models to follow is important when we engage in something, I believe.

The Words “Thank You” and Smiles Are Important

At Konko Church of Haruki, to which I belong, we are currently working on “Training to Nurture Joyful and Harmonious Heart.” (“*Wagakokoro-gyo*”) In the case of our church, our motto is “In order to obtain *wagakokoro*, let’s say THANK YOU, and let’s put a cheerful smile on our faces as our general attitude.” Following this motto, we try to train ourselves to acquire joyful and harmonious hearts.

It was the Head Minister of Haruki church, my father, who first promoted this training. Originally, my father was not a person who often expressed gratitude and smiled a lot. He was more hot-tempered than mild. I used to be scolded by my father many times when I was a young child. He would slap me in the face just for my forgetting to shut the entrance door. Similarly, I was loudly reprimanded by my father, who abruptly opened up the door of the restroom while I was doing my thing inside. Because of these incidents, I was not very comfortable with my father in my childhood. But suddenly, my father began to say, “The words of THANK YOU and smiles are important.” Honestly speaking and thinking of my father’s past behaviors, I said to myself, “How dare dad say such a thing!”

When our church began the “Training to Nurture Joyful and Harmonious Heart” (“*Wagakokoro-gyo*”), a paper was put up on the church’s wall that said, “In order to obtain *wagakokoro*, let’s say THANK YOU, and let’s put a cheerful smile on our faces as our general attitude.” Some photographs of the bright smiles of people I didn’t know were also put up on the wall. I didn’t mind the motto and the pictures at all in the beginning, but

I gradually got fed up with them, as the number of the photos on the wall increased. I also grew weary of the “*Wagakokoro-gyo*” training which my father had initially suggested we take on.

As a custom of our church, we hand a bottle of sacred sake (*omiki*) with a piece of paper of our Founder’s teaching pasted onto it to each worshipper on New Year’s Day. In the final days of the previous year, my father and I were preparing for the papers with our Founder’s teachings. I was in charge of cutting paper into small pieces, and as I finished this task and was walking along the church corridor to return the cutter knife to its original location, I found my father sitting in the middle of a narrow corridor doing something. He was in fact blocking my way. Father said to me, “I’m working here right now, and you can return the knife later on.” I obeyed him, took the cutter knife with me, then went to rest in another room. A little while later, father came over to me and in an irritated tone said to me, “You haven’t returned the cutter knife to its original spot yet.” Because little while earlier, father said to me, “You can return the knife later on,” I didn’t understand my father’s unreasonable remark and was frustrated. with it. Before even thinking about it, I said to father, “It is you who said I could put it away later.” I soon regretted saying this, but my father’s ears had already captured my words. It was too late! It was spilt milk on the carpet!

We found ourselves in an awkward atmosphere and I simply couldn’t stay there. I got up and walking along the corridor with the cutter knife in my hand. On my way, the paper on the church wall came in sight. It read, “In order to obtain *wagakokoro*, let’s say THANK YOU, and let’s put a cheerful smile on our faces as our general attitude.” The words which I had long considered irritable came into my heart so subtly, but I didn’t know why. However, I was made to realize that, in fact, I was the one who easily got angry, being unable to say THANK YOU and put a smile on my face. I was also made to see that our Divine Parent (*Kami*) used my father when he put up those pieces of slogan paper and photographs on the wall. *Kami* did this in order to show me the truth about me: the more photographs the wall had, the more often *Kami* taught me about it. *Kami* had to do this because I was not a fast learner. I was quite unwilling to follow the “*Wagakokoro-gyo*” training at first because it was initiated by my father, a hot-tempered man. Through this cutter-knife incident, however, I was allowed to realize that there is *Kami*’s wish for me in the *Wagakokoro-gyo* training. I made up my mind then to take on this spiritual training, trying to appreciate *Kami*’s wish for me.

Taking on “*Wagakokoro-gyo*” Training

Before I worked on “*Wagakokoro-gyo*” training, I didn’t really know what this training was all about. Before our church began to do this training, I thought had already expressed words of gratitude and smiled in my daily life. In this sense, I didn’t really feel that it was necessary for me to train myself in order to say THANK YOU and smile. I tried taking on the training consciously, but I didn’t get any meaningful responses from within.

I later observed my father for my reference, and I noticed that he was engaging in chanting the prayer words of the Konko Faith with a smile on his face. According to father, he watched Sachiko Kobayashi, a Japanese professional singer, on TV one day, and Ms. Kobayashi was singing with a bright smile. Father liked it and he decided to follow Ms. Kobayashi’s style. I asked my father, “Does imitating Sachiko Kobayashi enable you to engage in the training with enthusiasm?” Father replied, “No, it doesn’t.” His answer was no wonder to me. My father is originally not used to expressing his gratitude, and father looks and sounds awkward when he says “Thank you.” Because of this, I was more irritated than comfortable when father thanked me. Observing him, I judged that my father was not going to be my role model in this field. For a long time, I often considered how I would know that I was really working hard on this faith movement of our church.

My grandmother passed away in January this year. Grandmother lived for 89 years and she died of senility. She had not suffered any serious diseases before she left this world, but she did have dementia. Her dementia became worse as days went by. When I visited my grandmother at her hospital, she always looked at me and asked me, “Who are you?” I told her my name and grandmother put a big smile on her face, saying to me, “You’ve grown so much, Seiji!” I felt lonely a little when my grandmother did not quickly recognize me. But she delighted me a whole lot with her bright smile, and I made it a rule to visit her as often as possible when I returned to my church.

One day, I visited my grandmother at her hospital as usual. Grandmother gave me a brief glance and suddenly said to me, “Go home soon.” Shocked, I replied to her, et grandmother showed me her back and said to me, “I hope you will go home soon.” I learned later on that it was a side effect of the medicine my grandmother had taken in order to slow down the progress of her dementia. My mind knew that my grandmother was just like that because of the medicine’s side effect. Yet I was sad at heart whenever she told me to go home every time I went to see her. I soon came to feel that I was doing

nothing but bothering my grandmother, and so I gradually stopped visiting her in the hospital.

My uncle usually took care of my grandmother, and he let me know how grandmother was doing from time to time. When I asked, my uncle always replied, “Though her dementia is going worse as days go by, her physical health is quite good.” Because of his report, I innocently assumed that grandmother would live long. Consequently, I was more surprised than sad when I heard of her death.

During the official address of the chief mourner in my grandmother’s funeral, my uncle kindly spoke of the final moments of grandmother’s life. As soon as the new year arrived, grandmother lost her appetite and could not eat enough. It deprived her of her physical strength and grandmother eventually lost consciousness. A few days later, grandmother awoke, and she clearly said, “Thank you very much.” Grandmother became unconscious again soon after that. She didn’t recover her consciousness again, and she passed away two days later.

My grandmother said words of gratitude just before bidding farewell to this world. I have no idea who my grandmother was thanking and what kind of feelings she had when she uttered them. But I believe that grandmother said the very thing that she had constantly cherished the most throughout her life, making it her last message in this world. My grandmother did not go to a Konko church so often, and this may explain that she was not a very pious Konko believer. I’m sure that my grandmother did not know much about the Konko Faith. But her last words were “Thank you very much,” and these words represented the idea that my grandmother had always considered feeling and expressing gratitude important. I felt that her lifestyle totally corresponded with the faith of the Konko religion. My grandmother, to me, looked like a perfect role model for those who participate in the “*Wagakokoro-gyo*” training at our church. Grandmother concluded her life with the words of “Thank you very much,” and I knew that her lifestyle would be the model for my “*Wagakokoro-gyo*” training.

Our Role Model Is Right beside us

There is a movie called “Kiki’s Delivery Service” (the original Japanese title is “*Majo No Takkyubin*”). It’s an animated film directed by Mr. Hayao Miyazaki. Kiki is the heroine of

the movie, a thirteen-year-old witch girl, who comes over to human world and lives by herself. Kiki encounters a lot of hardships in the town where she lives. At each adversity, Kiki gets support from various people, tackles the issue instead of looking away from it and grows up. People that Kiki meet in the town are all kind, and I find my heart get warm, mild and gentle whenever I watch this movie.

But in this film, there was a thing I considered strange and mysterious. It was about the voice actors for this movie. It seemed to me that one voice actress was doing two different female characters; Kiki, the heroine, and Ursula, whom Kiki sees in town. It may not be so unusual that one voice actor covers more than one character in an animated film. However, I still felt it strange that one voice actress does two main characters. "Maybe two different voice actresses with a similar voice are playing those two characters," I thought. I used the Internet to research this movie, and I learned that one voice actress played the two main characters of the film. On the website, there was a description about the reason why one voice actress was doing two main female characters:

"A lot of ladies are seen in the movie of Kiki's Delivery Service, and each female character represents her generation, her age group. Those ladies are not Kiki, and of course they are different from one another. But those women are created in an image that they represent Kiki in a way: Kiki is an early teenager, and if a lady in a movie is in her twenties, the lady is, in a way, Kiki in her twenties, showing future's Kiki. In this sense, we came up with an idea that one voice actress would do two different characters, Kiki and Ursula, who is a bit older than Kiki." This is a thing in a movie, but I thought that the concept of a person older than me that I meet who is also my future self, can be realized in our real life.

We usually feel anxiety when we are in trouble and/or when we are thinking about trying something new. But the good news is that there is always going to be someone that has already gone through the trouble which we find ourselves in at present or the thing we are going to experience for the first time in our lives. This "someone" has undergone various kinds of hardship before. He/she has overcome some problems, and he/she has failed to triumph over others. In a sense that this "someone" has already experienced what we are going to experience from now, so he/she may represent our future selves.

The Founder of the Konko Faith teaches, "Practicing faith is the same as learning. It progresses step by step. You cannot become a teacher immediately." (GIII: Konko

Kyoso Gorikai 62) Instead of aiming at a big goal right from the start, I believe that we should make one step after another to move forward, following our role models around us.

You Can Be Awkward, But If You Continue to Practice...

I went home to my church the other day. Both of my hands were occupied with a lot of things to carry, and I could not close the door at the entrance hall of my home when I came inside the house. I initially thought of closing the entrance door after I put down those stuffs in my room, but as I busily organized the baggage in my room, I forgot about the door. Forgetting about the door at the doorway completely, I rested in my room. Soon, father entered my room, and as soon as he saw me lying in there, father said, "Let me remind you that you forgot to close the entrance door."

My father scolded me for my carelessness, but he did so with a gentle smile. I was sorry for my lack of care, and I simultaneously remembered that I used to be slapped in the face by my father just for forgetting to close the door when I was a little kid.

The way my father is committed to "Training to Nurture Joyful and Harmonious Heart" (*Wagakokoro-gyo*) is too awkward for me to follow him. I felt this way for a long time. But father seems to have worked on this training for a number of days. His sincere commitment surely has changed my father himself. When my father said, "You forgot to close the entrance door" with a smile, I was made to see that I had a great role model of my spiritual life right by my side. Since the way my father trains himself does not look very stylish, I didn't really feel like copying him. Yet I want to learn more about father's perseverance despite his awkwardness.

No matter what you learn, you need some time to confirm your development. The important thing is that you continue to keep your motivation and determination to work hard at what you do. It is also important that you will be blessed with your role model and learn a lot from your mentor. Continuing to work hard and considering these things important, I would like to appreciate our Founder's teaching, "Practicing faith is the same as learning. It progresses step by step."

(THE END)