The Third Stage of Life
There Is No Retirement Age

The first in a series of discussions about aging in contemporary society. Participants are SGI President Ikeda, Seikyo Shimbun *General Editorial Bureau Senior Director Osamu Matsuoka and Vice Director Katsusuke Sasaki.*

Ikeda: Now that we have entered a time when the average life expectancy has stretched into the 80s, it is important to think about how we can spend our senior years, the third stage of our lives, in the most fruitful, rewarding fashion. My beloved mentor, Josei Toda, second Soka Gakkai president, used to say that the last years of our lives are the most important. If the last few years are happy, we have had a happy life. The victories and achievements up to that time are all illusory. The person who wins in the end is a victor in the truest sense.

How should we face and deal with the issues of old age, sickness and death? I'm sure we will touch on many subjects in the course of our discussion. Let's go one by one.

Matsuoka and Sasaki: We look forward to it.

Ikeda: Though we speak of the third stage of life, there is no set age that marks our entry into this period. The third stage basically means that we have reached an advanced age — the start of a chapter where we put the finishing touches on our development and bring our lives to completion.

Japan has recently become one of the world's leaders in terms of average life expectancy. How has life expectancy changed in Japan over the years?

Matsuoka: It was in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that the average life span for both men and women reached 40. It pushed upward to 50 soon after World War II. Today, it has stretched to 80.

Sasaki: In Japan today, one in seven people is over 65. But by 2020, it is estimated that that number will climb to one in four. Soon Japan will overtake Sweden as having the largest elderly population in the world.

Looking to the Future

Ikeda: The senior members who comprise the Soka Gakkai's Many Treasures Group have devoted their lives to kosen-rufu, working for the happiness of their fellow human beings and for the sake of Buddhism and peace. As a result, they enjoy immeasurable good fortune and the protection of all Buddhas throughout the universe. They are always youthful and energetic.

Though our bodies may age, through participating in SGI activities our hearts and minds remain as bright as the sun. We are youthful throughout our lives. Those who work for others' happiness and for Buddhism remain vigorous and full of energy.

I am always praying for the noble men and women who have worked so hard, over many long years, to build the Soka Gakkai and the SGI. I pray for their health, their long lives, and that they may spend their last years filled with a deep sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. Let's dedicate this discussion series to these honorable members who

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Author:
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have walked together with us since the pioneering days, always devoted to our cause and never seeking personal gain.

Sasaki: As a *Seikyo Shimbun* journalist, I have reported on many occasions when you introduced Buddhist teachings to people around the world. I am impressed by your great spirit to keep moving forward — facing each moment as a fresh challenge.

Ikeda: It is important to look always to the future, to have plans and aspirations. This is particularly crucial in making your last years fulfilling.

Matsuoka: In May, you were named an honorary professor of Shanghai University. During his speech at the presentation ceremony, University Senior Vice Chancellor Fang Minglun read a list of some of the distinguished figures you have met and held dialogues with over the years.

The Older They Get, the More Energetic They Become

Ikeda: Yes, I think he mentioned Zhou Enlai, Arnold Toynbee, Mikhail Sholokhov, Henry Kissinger, Aurelio Peccei, Norman Cousins and Nelson Mandela, among others. One thing that was true of all these individuals was that the older they got, the more energetically they devoted themselves to their chosen work. Age only made them more impressive. All were wonderful human beings who dedicated their lives to their missions. The lives of those who move forward with a sense of mission have true majesty and beauty.

Sasaki: Between the two of us, Mr. Matsuoka and I have been fortunate to report on your dialogues with at least half of these dignitaries. In this discussion series, I hope you will share how those individuals serve as models for us.

Ikeda: Certainly. Please feel free to ask me anything. In the upcoming discussions, let us range far and plumb deep.

The da Vinci Spirit

Matsuoka: You once visited the chateau where Leonardo da Vinci spent his last years.

Ikeda: Yes, that was more than 20 years ago. After finishing my first dialogue with Dr. Toynbee in London in 1974, I flew to Paris, and in the short time left before I had to return to Japan, I visited the Loire Valley, the setting of the French Renaissance. It is about two hours from Paris by train. Ancient castles dotting the hilltops here and there slumbered peacefully in the spring sunlight. Lambs and calves gamboled in the green fields. The pure waters of a rushing river cleansed rocky banks. And narrow trails winding through the forest were lined with iris and bright yellow mustard flowers.

Sasaki: The palace of the French king Francis I, who invited Leonardo to France, was in Amboise. The great Italian artist and inventor took up residence in nearby Cloux. There he spent his last years, and there he died.

Matsuoka: A quotation from Leonardo is engraved on a copper plaque in his bedroom there. I remember you looked at the plaque for some time, President Ikeda, and then said: “These are excellent words. Please write them down.”

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Ikeda: I was impressed because they seemed to represent the very essence of Leonardo's life, the soul of a genius who epitomized the Renaissance.

A full life is long.
Full days bring sound sleep.
A full life gives a tranquil death.

Leonardo compares a sound sleep after a full day with a tranquil death after a full life.

Buddhism teaches that death is but an expedient means — that life itself continues. Our day begins with an invigorating awakening. And at night we lay our tired bodies down for their much-deserved rest. Refreshed by sleep, we wake again the next morning with renewed energy. Viewed in terms of life's eternity, death is the first step of the journey to a new existence.

Sasaki: The writer Yasushi Inoue1 (1907–91), with whom you had a correspondence later published under the title *Letters of Four Seasons,* expressed a strong interest in these words of Leonardo. In a letter to you, he wrote:

> Among the three impressive sentences you found engraved on a copper tablet in the chateau, the last moves me most deeply: "A full life gives a tranquil death." I am certain this statement is especially applicable to artists who have lived full lives. (*Letters of Four Seasons,* pp. 93–94)

Ikeda: Mr. Inoue went on to say that he wanted to visit the chateau where Leonardo lived.

Leonardo, who challenged himself throughout life, also wrote: "Iron rusts when it is not used. Stagnant water loses its purity and freezes over with the cold; so, too, does inactivity sap the vigor of the mind."2 I was also impressed that shortly before his death, he wrote the inspiring words, "I shall continue."3

Sasaki: And Dr. Toynbee's motto was "*Laboremus*!" [Let's get to work!], wasn't it?

Ikeda: Yes. At the start of our dialogue he said: "Let's get to work! Let's engage in this dialogue for the sake of humanity in the 21st century!" When I asked him — and he was 84 at the time — what the most fulfilling, happy time for him was, he answered with a smile, "When I am writing and reading."

He rose every day at 6:45 a.m. He and his wife prepared breakfast together. Then he made his bed and was sitting at his desk in his study by 9:00, starting to write. He still burned with a passion for knowledge, though he was well over 80.

Matsuoka: I reported on your dialogue with Dr. Toynbee at his home in Oakwood Court, London. I remember it well. Dr. Toynbee lived in a red brick apartment building, and you took an old-fashioned elevator up to the fifth floor. Dr. Toynbee was eager for your arrival, so he had come out to wait for you in front of the elevator. I remember how happy he was when the elevator doors opened. He greeted you joyfully, with a broad smile, shook your hand and ushered you into his living room.

Sasaki: Though the two of you were a generation apart, he seemed to have great respect for you as an equal.

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Matsuoka: Each day the dialogue lasted for five hours, from 10:00 a.m. Tall, white-haired Dr. Toynbee participated with an intent expression on his face. He frequently interjected with expressions of joy and approval. When the subject turned to the theory of life and Buddhist philosophy, he solicited your opinion earnestly.

Ikeda: Dr. Toynbee continued to study all his life. He lived up to everything I imagined one hailed as this century's greatest historian should be. He told me, "In my 84 years, I have never engaged in a dialogue of this caliber." It seemed with each passing year, his passion to learn and study grew stronger.

Issues That Concern Us Today

Matsuoka: After the first series of dialogues was completed, Dr. Toynbee turned to you and said with considerable emotion: "Speaking with you has been stimulating and moving. Talking so directly and openly with a person capable of discussing the truly important issues is of enormous value to me, and I have no greater joy as a scholar. What you have said is of great significance to human life — and not merely on the conceptual level, for you are also passionately committed to solving the actual problems we confront. This dialogue has allowed me to organize my studies."

Sasaki: When you met Dr. Toynbee again for the second series, a year later, in 1975, one of the first things the two of you discussed was the pressing need to care for the aged in our modern industrial society.

Ikeda: Yes, we did. In response to a question I posed about the situation in the United Kingdom, Dr. Toynbee said that senior citizens, including himself, drew a national pension, and that many people lived in what were called old people's homes, including his wife's sister, who lived in one run by the government. Dr. Toynbee strongly advocated extended families, with grandparents, parents and children living under one roof. He also said that urban housing needed to be reconsidered to make that possible.

He was a pioneering thinker. Many issues that concern us today, he considered, such as the definition of death, the use of artificial life-support systems and the question of quality of life. I think we should discuss these issues again in future installments.

Matsuoka: Yes, we look forward to that very much.

Ikeda: People like Dr. Toynbee and Leonardo da Vinci teach us that there is no retirement. No retirement from the fulfillment and spirit of quest that make up life. No retirement from the challenges that life always presents us.

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1. Prolific Japanese journalist and author, who gained wide renown for his historical short stories and novels.
2. Serge Bramly, *Leonardo: The Artist and the Man*, trans. Sian Reynolds (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 401.
3. Ibid.

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