"What is most important to you?" According to a survey on life values conducted by Sony Life Insurance in 2021, targeting junior and senior high school students, friends was number one.

Honestly, this slightly bothers me. Is "friendship" really that important?

There was a time when I believed so. When I was in fourth grade, I was quite popular at school and easily attracted attention - what you would call the "social butterfly" of the class.

However, in order to attract such attention, I was very conscious of my clothes, possessions, and character to avoid being disliked by others. Looking back, those days were suffocating.

At recess, I was always surrounded by classmates but I always had a sense of anxiety in the back of my mind, fearing I would lose popularity. Some people might feel that they are superior to others just because they are being noticed, while others might feel inferior simply because they do not stand out.

We see this come into play a lot. For example, when asked to form pairs in class, some people find a partner straight away, while others end up without one. In such situations, we feel what is known as the "school caste." The factors that determine this include personality, academic ability, athletic skills and so on.

In my view, the school caste is one of the most trivial things. Being bound by this invisible hierarchy, I began to lose myself more and more. I started to act according to what others expected, pretending to always be upbeat... and before I knew it, I was hiding my real self. I became afraid of letting those "fake" friends know the real me. I thought if I showed them the real me, they might not like me. This made me feel extremely anxious. So much so that eventually I stopped going to school. I believe friends should be mirrors that help us see ourselves objectively.

Unfortunately, recently, many people are obsessed with popularity as reflected on social media. People want to have many followers and put up posts and photos to gain likes and nice comments. People are afraid of being disliked by others and become upset if they don't get likes from friends or, even worse, get unfriended.

However, true friends would never suddenly cut ties over a small disagreement. That's why I believe it is essential to make friends who accept the real you.

At this point, some of you may be thinking: "What if I'm not confident that others will accept the real me?" My answer is simple: you need to work on yourself.

This may sound difficult, but it really just means mastering something you love or are good at. For me, it was studying. I became interested in English, and I learned how to express my thoughts.

That, in turn, naturally created opportunities for interaction with others. The relationships that formed when I was being true to myself became incredibly valuable. That's why I believe we don't need to force ourselves to make friends. By valuing ourselves and engaging with people honestly, we can build truly meaningful, genuine relationships.

Take care of yourself, live as you wish and above all, be true to yourself, love yourself. This is my true self. If you happen to like this version of me…great. If not…still great.

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