

Some people say laughter strengthens the human immune system. Whether this is true or not, it is certainly the case that laughter lifts the spirits. Our everyday lives are filled with monotonous or unpleasant things. In such a stress-prone society, laughter brings about great therapeutic effects.

Recently, a national contest was held in Tokyo to choose the best solo comic storyteller. The number of contestants in the “R-1 Grand Prix” competition is increasing year by year. The latest edition of the contest, the sixth in an annual series, drew as many as 2,400 participants, about six times more than in the first contest. After preliminaries lasting more than a month, Takeshi Nadagi emerged the winner for the second year in a row and took home ¥5 million in prize money. Nadagi performed a skit in which he plays a strange university student who conceives a program for a school festival. He got the audience laughing with his gag featuring a phrase borrowed from *Kyogen* (Japanese traditional comedy) played by *Kyogen* artist Mansai Nomura.

“kowitz” before the master to ask for his nod. When Shinokichi received the championship trophy from popular *rakugo* artist Shunputei Koasa, who organized the competition with the aim of raising the standard of the *rakugo* art, he seemed to be more surprised than pleased to have become the champion. After watching the two competitions, I felt refreshed as if I had taken a shower.

A smile relieves not only yourself but also people around you, says German philosopher Alfons Deeken, who once taught “philosophy of death” at Sophia University in Tokyo. Deeken emphasizes the importance of smiling when people face difficulties. When you suffer, fail or are reprimanded, it is important to humbly admit your failure and show a smile out of consideration for other persons, Deeken says.

Actress Akiko Koyama, wife of ailing internationally known movie director Nagisa Oshima, says in lectures she gives in various parts of the country that she was relieved at Deeken’s words when she was in a depressed mood while taking care of her bedridden husband.

Laughter Saves the World

By Shinichi OGATA

I had a big laugh as I watched his performance on TV and, when Nadagi was moved to tears as he received the prize and said, “This honor is unbelievable,” I wept in sympathy.

The letter “R” in the R-1 Grand Prix stands for *rakugo*, the traditional Japanese art of sit-down comic monologue. There are several competitions in the *rakugo* world. One is the National Competition for Young *Rakugo* Performers, aimed at encouraging and stimulating young *rakugo* performers of the *futatsume* (junior) class. This contest is unique in that the winner is decided by vote by members of the audience.

A week after the R-1 Grand Prix final, I went to see the first Annual Grand Championship, in which the winners of the past five R-1 competitions competed against each other. The five contestants, some performing classics and others new works, demonstrated their individualistic and ingenuous skills worthy of their title, and warmed up the atmosphere of the hall.

Tatekawa Shinokichi, who was voted the first winner of the grand championship, is a top disciple of Tatekawa Shinosuke, one of the most popular *rakugo* performers. Shinokichi, 35, joined Shinosuke’s stable after graduating from the Tokyo University of Agriculture. Shinokichi was so anxious to become Shinosuke’s disciple that he even

Laughter has greater effects than generally imagined. It seems that the necessity of laughing is becoming greater these days because people are increasingly discouraged from laughing in their daily lives. To exaggerate, laughter saves the world. Take my word for it and laugh if you are frowning all the time in your workplace or at home.

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Photo: Kyodo News



Tatekawa Shinokichi (extreme left) reacts to applause after winning the first Annual Grand Championship in the National Competition for Young *Rakugo* Performers as *rakugo* masters Hayashiya Shozo (extreme right) and Shunputei Koasa (2nd from right) join a cheering audience.

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