

The Third Stage of Life Be Open To Possibilities

This is the seventh installment in this series. Participants in this installment are SGI President Ikeda, Seikyo Shimbun General Editorial Bureau Senior Director Osamu Matsuoka and Vice Director Katsusuke Sasaki.

IKEDA: There is a Buddhist scripture in which Shakyamuni speaks of conquering the three forms of pride — that of youth, that of health, that of life — in relation to the universal sufferings of aging, sickness and death.

The Buddha points out that, drunk with the pride of youth, people have an aversion to those bent with old age. Drunk with the pride of health, people have an aversion to those suffering from illness or disease. And drunk with the pride of life, people have an aversion to the dead.

Reminiscing about his youth, an elderly Shakyamuni says that he shed these three forms of pride. This is related to the famous four meetings and was a reason for his leaving home to seek enlightenment.

The four meetings is a story appearing in many sutras about Shakyamuni's motives for renouncing the secular world. As the young Prince Siddhartha, he lived a sheltered and pampered existence in the royal palace. Then, one day, he is said to have ventured out of the four palace gates and encountered first an elderly person, then a sick person, then a corpse, then a religious mendicant — one at each gate. These were his first disturbing encounters with the inescapable realities of aging, sickness and death. Finally, inspired by the serene dignity of the mendicant, he resolved to embark on a religious life and attain enlightenment.

SASAKI: It's amazing that Shakyamuni rid himself of these three forms of pride when he still enjoyed the privileged life of a prince.

IKEDA: Yes, what sets him apart is that he turned his thoughts to the aging, the ill and the dying at a time when he was at the peak of his youth. He was in vigorous health and filled with the joy of living.

We should remember that these three forms of pride are not just relics that have no relevance to the present. Today, in Japan in particular, we are facing the reality of a rapidly aging society. And there is much discussion of the changes we must make in terms of our social systems and institutions to respond to this new situation. Such discussions are of course important, but I believe we must also focus on the more essential issue of the pride or arrogance that has taken root in people's hearts and try to change human beings themselves.

MATSUOKA: That's so true.

IKEDA: All too often people despise what is different from them. In my 1993 lecture at Harvard University, I called this "an unreasoning emphasis on difference." Shakyamuni described this as "a single, invisible arrow piercing the hearts of the people."

By placing an unreasonable emphasis on difference, we set boundaries to our lives and block ourselves off from wider possibilities. By fearing and rejecting what is different, we

restrict ourselves to what we are now and shut the door to further growth and spiritual enrichment.

As long as people continue to avert their gaze from the realities of aging, sickness and death, they are denying their own future. They are rejecting their inevitable fate. All of us, without exception, will experience these things.

MATSUOKA: People seem to regard aging as a negative thing, but I think there are many wonderful, beautiful and positive things about growing old.

IKEDA: We need to change our values, the way we look at aging. The rich kind of life-experience that an older person has is a precious and irreplaceable resource, not only for that individual but those around him or her. And for society at large.

In one of his writings, Nichiren Daishonin recounts how King Wen of the Chou dynasty in ancient China valued the elderly, respecting their wisdom (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 5, p. 274). He goes on to say that the Chou dynasty lasted 800 years because of King Wen's wise policies.

In Japan, Sept. 15 is Respect-for-the-Aged Day. Please make time to share a few warm, heartfelt words with the elderly people in your life. Let's work to promote concern and respect for the aged.

SASAKI: Yes. And as in all things, it starts with our own actions.

IKEDA: Many times, the words of older people, based on their long, abundant experience, possess a wisdom and weight that can take your breath away. I know countless elderly people whose lives shine beautifully.

People who have built indestructible selves through their work for kosen-rufu literally sparkle.

The secret is to live with dignity and confidence.

MATSUOKA: I recently met someone who's a perfect example of that: Mrs. Yoshi Takahashi, whom you introduced in your *Ode to Mothers* [a recently published book of President Ikeda's poems and essays dedicated to mothers, available only in Japanese]. She's 103 years old.

The day I visited her at her home in Fujisawa City, Kanagawa Prefecture, just happened to be her birthday. Her house was filled with flowers she had received from her grandchildren, neighbors and friends, and she was as hale and hearty as ever.

IKEDA: Yes, I know her well. At age 98, she became a special lecturer at an academy for training fashion coordinators! Until last year — that is, for five years, until she was 102 — she lectured the young students at the school. And she was popular. She made appearances on television, radio and the lecture circuit, where she delivered wonderful speeches and was interviewed. I am so happy to know that she has remained active all these years.

SASAKI: I remember seeing her by chance on a TV show last year. The interviewer was moved to tears by some of Mrs. Takahashi's accounts of her life. Mrs. Takahashi emphasized the importance of courage, perseverance and effort, and she said that she intended to keep going and to live to see a peaceful 21st century. She spoke with impressive force and clarity.

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IKEDA: That's wonderful. I pray every day that the members who have been with us since the early days of our movement will live long, healthy lives, enjoying a fulfilling third stage of life.

MATSUOKA: Mrs. Takahashi gets up at 5:00 a.m. every day and starts the day off with gongyo and an hour of daimoku. She says that every day she prays for the good health and longevity of you and Mrs. Ikeda, and for you, President Ikeda, to continue encouraging members around the world.

She has every intention of ushering in the 21st century together with you. Mrs. Takahashi said that since she had the fortune to be born a human being, it is her mission to work for the happiness and welfare of people in society.

IKEDA: I have heard that she really looks forward to attending the monthly discussion meetings with members of her local organization, and that she writes a short poem for each meeting.

MATSUOKA: Yes. For the May meeting this year [1997], she wrote:

*How happy I am
To celebrate May 3!
At 103,
Still healthy,
Following the path of mentor and disciple.*

Mrs. Takahashi also talks to the plants in her garden as she tends them and sometimes those words take shape as poems. For example:

*As I speak
To these silent
Flowers
I count the buds
Of tomorrow's blossoms.*

Mrs. Takahashi also reads the *Seikyo Shimbun* every day, using a magnifying glass.

IKEDA: What an excellent example for us all! It is women like Mrs. Takahashi who have supported the Soka Gakkai and, indeed, society, over the years.

SASAKI: A week after joining the Soka Gakkai, Mrs. Takahashi was in the audience at Yokohama's Mitsuzawa Stadium when Mr. Toda delivered his 1957 declaration for the abolition of all nuclear weapons. Her life has spanned the 20th century. As one who remembers the songs that were popular during the time of the Sino-Japanese War, the Russo-Japanese War and World War II, she states unequivocally, in a firm, resounding voice: "In war, so many bright young people are sacrificed in their prime. It is a terrible waste of life. Nothing is more terrible than war."

IKEDA: Mrs. Takahashi was over 60 when she found faith in the Daishonin's Buddhism and joined the Soka Gakkai, wasn't she?

MATSUOKA: Yes, she was 63. At the time, she wasn't feeling well. Her heart was weak,

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and she frequently had dizzy spells and fainted. She joined because she wanted to improve her health. She now finds it amazing that her wish was so completely realized, and that she's lived to over 100.

IKEDA: It's the principle of faith extending life. I once presented her a cane along with a message that I was praying for her to continue enjoying a long, fulfilling life.

SASAKI: Yes. She regards that cane as a precious treasure. When she picks it up each morning, she says that she feels like she is starting the day with a handshake from you.

IKEDA: I think the secret to long life can be found in Mrs. Takahashi's words: "There's nothing to fret or worry about. Brooding over problems serves no purpose. You mustn't keep looking back and making comparisons with what happened in the past, letting it stop you from moving forward. You'll live a long time if you keep looking ahead and advancing with a positive attitude. You need to keep a positive outlook. Never grumble and gripe." This is an excellent attitude.

Does Mrs. Takahashi come from a long-lived family, by the way?

SASAKI: Actually, her father died at 33. And her mother only lived to be 54. So we can't say that she comes from a particularly long-lived family. I think this shows, however, that attitude and lifestyle are important factors in achieving a long life.

IKEDA: Dr. Ihsan Dogramaci, the famous Turkish pediatrician and educator with whom I conducted a dialogue in 1992, said that he believes the secret to a long life is a peaceful heart.

MATSUOKA: Yes. I still remember him declaring that with a peaceful heart such as yours, you should live to more than a thousand years old!

IKEDA: Actually, I think his sharp wit is the secret to his long life.

MATSUOKA: Many people get sick when summer turns to autumn, in other words, when the seasons change. Let's talk a while about things that elderly people should look out for at such times.

IKEDA: One of the most important things is overexertion. Exhaustion is the cause of many, many illnesses. If you want to live long, it's important to get enough rest. Attention should also be paid to your diet, with care being taken to ensure that your meals are nutritionally well-balanced and to refrain from eating late at night.

There is a saying "Laughter makes young; anger makes old." Laughter, a sense of humor, plays an important part in staying in good health. If you look on the bright side of things and act positively, you'll have a cheerful, happy life. A happy life is a healthy life.

SASAKI: In the series "A New Century of Health: Buddhism and the Art of Medicine," you spoke with various experts — representatives of the Soka Gakkai doctors division and nurses group — about ways to prevent senility. Would you sum up the key points again for our readers?

IKEDA: Certainly. The best ways to stimulate the brain, and thus prevent senility's onset, it

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seems, are to use our hands and feet, and to interact with others. Some even call our hands a second brain. Writing letters or performing other activities that require manual dexterity stimulates the brain cells.

When we perform morning and evening gongyo, we join our palms together in prayer. The very act of joining our palms creates a moderate tension in the muscles of our hands and fingers, which is said to provide the brain excellent stimulation.

MATSUOKA: Mrs. Takahashi says that she still enjoys working in the kitchen and preparing food. At 103, she's still using her hands. She showed them to me, as a matter of fact, and they are pretty hands, smooth and soft.

SASAKI: Walking is another great way to prevent senility.

IKEDA: That's right. Using one's voice, as in singing, and doing moderate exercise are also crucial in preventing it. It's important to keep in mind that elderly people tend to be susceptible to sudden changes in their environment and to stress, often with adverse consequences for their health and well-being. We should strive to create environments for them in which they feel at ease.

SASAKI: Apparently, people with the following characteristics run a higher risk of becoming senile: stubborn and selfish people, short-tempered people, people with few friends, people without a sense of humor, people who are obsessed with money and possessions, and people who don't trust others.

IKEDA: We should all watch out for those traits in ourselves.

It's been said, too, that people with a strong sense of purpose, a sense of responsibility, who work hard to achieve a goal, are less likely to become senile.

SASAKI: In the health discussion series, you suggested four mottoes for a healthy life, didn't you?

IKEDA: Medically speaking, proper diet, sufficient exercise and sleep, and the reduction of stress are regarded as the keys to good health.

All of these are incorporated in my four-point motto:

- 1) Do an invigorating gongyo.
- 2) Conduct your daily life in a reasonable, productive manner.
- 3) Be of service to others.
- 4) Maintain sound eating habits.

I am always praying for the health and long life of our members, who work so hard day and night for kosen-rufu.

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