

The Third Stage of Life

SGI President Ikeda gave the following speech at an All-Japan Representative Leaders Conference, Feb. 1.

How should we live the third major period of our lives, old age? Society must focus serious attention on this topic. In 2025, one out of four Japanese will be over 65. By the middle of the 21st century, it is predicted, that figure will rise to one in three. Even today, 2 million elderly Japanese are in need of nursing care; by 2025 it is estimated the number will increase to 5.2 million.

A Leading Newspaper's Series on Aging

The *Mainichi Shimbun*, a major Japanese newspaper that celebrates its 125th anniversary this month, started running a new series on Jan. 1. "We are living at a time," begins the first installment, "when we must all join hands and come to grips with the issues that a long old age will present. What can we do to have fruitful and fulfilling lives? What can we do to pave the way for a new society?"¹

This is a very important point of view, I believe. The choice of the words "long old age" instead of "long life" is significant — the article states that "long life" has traditionally had only happy implications, whereas "long old age" suggests the harsh reality we must confront.²

Our wish, of course, is that in this society of long old age people can also enjoy long and happy lives. The aim of the *Mainichi* series is to discuss precisely what we need to do to make that happen.

The installments in Part One of the ongoing series were written by a group of young journalists mostly in their 30s. They report the stories of people facing the realities of old age and share their own impressions. One article dealt with a teacher who made complete arrangements for her funeral while still alive and then died alone, anonymously. Another was about a woman whose father, a well-known writer, had contracted Alzheimer's. She made his situation public to help others who face the same problem. Yet another was about a man who became like a parent to his senile mother, striving valiantly to hold down his job and nurse her at the same time. There was also the story of an ex-pilot of a World War II commando unit who was communicating with young people over the Internet. And another told the story of an energetic 89-year-old woman who still runs her own hair salon.

By looking at individual lives such as these, the series encourages its readers to think about issues such as nursing care, the parent-child relationship, senility and euthanasia. The journalists write the stories not as bystanders but as people who will one day confront the same problems of old age themselves and, in many cases, as children with elderly parents actually dealing with aging firsthand.

One reporter writes: "In a society where people are living longer, new lifestyle choices and attitudes are required. The experience of old age varies from person to person. Some face it joyfully and vigorously; for others, it is filled with suffering and anxiety. Each person and the life he or she has lived is different. So are the stories. While gathering information for my article, I realized again and again that every question I asked was a question that I must ask myself as well."³

The series appears to have drawn a strong response from readers. It even came up the other day in a discussion I was having with a certain scholar. All of the issues the series raises are important, including nursing care and senility. But since I have spoken about

these topics in my health series, I will not explore them in further depth today [the series is being published in the *World Tribune* under the title “A New Century of Health”].

Caring for Others

In a letter to Toki-ama Gozen, the wife of Toki Jonin, Nichiren Daishonin writes: “[Your husband] Lord Toki has told me that, while grieved at his mother’s death, he is grateful that she passed away peacefully and that you gave her such attentive care. He said joyfully that he would never forget this in any lifetime to come” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 7, p. 125).

Toki-ama Gozen had a poor constitution herself. No doubt the challenges she underwent nursing her aged mother-in-law, who was in her 90s, were indescribable. The Daishonin felt her struggle, appreciated her efforts and comforted her warmly. There is nothing more wonderful than having a true mentor to support you, to show concern for your well-being and growth.

After the above passage, the Daishonin writes, “My greatest concern now is for your illness” (MW-7, 125). And he offers words of encouragement to Toki-ama Gozen, drawing on examples from history and Buddhist sutras.

Also, caring for an ailing family member with great love is what Buddhist compassion is all about. This is the behavior of a bodhisattva.

Boundless Compassion for the Elderly

Nichiren Daishonin also sent letters of encouragement from Mount Minobu to the elderly Ko Nyudo and his wife, Ko-no-ama, who lived on faraway Sado Island. To the childless couple, the Daishonin writes: “I, Nichiren, must be your child, but wishing to save the people of Japan, I am residing for the time in the central part of the country.... When the Mongols come pouring into Japan, please make your way here. And, because you have no sons, please consider coming here to live with me in your old age” (MW-7, 87–88).

Though he faced one life-threatening situation after another, the Daishonin continued to stand firm. As if they were his own parents, he continued to embrace and care for his sincere elderly followers, ordinary people who lived during turbulent, uncertain times. In this strength and kindness, we see the very essence of what it is to be human.

‘Buddhahood Is the Final Abode’

The Daishonin concluded his letter to the couple by writing: “No place is secure. Be convinced that Buddhahood is the final abode” (MW-7, 88). Where is our final abode, our sweet home, our safe haven? It is here. It is within us. The state of Buddhahood that we attain in ourselves is the eternally safe haven.

External circumstances do not determine your peace of mind or inner tranquillity.

No matter how wonderful a home you may be living in, if you are sad and lonely you cannot be said to be at ease nor your life happy. And even if your present circumstances are good, there is no guarantee that they will last forever. Only the palace of peace and security that you build within your life through Buddhist practice is eternal.

Supportive Friends

Ko Nyudo and Ko-no-ama were followers of the Daishonin who practiced Buddhism with Abutsu-bo and his wife, Sennichi-ama, fellow residents on Sado. Fondly watching

over their friendship, the Daishonin always urged them to work together good-naturedly and maintain their solidarity.

There is no doubt that the older one gets, the more one appreciates the good fortune of having supportive, encouraging friends. SGI members are extending a network of such precious, jewel-like friendships throughout their communities and society at large.

The Soka Gakkai's daily newspaper, the *Seikyo Shimbun*, often spotlights members of the Many Treasures Group, pioneers from the early days of our organization. Their faces are beautiful, reflecting the integrity of their lives and faith.

Shakyamuni taught that those who treasure and esteem the elderly increase their longevity, beauty, joy and strength. This is a principle that is most certainly in accord with the law of cause and effect. A society that respects the elderly is one that respects human life. Such a society will flourish with vigor.

A Longer Life

In the Gosho, the Daishonin quotes the Lotus Sutra passage “We may use our long lives to save living beings”⁴ (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 657). “Long life” in this context refers to the immeasurably long life of the Buddha as explained in the “Life Span of the Thus Come One” chapter in the Lotus Sutra.

The eternal state of Buddhahood wells up within those who practice the Lotus Sutra. And in accord with the plea in the sutra “Let us live out our lives,”⁵ our life force is strengthened, our lives extended, as a result of our practice and desire to lead others to happiness.

Bodhisattvas do not strive to live long solely for their own sakes. They do so to serve others to the greatest possible extent, using their experience, their seamless blend of compassion and wisdom, to do so.

This is a subtle but crucial difference.

The Majesty of Age

In the Gosho, Nichiren Daishonin refers to the leader of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth as “the old man who is Bodhisattva Superior Practices”⁶ (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1458). This passage has profound significance in Buddhism, but I want to clarify that the expression “old man” here is in no way negative or derogatory.

It implies a venerable, majestic greatness. It brings to mind the virtues of one who has gained true mastery of life — qualities such as firm and unwavering faith, ceaseless, compassionate action, indomitable courage, gripping conversation, unflagging patience, transcendent nobility and dignity and a vast, inexhaustible reservoir of wisdom. This is a description of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, who are spreading the ideals of humanism in the midst of this polluted age.

Makiguchi's Last Decades

We mustn't forget that the first Soka Gakkai president, Tsunesa buro Makiguchi, encountered this Buddhism when he was 57. He entered the third stage of his life, his final chapter as it were, as a practicing Buddhist.

Already he had led a life of great accomplishment, having published monumental works such as *The Geography of Human Life* and earned a reputation as a fine teacher and principal in elementary education. But it wasn't until his late 50s, and on through his 60s and 70s, that Mr. Makiguchi gave himself to the true mission for which he had been born in this world. As he wrote [around age 64]:

When I made that great decision and finally committed myself to faith, I came to fully

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comprehend and appreciate the Daishonin's words: "When the skies are clear, the ground is illuminated. Similarly, when one knows the Lotus Sutra, he understands the meaning of all worldly affairs" (MW-1, 82). With indescribable joy, I transformed the way I had lived my life for almost 60 years.

The anxiety that came from searching in the dark for life's answers has completely evaporated. My inborn reserve and diffidence have disappeared. My goals in life became increasingly grander and loftier; my fears dwindled.⁷

Mr. Makiguchi opposed the Japanese authorities head-on during the rabid militarism of World War II, dying in prison for his beliefs at 73. Let us follow the example of this mentor of boundless humanism and compassion and devote our lives until the very end to realizing our lofty goal.

In the final, most meaningful third stage of our lives, let us shine as bright beacons of hope, courage and compassion on all those around us.

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1. "Chomei Shakai o Ikiru" (Living in a Long Old Age Society), *Mainichi Shimbun*, Jan. 1.
2. *Ibid.*, Jan. 21.
3. *Ibid.*, Jan. 18.
4. *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 239.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 228.
6. When Shakyamuni declares in the "Emerging From the Earth" chapter of the Lotus Sutra that the vast multitudes of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth who have emerged are his original disciples, Bodhisattva Maitreya expresses doubt, saying that it is as though a young man of 25 were to point to an old man of 100 and say, "This is my son!" (p. 221).
7. *Makiguchi Tsunesaburo Zenshu* (Collected Works of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi) (Tokyo: Daisan Bunmeisha, 1984), vol. 8, p. 406.

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